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Engaging the UN Scientific Panel on Artificial Intelligence for the Global South

By Danish

The UN General Assembly has set up the new Independent International Scientific Panel on Artificial Intelligence to assess how the development and deployment of AI technologies are creating risks, impacts and opportunities. Co-chaired by Maria Ressa and Yoshua Bengio, the Panel will be presenting its inaugural report in July 2026. This paper presents significant priorities for developing and least developed countries around AI impacts, benefit-sharing and governance, and provides some recommendations on how these priorities can be addressed by the Panel for promoting sustainable development in the global South.

L'Assemblée générale des Nations Unies a créé le nouveau Groupe scientifique international indépendant sur l'intelligence artificielle (IA) afin d'évaluer comment le développement et le déploiement des technologies d'IA génèrent des risques, des répercussions et des opportunités. Coprésidé par Maria Ressa et Yoshua Bengio, le Groupe présentera son rapport inaugural en juillet 2026. Le présent document expose les priorités majeures pour les pays en développement et les pays les moins avancés en matière d'impacts de l'IA, de partage des avantages et de gouvernance, et formule des recommandations sur la manière dont le Groupe pourrait répondre à ces priorités afin de promouvoir le développement durable dans les pays du Sud.

La Asamblea General de las Naciones Unidas ha constituido el nuevo Panel Científico Internacional Independiente sobre Inteligencia Artificial para evaluar cómo el desarrollo y la implantación de las tecnologías de IA están generando riesgos, impactos y oportunidades. Copresidido por Maria Ressa y Yoshua Bengio, el Panel presentará su informe inaugural en julio de 2026. Este documento expone las prioridades clave de los países en desarrollo y de los países menos adelantados en relación con los impactos de la IA, la distribución de beneficios y la gobernanza, y ofrece recomendaciones sobre cómo el Panel puede abordar estas prioridades para promover el desarrollo sostenible en el Sur Global.

联合国大会已成立新的"人工智能独立国际科学小组"，旨在评估人工智能技术的开发和部署如何带来风险、影响和机遇。该小组由玛丽亚·雷萨和约书亚·本吉奥共同主持，将于2026年7月提交首份报告。本文阐述了发展中国家和最不发达国家在人工智能影响、利益共享及治理方面的主要优先事项，并就该小组如何通过解决这些优先事项来促进全球南方的可持续发展提出了一些建议。

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Introduction

The United Nations (UN) Independent International Scientific Panel on Artificial Intelligence (the Panel) was recently established as the first global scientific body that would assess the impacts of artificial intelligence (AI). The Panel is expected to shape the global evidence base through the scientific assessment of AI - its risks, opportunities and impacts, especially for sustainable development and bridging digital divides.

The Terms of Reference of the Panel were adopted in August 2025, and the forty Panel members were approved by the UN General Assembly through a vote on 12 February 2026 (with 117 in favour, 2 abstentions, and 2 against)[i]. Serving in their personal capacity for a three-year term, the Panel members "have backgrounds in core technical AI expertise; applied AI, safety and infrastructure experience; and AI policy, ethics and impact"[ii]. The Panel is well-positioned to provide rigorous and independent scientific insights that will enable all countries to engage with AI on an equal footing.

The Panel is mandated to "issue evidence-based scientific assessments synthesizing and analyzing existing research related to the opportunities, risks, and impacts of artificial intelligence" and to "contribute to informing and improving capacity-building efforts on artificial intelligence"[iii]. Some commentators have compared the Panel to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), as it would "amass and analyse current knowledge on AI and its impacts … [while] its findings might be similarly influential in guiding government actions"[iv].

At the first meeting of the Panel, which took place virtually on 3 March, UN Secretary-General António Guterres emphasised the need to build an unbiased and trusted common understanding of AI. Noting the broad mandate of the panel "spanning from frontier systems to the impacts already unfolding across societies and economies", he said that the Panel's work will provide a set of shared facts to develop workable solutions for "building effective guardrails, unlocking innovation for the common good, and strengthening international cooperation"[v]. The Panel also selected Maria Ressa from the Philippines and Yoshua Bengio from Canada as its co-chairs[vi].

It will be important that the Panel recognizes as a basic premise for its work that the majority of developing and least developed countries are engaging very differently with AI in comparison to large and advanced economies. Most developing nations have limited availability of digital infrastructure, digital skills, and effective data governance frameworks. While advances in the development of 'frugal' AI systems can increase access; having affordable, inclusive and responsible AI is a key priority for the global South for bridging existing technological and AI divides.

By taking these concerns into account, the Panel can provide developing countries with appropriate guidance on AI that is suited to their needs, capacities and national priorities. In this context, there are three interconnected priorities for developing countries[vii] that should be considered by the Panel, as elaborated below.

