KIEP Opinions

Bridging the AI Divide: The Role of International Cooperation

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AI is expected to promote economic growth through productivity-enhancing mechanisms, exerting structural effects on industry, trade, and labor markets. However, a growing body of findings suggests that the positive effects of AI will be distributed unevenly across countries. In the Global North, 27.5 percent of the population uses generative AI tools as of the first quarter of 2026, whereas the corresponding share in the Global South is only 15.4 percent.[1] The World Bank (2025) classifies the conditions for AI adoption into four categories: connectivity, compute, context, and competency. These encompass not only traditional infrastructure but also data accumulation, cloud services, the development of tailored models, human resources, regulatory capacity, etc. The World Bank (2025) recommends that each country set policy priorities appropriate to its own AI readiness.[2]

[1] Microsoft AI Economy Institute. 2026. "Global AI Diffusion Q1 2026 Trends and Insights."

[2] World Bank. 2025. *Digital Progress and Trends Report 2025: Strengthening AI Foundations*.

AI readiness varies considerably across countries, and for most low-income countries the establishment of infrastructure and basic human capital remains an urgent priority. Generative AI usage rates by national income level show a clear correlation with the level of digital infrastructure, and many studies indicate that infrastructure is a major determinant of AI adoption in low-income countries. Meanwhile, developing countries that have attained a certain level of infrastructure and human capital are reaching a stage at which technological innovation becomes feasible, and they are also making progress on the regulatory front. Such cross-country disparities are closely linked to the degree of progress toward the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).[3]

Under these conditions, the Global South is working to avoid being confined to the roles of market, data supplier, and rule-taker. The AI Impact Summit held in India in February 2026 demonstrated the substantive voice of the Global South. The summit illustrated the Global South's pursuit of driving innovation and growth through AI adoption. Many developing countries are now formulating national AI strategies, treating AI as an engine of innovation and growth tailored to their own development challenges.

The global diffusion and management of AI require cooperation among states. AI carries the potential to deepen imbalances in the global economy, and its technological risks transcend national borders. There is thus a strong need to mitigate these negative effects and to support the global diffusion of AI. The OECD AI Principles stipulate that AI should foster innovation while respecting human rights and democratic values and contributing to inclusive growth and sustainable development. UNESCO's Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence identifies human rights and dignity, transparency, fairness, environmental sustainability, and human oversight of AI systems as core values. The Global Digital Compact, adopted by the United Nations in 2024, establishes the bridging of digital divides, equitable data governance, international governance of AI for the benefit of humanity, etc. as shared objectives. The first UN Global Dialogue on Global AI Governance, held in July 2026, emphasized international cooperation in strengthening AI capacity, improving the quantity and quality of data, supporting low-resource languages to secure cultural diversity, and providing infrastructure such as data centers and telecommunications networks.

[3] Kim, Jeong Gon. 2026. “Bridging Gaps in Global AI Adoption: International Cooperation and Korea’s Policy.” World Economy Brief vol. 16 no. 12. Korea Institute for International Economic Policy.

AI capacity building and accessibility are closely connected to global AI governance. The Global South tends to place explicit emphasis on participation in global governance. For Instance, the ASEAN Responsible AI Roadmap states that ASEAN member states should actively participate in international AI ethics and governance forums and in discussions on global AI standards, and that the perspectives of countries with diverse socioeconomic backgrounds should be reflected in international AI standards and norms. The African Union's AI Strategy sets Africa's participation in shaping the global AI governance architecture as a strategic objective, articulating the concern that African languages, cultures, values, human rights, and inclusiveness must be reflected in international AI governance. In these ways, the Global South demonstrates a strong willingness to participate in global AI governance in order to reflect its own development priorities.

Amid ongoing international efforts to address the global AI divide, Korea' Fourth Comprehensive Strategies for International Development Cooperation (2026-2030) designated AI as a new priority area, alongside existing ones, such as health, education, climate, public administration, etc. It emphasizes the design and construction of AI infrastructure suited to partner countries' technological levels and IT environments, as well as the development of small-scale, specialized AI models tailored to partner country demands. At the same time, under its Global AI Hub initiative, Korea is pursuing close cooperation with international organizations.

International efforts to bridge the global AI divide are likely to proceed along multiple tracks. Alongside bilateral channels, multilateral, plurilateral, and regional forms of cooperation are expanding, and they feed into the formation of global AI governance. Two questions should guide these efforts: how far they align with the development priorities of each country, and how far they contribute to interoperable governance frameworks. The two are connected. Each country will adopt the AI systems it needs, but the capacity to manage them is itself a development priority—and that capacity rests on shared taxonomy and standards. AI's environmental footprint poses a similar question. Narrowing the global AI divide therefore depends not only on access and adoption but also on the interoperable institutional foundations.KIEP