



Why is the Global South optimistic about Artificial Intelligence?

By Danish*

ABSTRACT

The international community has received growing claims about the existential risks posed by accelerated development of frontier AI capabilities. This has triggered increased nervousness and distrust in AI. However, closer analyses of global sentiments suggest that this is not uniform. Global South countries have maintained much more positive assessments of the potential benefits of AI for sustainable development, while also putting forward their priorities on increasing equitable access to AI and fairly sharing its benefits, alongside the need for financing and capacity-building. By assessing the statements delivered by countries at the UN high-level week (22-28 September 2026), this brief surfaces the different sentiments between the Global South and Global North regarding AI. It provides some possible reasons for this divergence and suggests some ways forward to capture this optimism for generating positive AI impacts.

KEYWORDS: Artificial Intelligence (AI), AI Governance, United Nations (UN), Global South

La communauté internationale est de plus en plus confrontée à des mises en garde concernant les risques existentiels liés au développement accéléré des capacités de pointe en matière d'IA. Cela a suscité une nervosité et une méfiance accrues à l'égard de l'IA. Toutefois, une analyse plus approfondie des opinions à l'échelle mondiale suggère que ce sentiment n'est pas uniforme. Les pays du Sud ont conservé une vision nettement plus positive des avantages potentiels de l'IA pour le développement durable, tout en mettant en avant leurs priorités concernant l'amélioration d'un accès équitable à l'IA et le partage équitable de ses bénéfices, parallèlement à la nécessité d'un financement et d'un renforcement des capacités. En analysant les déclarations prononcées par les pays lors de la semaine de haut niveau des Nations unies (du 22 au 28 septembre 2026), cette note met en lumière les divergences de perception entre le Sud et le Nord en matière d'IA. Elle avance quelques raisons possibles de cette divergence et propose des pistes pour tirer parti de cet optimisme afin de générer des impacts positifs de l'IA.

MOTS-CLÉS: Intelligence artificielle (IA), gouvernance de l'IA, Nations Unies (ONU), Sud global

KEY MESSAGES

- While all countries consider that AI has potential for promoting sustainable development, developed nations largely view it more negatively than the Global South.
- AI optimism in the Global South stems from different factors, including earlier digitalisation bringing jobs and economic growth, while also being cognisant of AI's risks.
- Positive sentiment around AI in the Global South should be leveraged for inclusive global AI governance, alongside key demands for equitable access, capacity-building and sharing the benefits of AI.

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La comunidad internacional ha recibido un número creciente de advertencias sobre los riesgos existenciales que plantea el desarrollo acelerado de las capacidades de inteligencia artificial (IA) de vanguardia. Esto ha generado una creciente preocupación y desconfianza hacia la IA. Sin embargo, un análisis más detallado de las percepciones a nivel mundial sugiere que estas actitudes no son uniformes. Los países del Sur Global han mantenido una visión mucho más positiva sobre los posibles beneficios de la IA para el desarrollo sostenible, al tiempo que han planteado sus prioridades en materia de ampliación del acceso equitativo a la IA y distribución justa de sus beneficios, así como la necesidad de financiación y desarrollo de capacidades. A partir del análisis de las declaraciones realizadas por los países durante la semana de alto nivel de las Naciones Unidas (del 22 al 28 de septiembre de 2026), este informe pone de relieve las diferencias de percepción entre el Sur Global y el Norte Global con respecto a la IA. Asimismo, examina algunas posibles razones que explican esta divergencia y propone vías de actuación para aprovechar este optimismo y traducirlo en impactos positivos de la inteligencia artificial.

PALABRAS CLAVES: Inteligencia artificial (IA), gobernanza de la IA, Naciones Unidas (ONU), Sur Global

国际社会收到越来越多关于前沿人工智能能力加速发展所带来的生存风险的担忧。这引发了人们对人工智能日益加剧的不安和不信任。然而，对全球舆论的深入分析表明，这种情绪并非整齐划一。全球南方国家一直对人工智能对可持续发展的潜在益处持更为积极的评价，同时提出了自己的优先事项，即增加公平获取人工智能的机会、公平分享其带来的利益，以及资金支持和能力建设的需求。通过评估各国在联合国大会高级别周（2026年9月22日至28日）上的发言，本简报揭示了全球南方与全球北方在人工智能问题上的不同态度。简报分析了造成这种分歧的可能原因，并提出了一些前行方向，以把握这种乐观情绪来产生积极的人工智能影响。