AI Impacts

The multidimensional impacts of AI adoption in developing countries are still manifesting, but are expected to show up in economic metrics and increased pace of digital transformation. Without the necessary scale of investment in building digital skills, AI infrastructure and productive application of AI in new and existing industries, developing countries will not be able to make full use of the capacities of AI systems for increasing productivity growth and would risk being left behind.

The impacts of AI are also going to be varied among countries and peoples, depending on the differentiated pace of adoption and exposure of their major economic sectors. Global aggregates of AI impacts hide much of the nuance required by developing countries to frame their digital transformation and AI policies, which need to be context dependent and aligned with national priorities and capacities.

Global South countries are also considering how their data can be monetised in the context of AI. Large AI companies have already been capturing value from developing countries by extracting their data resources, which are then exported across borders and processed to create high-quality datasets for training AI. The

Panel should determine the economic value thus being extracted from the global South, and what could be done to ensure that the greater share of the value is retained in the countries of origin of the data.

The Panel should further assess the distributional effects of AI on developing countries, particularly to identify the beneficiaries and cost allocation from AI buildouts, and which entities are capturing the economic value being generated by the productive use of AI. For instance, the Panel can review whether the economic gains of AI are being created by replacing workers rather than increasing productivity or efficiency. Such an assessment would identify the people, communities and sectors bearing the costs of unequal AI adoption, and how this can be remedied. For AI governance to be effectively oriented towards sustainable development, it must be based on addressing these asymmetries and disproportionate impacts.

AI Access and Benefit Sharing

To advance an affirmative agenda for equitable AI access, the Panel should consider the ability of developing countries to access AI models, financing of digital infrastructure, and fairness in sharing the economic, social and other benefits generated through AI. By assessing existing mechanisms for AI benefit sharing for their effectiveness and gaps, the Panel should consider how they could be improved to provide better outcomes for developing countries, or whether there is a need to develop completely new models for this purpose. This could also include addressing frameworks for equitable data governance at all levels and how they should be harnessed to enhance value creation in developing countries.

The Panel should analyse the current state-of-play on the global build out and financing of AI infrastructure, such as data centres. The evidence and trends thus identified should be used to provide guidance to developing countries on building their own domestic and regional AI capacities. This should be complemented by efforts that promote the transfer of AI technologies; strengthen their practical applications in industrial sectors and processes – particularly those with existing high levels of automation; and elaborate how global South stakeholders can be equipped with the requisite skills to use and apply AI, in line with UN General Assembly Resolution 78/311, which emphasises the need to enhance international cooperation on AI capacity-building with full consideration of the needs, policies and priorities of developing countries[viii]. This could be further operationalised at the multilateral level through the development of suitable indicators, backed by robust monitoring to assess and track progress on AI access and benefit sharing over time.

In this effort, the Panel should integrate developing countries' sovereign policy choices on AI and foster their technological and data autonomy as part of its work. It could consider how international cooperation, including South-South and Triangular Cooperation, can be leveraged for increasing technology transfer for AI; adapting AI systems to local contexts; promoting initiatives that build AI capacity and readiness; and to foster innovation and homegrown AI talent in global South countries.

AI Governance Fragmentation

The current landscape of global AI governance is fragmented, characterised by discussions in multiple fora with overlapping agendas, advancing competing and sometimes contradictory governance approaches, and outcomes that in some instances led to the marginalisation of developing countries' priorities. This has raised concerns that the priorities of the global majority on AI governance are being overlooked[ix]. To address this ongoing fragmentation, the Panel should map the current AI governance landscape to identify the different fora where AI regulation and other dimensions of AI such as AI safety and trustworthiness are currently being discussed; the stakeholders participating in these discussions; and whether the priorities of the global South are being adequately represented in such processes.

It can further determine policy coherence and gaps in the different AI governance processes, identify overlaps and potential conflicts, and consider if developing country interests are being adequately reflected in the work of the UN agencies and their outcomes related to AI. By promoting greater coherence, both among existing UN initiatives and with other international fora discussing AI policy and governance, the Panel can support systematic engagement of developing countries and global South stakeholders in global AI governance. It should also advocate for allocating resources and capacity-building for developing

countries to participate meaningfully in such fora, as well as the barriers they face in effective engagement.

The outcomes from these assessments should inform the agenda of the Global Dialogue on AI Governance and promote actionable results that support inclusive, sustainable development-oriented global AI governance. This aligns with the commitment by the co-chairs of the Global Dialogue, El Salvador and Estonia for "ensuring that the Dialogue's preparatory process is well-informed by the best available science" and "to engaging closely with the Panel so complementarity and coordination can be ensured and the Panel's work can meaningfully inform the Dialogue's discussion…"[x].

By holistically addressing these priorities in its future work, the Panel could play an important role in identifying emerging trends and possible risks of AI, build effective guardrails against its harmful impacts, reduce global asymmetries in AI access and impacts, and guide efforts towards making AI technologies safe, affordable and trustworthy for all.