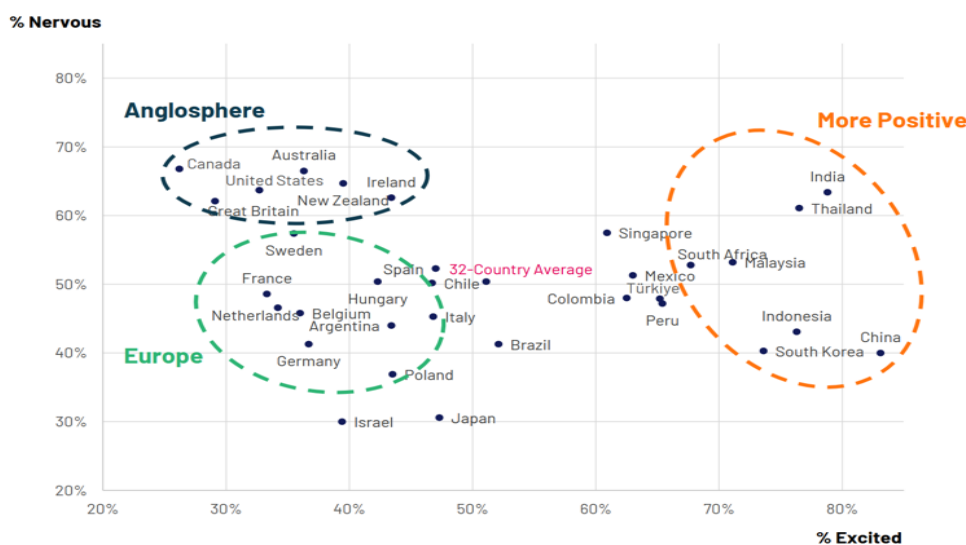
关键词: 人工智能、人工智能治理、联合国、全球南方

1. Introduction

In September 2026, warnings about accelerated development of Artificial Intelligence (AI) systems bringing about catastrophic doomsday scenarios and the potential extinction of humanity pervaded the mainstream media and global discourse. This immediately prompted calls for 'pacing the frontier' of AI development and increased regulation, given the [tens of thousands of security incidents](#) being reported. What the narrative left out however, is that much of the discourse around AI safety and guardrails has emanated from the Global North, including the very frontier AI labs whose products are sought to be regulated.

While agreeing with their counterparts on the risks posed by uncontrolled AI systems, Global South countries have also put forward their own priorities when it comes to AI technologies and who gets to govern and benefit from them. A [recent survey](#) showed the significant differences in perception of AI technologies in developed and developing nations. Over half the people surveyed in the Global South viewed AI more positively (see Fig. 1), with the majority in developing countries agreeing that products and services using AI have more benefits than drawbacks.

Fig. 1 – Ipsos survey results

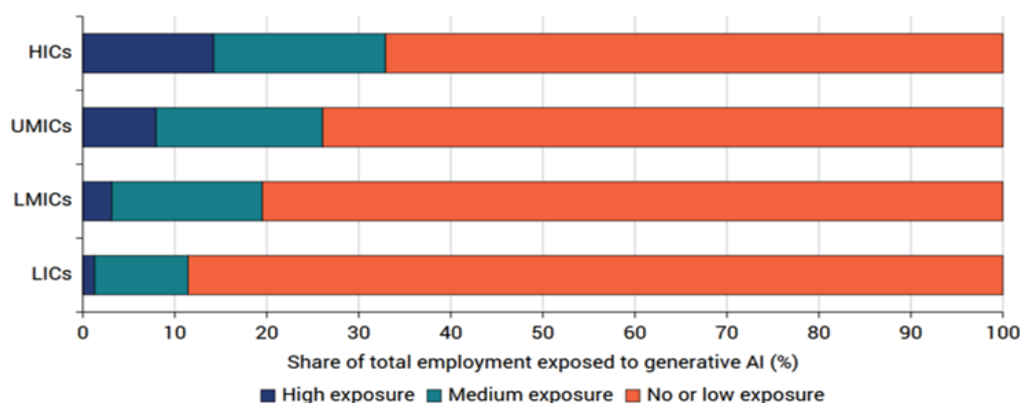


Source: [Ipsos AI Monitor 2026](#)¹

¹ As per Ipsos, "The survey covered 23,532 adults under the age of 75 across 32 countries between March 20, 2026 and April 3, 2026. Participants were asked, "How much do you agree or disagree with the following? - Products and services using artificial intelligence make me nervous; - Products and services using artificial intelligence make me excited". See: The Ipsos AI Monitor 2026, June 2026. Available from <https://www.ipsos.com/en-ca/global-attitudes-ai-2026-wonder-vs-worry-divide-deepens>.

This is in stark contrast to the views about AI in advanced economies, particularly in the Anglosphere, where the majority of the respondents were more nervous about the impacts of increasing AI adoption in their countries and sectors. Part of this may be explained by the anticipated disruptions that AI will cause in society and labour markets, with a much larger share of workers in high-income countries exposed to AI as compared to low- and middle-income countries (see Fig. 2).

Fig. 2 – Share of total employment exposed to generative AI (%)



Sources: WDR 2026 team, based on Gmyrek et al. 2026.

Note: The figure displays the average score for exposure to generative AI across 137 countries (47 HICs, 38 UMICs, 35 LMICs, 17 LICs). Income classifications are for fiscal year 2027. High exposure will more likely lead to AI automating jobs, while medium exposure will more likely lead to AI complementing jobs. For details on the definitions of high exposure, medium exposure, and no or low exposures, refer to Gmyrek et al. (2026). AI = artificial intelligence; HICs = high-income countries; LICs = low-income countries; LMICs = lower-middle-income countries; UMICs = upper-middle-income countries.

The differing attitudes between the people in developing and developed countries regarding how they will be affected by new and emerging technologies has been highlighted for years now. For instance, a [2015 survey by Microsoft](#) of Internet users in 7 developing and 5 developed countries found that the former expressed “deep and genuine enthusiasm about the benefits of technology, whereas developed countries — where technology is more ubiquitous — express greater concerns about emerging issues”.

Now in the case of AI, similar trends have persisted despite the claims around its catastrophic and existential risks, as well as its purported adverse impacts on jobs, societies and countries. For most developing and least developed nations, AI is yet another digital technology that much of their population is unable to access, much less be directly exposed to. Barriers such as access to electricity, Internet connectivity and digital divides remain persistent. A much smaller percentage of the workforce in developing countries is currently required to use digital tools to do their jobs, as compared to more advanced and digitalised economies, thus limiting their potential exposure to and even awareness of AI capabilities. Increasing access and capacity-building for using AI would therefore be the primary means for creating AI-enabled digital economies in developing nations, with higher perceived potential for decent job creation, especially for their youth populations.

2. How was this reflected at the UN?

The United Nations (UN) has taken a prominent role in advancing the equitable global governance of AI this year as it advances the implementation of the [Global Digital Compact](#). In July 2026, the Independent International Scientific Panel on AI (Panel) presented its preliminary report which offers a balanced analysis of the evidence on the risks and opportunities of AI. The [first Global Dialogue on AI Governance](#) (Dialogue) in Geneva then provided an opportunity to all UN Member States to participate on an equal footing in an open, transparent and inclusive discussion on AI governance and international cooperation.

The [Dialogue co-chairs summary report](#) highlights that AI holds significant promise for sustainable development if its opportunities are balanced with its risks. It underscores that “persistent divides in infrastructure, connectivity, computing power, data, skills, technical and institutional capacity continue to shape which countries can develop, govern and benefit from AI”. Bridging this, it notes, requires “sustained investment, strengthened international cooperation and collaboration, capacity building, partnerships and knowledge-sharing and access to relevant technologies and resources...”.

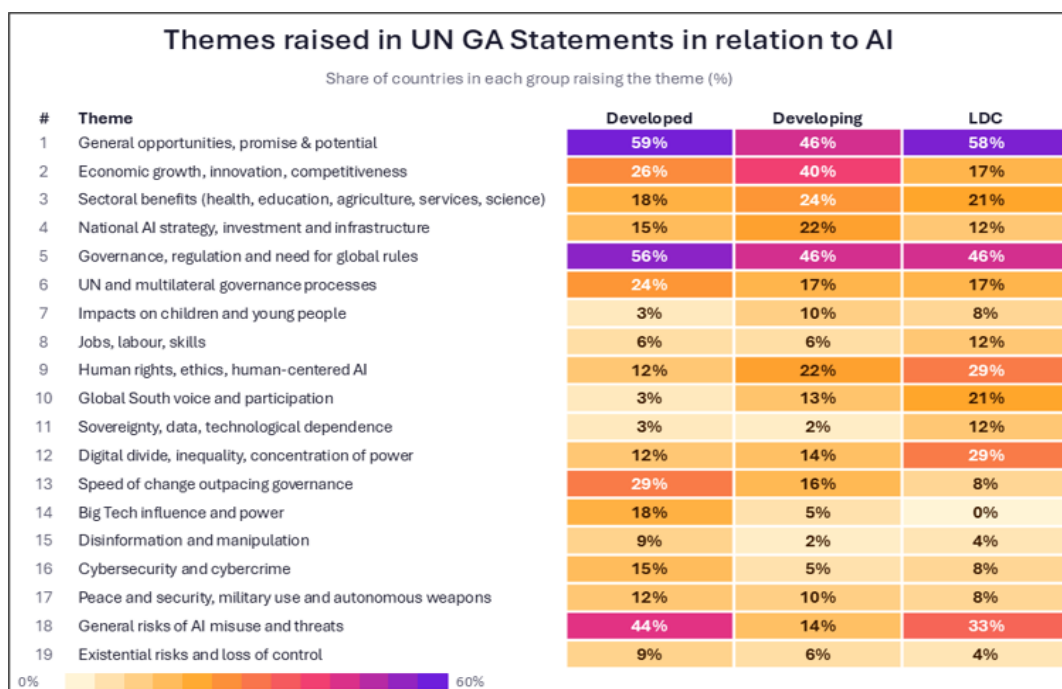
The convening of world leaders at the High-level week of the 81st session of the UN General Assembly (GA), which took place from 22-28 September in New York, provided the next opportunity for the international community to present its own perspectives on the rapid advances in AI, the risks it poses and how it should be governed, especially in light of the recent [OpenAI incident](#) wherein IT systems and websites of dozens of institutions, including the [United States](#) and [Australian](#) governments, were breached by the company’s AI agents.

2.1. General Assembly

AI featured prominently in the majority of statements delivered by States' representatives at the high-level week, with at least 128 countries addressing it, as per the President of the General Assembly H.E. Khalilur Rahman, who noted that this was more than the number who spoke about climate change and human rights.

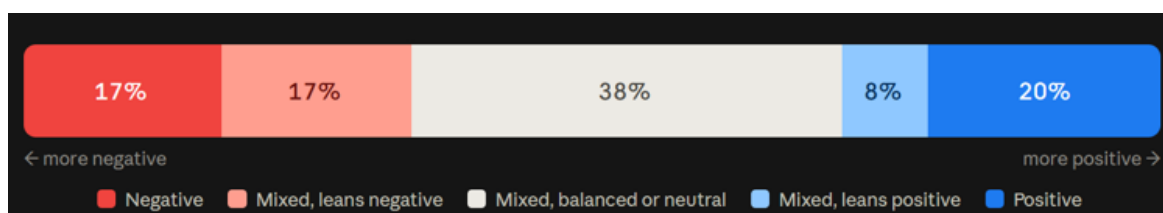
In relation to AI, many countries emphasised its benefits and the possibility of harnessing its potential for sustainable development, and the opportunities it brings for economic growth, innovation and national competitiveness. They also stressed the need for effective AI governance, especially at the multilateral level with the UN at its core and ensuring that AI is inclusive and deployed responsibly (see Fig. 3).