Recommendations

The Panel presents an important opportunity to scientifically assess and provide concrete evidence of AI capabilities, risks and impacts. These can be especially useful to developing countries which can use the Panel's scientific findings to inform their national AI policies, bridge digital and AI divides, and strengthen global AI governance. As Uruguay on behalf of the Group of 77 (G-77) countries recently emphasised, success in this effort will depend on how well countries can foster international cooperation, guarantee equitable AI access, promote shared prosperity, bridge and prevent the widening of existing digital divides, and ensure that AI serves as a tool for sustainable development for all[xi].

To achieve these important objectives, it is recommended that the Panel focus on the following three areas which are of high priority to developing countries:

- **AI impacts on economy and society:** Developing and least developed countries are contributing to the global AI economy through their data, users and labour. Yet, they are currently capturing little value from the development, deployment and adoption of AI systems. As AI can have disproportionate multi-dimensional impacts on global South countries and constituencies, the Panel should assess such impacts on their economies, labour and societies, and how these can promote or impede sustainable development.

- **Unequal access to AI and sharing its benefits:** Most developing countries are falling behind in terms of access to AI infrastructure, digital skills and capabilities[xii]. The Panel should assess how access to AI systems, and particularly frontier models, is evolving; how value from AI is being captured in different countries and developmental contexts; which mechanisms currently exist or need to be created for AI-related benefit-sharing; and provide guidance on enhancing technology transfer, digital skills development and capacity building on AI.

- **Fragmented multilateral AI governance:** The proliferation of different fora, institutions and processes on AI governance at the international level have fragmented discussions on AI safety, innovation and regulation. Often, this has led to a marginalisation of developing countries' priorities. The Panel's findings should seek to promote coherence and complementarity among the different regional and multilateral processes on AI, and link their outcomes to discussions at the Global Dialogue on AI Governance. This would further strengthen engagement of the multilateral system with developing countries and global South stakeholders and ensure their meaningful participation in the shaping of global AI governance.

Endnotes:

[i] United Nations, "General Assembly Appoints Artificial Intelligence Panel, Names Joint Inspection Unit Members, Notes Article 19 Arrears", GA/12751, 12 February 2026. Available from https://press.un.org/en/2026/ga12751.doc.htm.

[ii] United Nations, "UN Independent International Scientific Panel on AI, Panel Members". Available from https://www.un.org/independent-international-scientific-panel-ai/en/panel-members.

[iii] United Nations, UN General Assembly Resolution 79/325. Terms of reference and modalities for the establishment and functioning of the Independent International Scientific Panel on Artificial Intelligence and the Global Dialogue on Artificial Intelligence Governance, 27 August 2025. Available from https://docs.un.org/en/A/RES/79/325.

[iv] Elizabeth Gibney, "UN creates new scientific AI advisory panel: what will it do?", Nature, 26 February 2026. Available from https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-026-00542-8.

[v] UN Secretary-General's remarks to the First Meeting of the Independent International Scientific Panel on Artificial Intelligence, 3 March 2026. Available from https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statements/2026-03-03/un-secretary-generals-remarks-the-first-meeting-of-the-independent-international-scientific-panel-artificial-intelligence-delivered.

[vi] Victor Barreiro Jr., "Yoshua Bengio, Maria Ressa to co-chair UN's AI panel", *Rappler*, 4 March 2026. Available from https://www.rappler.com/world/global-affairs/maria-ressa-yoshua-bengio-un-independent-international-scientific-panel-ai/.

[vii] See: Danish, *AI and the Global South: Impacts, Opportunities, and Policy Approaches*, Research Paper, No. 231 (Geneva, South Centre, 2026). Available from https://www.southcentre.int/research-paper-231-19-february-2026/.

[viii] See: Carlos M. Correa, "The United Nations Call to Enhance International Cooperation for Capacity-Building on Artificial Intelligence", *SouthViews* No. 273, 22 August 2024. Available from https://www.southcentre.int/southviews-no-273-22-august-2024/.

[ix] See: Vahini Naidu and Danish, "From Fragmentation to Impact: Strengthening Southern Agency in Global AI Governance", Policy Brief, No. 148 (Geneva, South Centre, 2025). Available from https://www.southcentre.int/policy-brief-148-17-november-2025/.

[x] Statement by El Salvador on behalf of El Salvador and Estonia, co-chairs of the Global Dialogue on AI Governance, UN General Assembly, 12 February 2026.

[xi] Statement by Uruguay on behalf of the G-77, UN General Assembly, 12 February 2026.

[xii] See: Kishore Singh, "Education & Learning and the Global Digital Compact", Policy Brief, No. 142 (Geneva, South Centre, 2025). Available from https://www.southcentre.int/policy-brief-142-22-may-2025/.

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