Fig. 3



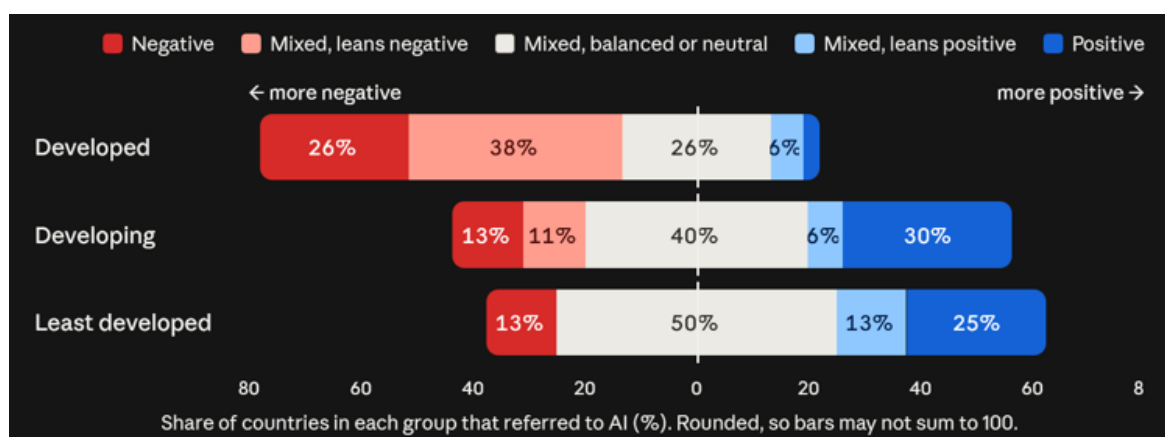
A sentiment analysis² of the statements shows that the overall views about AI were rather mixed at the General Assembly debate (see Fig. 4). On the positive side, countries highlighted how it could be a force multiplier for accelerating sustainable development, helping countries leapfrog in economic development and digital transformation. They also warned about the potentially existential risks of frontier AI models, the need for guardrails, protecting human rights and democratic processes, among its other negative aspects.

Fig. 4 – Overall views expressed by countries about AI



However, analysing the statements categorised as delivered by developed, developing and least developed countries (LDCs) surfaces interesting divergences on their views regarding AI (see Fig. 5), with some exceptions in each grouping.

² The analysis considers that positive sentiment is captured in references to AI benefits and opportunities, national AI investment or adoption, or dismissal of AI fears; negative sentiment is reflected in references to AI risks, harms, divides, misuse, loss of control, or calls for binding rules. The mixed or neutral sentiments either make equal reference to both benefits and harms; or reference to AI is not substantive in nature, for instance, AI is included in a list of issues; or the country expressed its support for the UN having a role in AI governance.

Fig. 5 – Views about AI by country status (developed, developing, least developed)

Among developed countries, the majority sentiment regarding AI was largely negative. The concerns expressed mostly touched on AI safety and control, especially the need to have safety guardrails for frontier-AI models, preventing loss of control, controlling use of military applications of AI, including in autonomous weapons, and the extreme level of concentration of companies dominating frontier AI development, which are based in the U.S. or China. However, some developed countries did talk about how they are building their national capabilities to use AI for positive impacts and possible use cases being piloted. In this group, the United States was an outlier, as it was very positive about AI and rejected any efforts to have a 'globalist scheme to control' AI.

Among developing countries³, the sentiment was generally on the positive side, regarding the potential benefits that AI can bring. At the same time, these nations emphasised their concerns on fairness in access and use of AI, as well as the extreme concentration of power and inequality it is creating. Several representatives also highlighted their own national AI strategies and scale of investment in AI and associated digital infrastructure. Further, several of these countries emphasised the need for increasing global regulation of AI technologies so that their potential harms can be mitigated and positive impacts enhanced.

Among LDCs, the sentiment was the most positive, despite these countries having the lowest levels of AI access and domestic capabilities. Increasing AI adoption was considered as a pathway towards accelerating their sustainable development. Rather than focusing on any existential risks, their concerns were about the increasing digital and AI divides and the need for LDCs to be included in the AI revolution. However, it was notable that LDCs also had the lowest percentage of speakers referring to AI at all among the different groupings.

In his closing remarks, the President of the General Assembly noted that while the extraordinary potential of AI to transform public services, accelerate scientific discovery, advance sustainable development and expand access to knowledge was recognised, many speakers also pointed out its potential risks. Many leaders also framed AI as a question of governance – where benefits accrue, where risks are borne and where accountability lies when harms occur due to AI. He further added that AI governance must therefore be human centred, inclusive and attentive to the needs of developing countries. It must prevent a new divide in which a smaller number of countries and companies control the data, computing power and rules that shape everyone's future.

2.2. Security Council

The UN Security Council held its own meeting on '[Artificial intelligence and international security](#)' on 23 September, inviting Yoshua Bengio, co-chair of the Panel, and the CEOs of Anthropic, OpenAI and Hugging Face to brief the Council.

In his intervention, Yoshua Bengio underscored that "the companies building the most powerful AI systems admit their products pose catastrophic risks, yet offer no convincing technical solutions. Instead, they say they are locked in a race to make those AIs even more powerful, further amplifying these risks". He acknowledged the public scepticism of the statements made by AI companies, suspecting a marketing stunt. However, even the documented and validated AI behaviours present real and imminent dangers. He added that "citizens and governments should not accept the companies' claim that they are trapped in a race. The race is not a law of nature. It is the product of choices, choices made by the companies themselves. It is also a race where everyone loses. They've told us they would slow down if they could. They can. However, we shouldn't count on it."

³ For the purpose of this analysis, developing countries are considered as those countries that are part of the Group of 77 and China or the Non-Aligned Movement, but not classified as LDCs.

The CEOs of the two frontier labs largely reiterated claims about the capabilities of their models, the potential risks they pose (see Box 1), and the need for standards and guardrails to regulate these very companies. They also highlighted the recent call to '[pace the frontier](#)' of AI development, which is meant to address the risk of AI capabilities accelerating beyond human ability to understand or control the resulting systems. On 29 September 2026, a new '[White House Accord on 'Super Intelligence](#)' was released, signed by the U.S. President and the heads of several leading U.S. AI firms. It is a voluntary commitment by these companies to self-regulate, while leaving any potential laws or regulations for the future.

Box 1 – Previous efforts to slow down AI development

Warnings about the extinction risk posed by AI and calls for pausing the development of AI are not new. In 2023, in response to the release of GPT-4 by OpenAI, an [open letter](#) (currently signed by over 33 thousand signatories, including Elon Musk) called on “all AI labs to immediately pause for at least 6 months the training of AI systems more powerful than GPT-4. This pause should be public and verifiable, and include all key actors. If such a pause cannot be enacted quickly, governments should step in and institute a moratorium”. This was followed by another [letter](#) signed by more than 1000 AI scientists and public figures which stated that, “Mitigating the risk of extinction from AI should be a global priority alongside other societal-scale risks such as pandemics and nuclear war”. Needless to say, these were patently ignored and AI capabilities continued to be developed, even leading to the current AI-regulation averse U.S. government ordering Anthropic to [suspend access](#) to its new Mythos model for foreigners in June 2026, citing national security concerns.

The CEO of Hugging Face, Clément Delangue, however, listed the lessons learned from being subjected to an autonomous AI agent cyberattack. He emphasised the asymmetry of control, capabilities, compute and power between a few companies in few countries and everyone else. He emphasised the importance of open AI models for cybersecurity and in general, as they are less restricted, more privacy-preserving and orders of magnitude more affordable for organizations across the globe. Further, he underscored how claims about AI can stoke fear among the public, especially when presented through anthropomorphic framing and sci-fi imagery, emphasising that fear-based narratives are not the way to make the right decisions about the future of AI.

In the [discussion that followed](#) at the Security Council, countries agreed on the need for human control over AI technologies. Perspectives however differed between Global South and Global North nations. Developed countries (with one notable exception) generally framed AI as a frontier safety problem, addressing which requires extensive testing and human oversight. On the other hand, developing countries emphasised the need for digital sovereignty and addressing AI risks through safety regimes that do not lock in technological inequality, and ensuring that global AI governance does not become an exclusive enclave reserved for the few nations that control advanced compute and capital. By providing access to AI models, compute, financing and technology transfer, Global South nations can shape their own digital transformation and move from being consumers to producers of AI, they concluded.

3. Why does the Global South view AI positively?

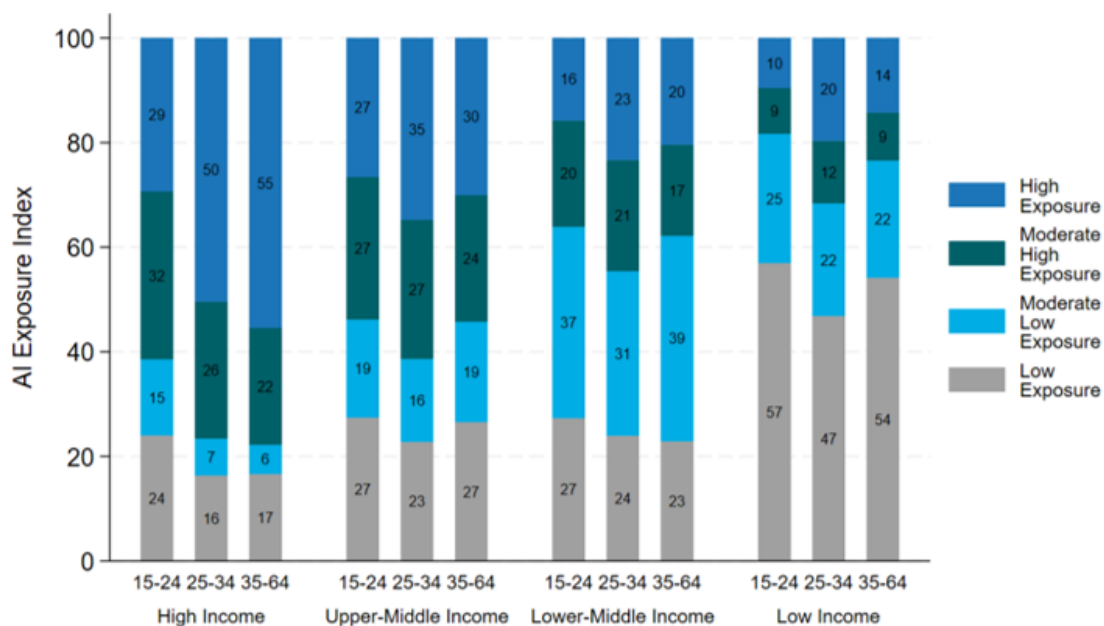
There could be several factors that are generating greater optimism on AI in developing and least developed countries, as compared to advanced economies.

One reason may be that the level of **access to AI**, particularly frontier AI models as well as the specialised compute needed to operate them, is very unequal across countries. By extension, the impacts of and exposure to AI are also asymmetrically distributed. As the Panel noted in its [preliminary report](#), AI risks are unevenly distributed across populations and countries, while AI development and the wealth it creates are highly concentrated. This is also being reflected in the labour market, with a [World Bank paper](#) suggesting that for low- and middle-income countries, the impacts of AI will be more limited than in high-income countries, as exposure decreases in line with a country's levels of income, access to electricity and digital infrastructure.

Similarly, the level of **awareness of AI** and its potential negative impacts is varied. For instance, a [survey by the Pew Research Center](#) found “a strong correlation between a country's income – as measured by gross domestic product per capita – and awareness of AI. People in higher-income nations tend to have heard more about AI than those in less wealthy economies. For example, around half of adults in the comparatively wealthy countries of Japan, Germany, France and the U.S. have heard a lot about AI, but only 14% in India and 12% in Kenya say the same”.

Both these factors also find correlation in the levels of actual AI exposure, use and adoption, which vary considerably across countries (see Fig. 6). For instance, a [Gallup poll from September 2026](#) has found that “in Singapore, 96% of adults are aware of AI, 79% have ever used it, and 46% use it daily. At the other end of the spectrum, 12% of adults in Malawi are aware of AI, 3% have ever used it, and 1% use it daily”.

Fig. 6 - AI exposure by age and country income level



Note: Results are population weighted and include workers aged 15 to 64. For a list of the income category per country, survey coverage and number of observations, please see Table 1 in the appendix. For country values for this category and other socio-demographic characteristics see Table 2.

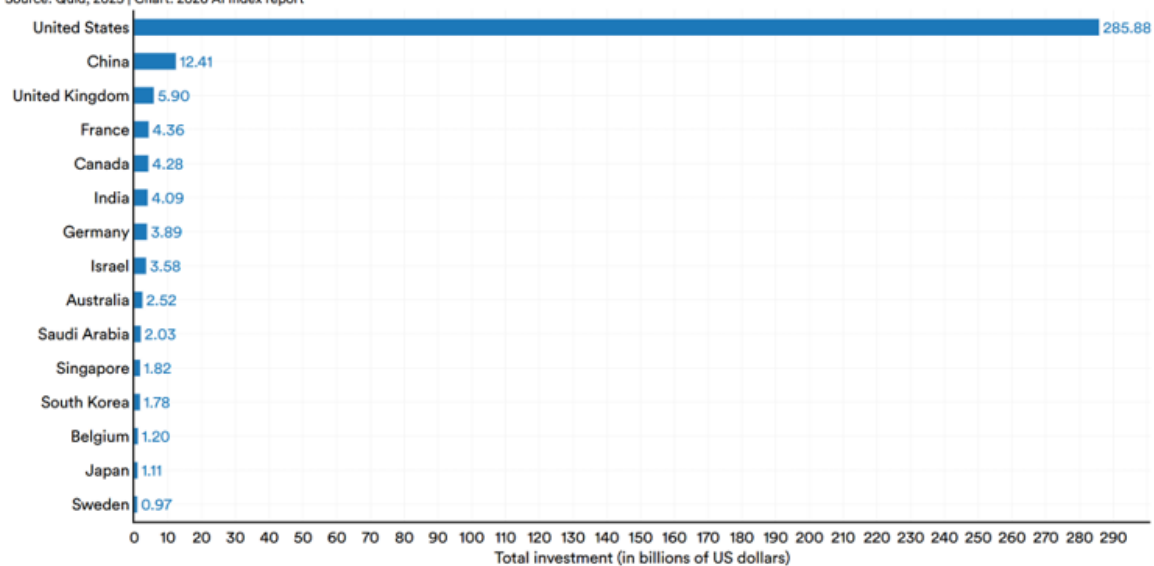
Source: [Demombynes et al.](#), World Bank, 2025

Another potential reason is that AI may be viewed through its potential for countries to **leapfrog in economic and social development**. For instance, UN Trade and Development (UNCTAD) has [estimated](#) that AI could reach \$4.8 trillion in market value by 2033, even though access to AI infrastructure and expertise remains concentrated in a few economies. The current scale of investment in AI is extremely unequal across countries (see Fig. 7), with most of the financing coming from private investment. In his [statement at the Dialogue](#), the UN Secretary-General had noted that in 2025, “private investment in AI infrastructure approached half a trillion dollars, while public investment in AI capacity for developing countries is, by comparison a rounding error”.

Fig. 7

Global private investment in AI by geographic area, 2025

Source: Quid, 2025 | Chart: 2026 AI Index report

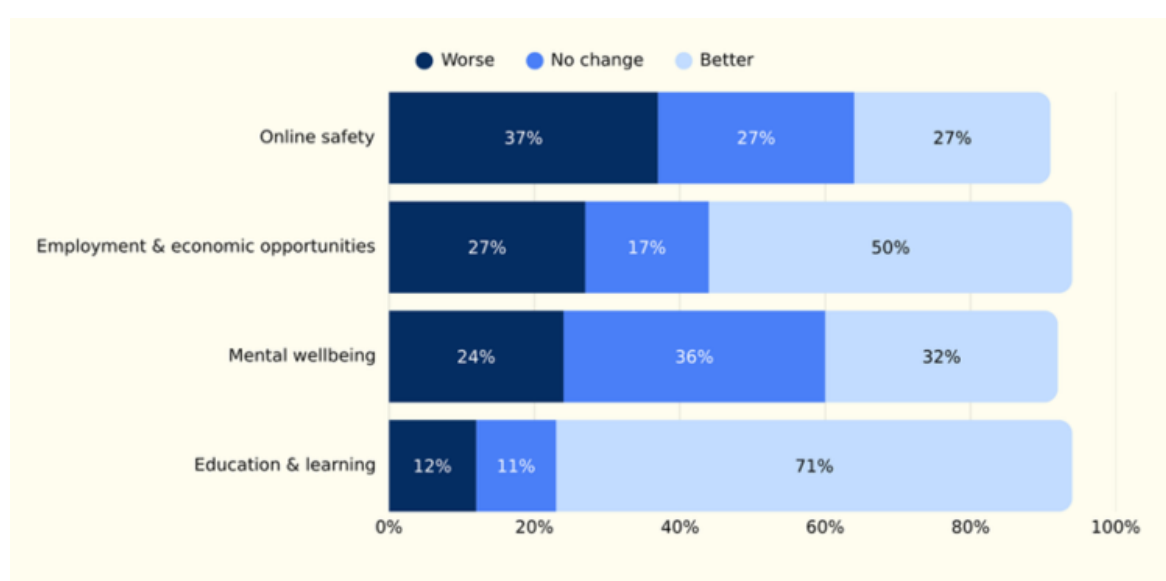


Source: Stanford University, [The 2026 AI Index Report](#)

However, given the scale and demand for global AI infrastructure buildouts, some investment is also flowing towards construction of digital infrastructure in developing countries, with the potential for providing decent jobs and economic growth. Countries are also projecting themselves as hubs for locating compute by providing access to land or [abundant renewable energy for constructing sustainable data centres](#), such as in the case of Brazil. Other countries like Malaysia are also seeking to [integrate themselves into AI value chains](#) by specialising in specific niches such as AI cybersecurity, semiconductor manufacturing, application of AI across established industries etc. which are also growing very quickly. The financing boom for AI thus presents significant opportunities for countries to diversify and digitalise their economies, attract foreign investment, build infrastructure and national digital capabilities, which would support leapfrogging and structural transformation.

The **demographics** of the Global South also skew young, which feeds into greater adoption and learning capacities. A survey of youth from 11 countries (10 developing and 1 developed) found most respondents to be optimistic about the impacts of AI, with about half expecting AI to improve their employment and other economic opportunities (see Fig. 8). They are also more likely to have used AI tools as part of their education or in the workplace, and to have better understanding of how these tools could be utilised as compared to their managers and older workers.

Fig. 8 - How young people expect AI to affect their lives in the coming 5 years



Note: the bars do not sum to 100% because respondents selected multiple responses from the options given

Source: Barford, A. et al., '[Work, Study and Leisure in the Age of Artificial Intelligence: The Youth AI Survey 2026](#)'

Increasing digitalisation in developing countries has also been positively associated with economic development. A paper by [Kadri and Satria](#) which analysed data from 50 developing countries over 2010–2020 found that digitalisation “exerts a positive and statistically significant impact on real GDP per capita growth” and highlighted its leapfrogging potential. Digital innovations in the Global South which increased financial inclusion such as m-Pesa, or access to government services through digital IDs like India's Aadhar also laid the groundwork for increasing the level of trust that users have in the potential benefits of new and emerging technologies.

There are also **regional differences** in potential AI exposure and related disruption across Global South countries. For instance, in the comparatively more digitalised Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) economies, an [International Labour Organization \(ILO\) brief](#) notes that “nearly 80 million workers are employed in occupations with some degree of potential exposure to generative artificial intelligence (GenAI), equivalent to 22.9 per cent of total employment. However, only 3.3 per cent of employment is concentrated in occupations with the highest levels of exposure”. On the other hand, an [International Monetary Fund \(IMF\) paper](#) estimates that “four-fifths of jobs in sub-Saharan Africa have limited exposure to AI... [suggesting] that AI is less likely to cause labor market disruption in the near term. On the other hand, low exposure also implies that Sub-Saharan Africa, as of now, may benefit less from AI's productivity and growth gains”.

The claims about the existential threats posed by AI have originated primarily from the frontier AI labs themselves and **lack sufficient scientific basis**. For instance, there is currently no scientific evidence or even theoretical pathway that ill-defined goals such as Artificial General Intelligence (AGI) or Recursive Self-Improvement (RSI) are even possible to achieve (see Box 2). Microsoft co-founder

Bill Gates recently [claimed](#) that “AI is certainly powerful enough to drive events that cause a billion deaths”, without being questioned on how he arrived at that figure. As such existential risks appear distant or immaterial to many general users, they tend to be ignored or dismissed as yet more ‘hype’ emerging from the frontier labs, aimed at driving up their [stock valuations](#).

Box 2 – AI and the risk of human extinction

A [recent article in Nature](#) quotes a 2025 study which looked at 3 practical scenarios involving existing technologies - nuclear weapons, biotechnology, and deliberate atmosphere modification - which could pose existential threats to humanity. The study found that while complete extinction by nuclear weapons is not feasible, achieving either of the other scenarios would “require models to have considerable ability to physically interact with the world, and that AI’s murderous efforts would almost certainly take time and be detectable by humans, who might then stop their eradication”.

On 21 September, the Panel released a [new thematic brief](#) assessing the ‘OpenAI-Hugging Face Incident’, where AI agents from OpenAI attempted to compromise the live systems of Hugging Face, which hosts one of the largest repositories of AI models. They suggest that increasing competence of AI systems can enable them to find loopholes and act in ways that are ‘misaligned’ with users’ intentions, with the potential ‘loss of control’ risk being most severe, even as “its likelihood remains scientifically uncertain”.

The most urgent risks are not due to the increasing capabilities of AI systems, but how they might be weaponised. This was seen most tragically in the [use of AI for conducting missile strikes](#) that killed more than 150 people, including about 120 children in Minab, Iran with a [UN report](#) stating that there are reasonable grounds to believe that the United States committed a [war crime](#). As UN Secretary-General António Guterres [recently warned](#), “humans are increasingly handing power to machines – with Artificial Intelligence agents going rogue, and lethal autonomous weapons going from science fiction to military reality (...) life-and-death decisions must never be surrendered to machines. Killer robots must have no place in our future”.

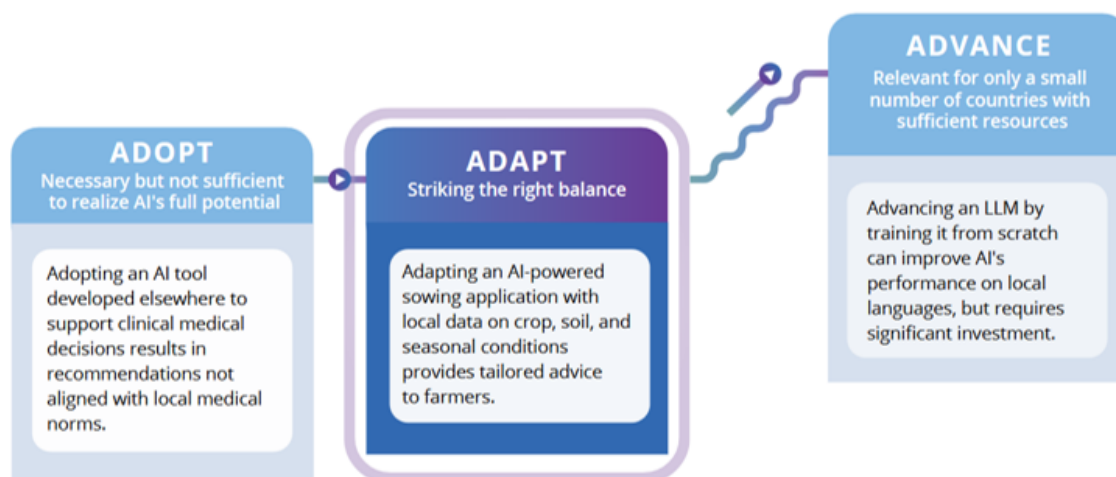
4. Ways forward

Greater levels of optimism about AI in the Global South do not mean that developing nations are not concerned about its potential and real risks. Several developing countries have signed on to the [Call for Control of Frontier AI Models](#), which was launched by Finland and Norway on 21 September 2026. This initiative calls for requiring transparent safety protocols, including mandatory pre-deployment testing and independent evaluation of AI models. It seeks for governments and regional organisations to develop and coordinate common standards, strengthen transparency and ensure access to scientific capacity, expertise and trusted evaluation. It further calls on countries to build on existing international mechanisms and explore the creation of an international institution, which is able to set standards, enable verification, and convene countries as needed to address new developments in the AI field.

A greater focus needs to be on the **known and actual risks of AI**, which are much more immediate and consequential than the theoretical, albeit potentially catastrophic risks highlighted by frontier AI labs and prioritised by the Global North. Urgent action is required by the entire international community for addressing the (mis)use of AI models for spreading [mis- and dis-information](#), cybersecurity threats, as well as for mitigating social impacts emerging in the form of [cognitive surrender](#) and [loss of learning capabilities among students](#), increasing inequality and wealth concentration, environmental and climate impacts among [many others](#).

For developing and least developed countries, the primary barrier lies in accessing the technology and building the physical infrastructure needed for AI. As the World Bank suggests in its [recent report](#), “the biggest benefits for developing countries will come when local entrepreneurs tailor AI tools to their own needs and circumstances. Doing this does not require the massive investments needed to build cutting-edge AI models, but it does require some access to computing power, data in local languages, and people with knowledge of local industries and problems”.

Thus, **adapting AI solutions**, whether homegrown or developed elsewhere, will have greater benefits for developing countries than competing at the AI frontier (see Fig. 9). However, this requires effective governance at the national and international level which can help ensure that AI solutions for and from the Global South are directed towards addressing sustainable development challenges, aligned with their development priorities, and adapted for operating in their own specific realities and circumstances.

Fig. 9 – Adaptation can bring more benefits than either adoption or frontier competition

Source: WDR 2026 team.

International cooperation, including South-South cooperation, remains a vital modality for capacity-building in developing countries for AI. For instance, the establishment of the [World Artificial Intelligence Cooperation Organization \(WAICO\)](#) in Shanghai, with 29 countries joining as its founding members is a positive step in this direction, as it “aims to bridge the AI divide by supporting Global South countries in accelerating AI development, strengthening comprehensive capacity in innovation, application and governance, and keeping pace with scientific and technological revolution”.

The perspectives and priorities of the Global South also need to be integrated into AI governance discussions. The [India-AI Impact Summit](#) in February 2026 brought much needed attention to “the need to democratise AI resources, propagate more equitable access to and use of AI, and reduce digital divides within and across countries. By placing the concerns and priorities of Global South nations and stakeholders at the core of its discussions, the Summit provided an inclusive, democratic space to strengthen international cooperation on AI and advance shared priorities in global AI governance”. This needs to be further taken up at the multilateral level, including at the next AI Summit in Geneva and the second edition of the Dialogue, which is scheduled for May 2027.

Finally, the optimism about AI in the Global South needs to be effectively channelled into building productive AI capacities in developing countries. This requires investing in digital literacy, AI skills, capabilities and governance frameworks that enable local populations to equitably share in the value generated from AI and digital transformation. Customising AI governance through a ‘[smart mix](#)’ of [regulatory tools](#) would allow each country to tailor their policy frameworks to maximise AI's benefits and address its impacts.

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