Ruhi Khan July 14th, 2025

From AI colonialism to co-creation: bridging the global AI divide

LSE's Dr Ruhi Khan explores how the rapid expansion of artificial intelligence, dominated by a few powerful actors in the Global North, is reinforcing global inequalities by extracting data, labour, and resources from the Global South. Framing this imbalance as AI colonialism, she calls for a worldwide shift towards global co-creation – an ethical, inclusive, and locally driven AI that fosters shared innovation and participatory governance. Through this, AI can evolve into a truly transformative force that empowers communities worldwide.

Could a Global South country be the next AI and tech capital of the world? This was the topic of discussion at one of the 'Big Five' tech companies' headquarters in London last week. I felt bombarded with one perspective after another on what could only be termed techno-determinism. With the seemingly utopian world of AI forecasted, especially for some emerging economies, one would imagine that AI is the miracle cure for all ills and that by simply harnessing AI *quickly*, a country could become the next global leader.

While I agree that AI has the potential to solve several problems and is leading the current global revolution, a mad dash to the finish line to be the next 'Capital' could only lead to history repeating itself.

Almost a decade ago, I argued at a conference at the Oxford Internet Institute that online social order traces a similar pattern to the historiography of class and categorisation of modern society. In short, technology is replicating colonial history. Since then, I've written on colonial harms in the contemporary world, including the bias in AI and how AI is tilting the power balance away from the marginalised groups.

Others have also raised the crucial issues of Data Colonialism, Digital Colonialism, and Technocolonialism. But with the fast-paced grand expansion of Artificial Intelligence, increasingly, what we are encountering now could be termed as AI Colonialism.

Decoding AI Colonialism

Adopting a decolonial lens, we can argue that European colonialism was, in essence, a forcible and brutal takeover of land, raw materials like minerals and other resources, and the exploitation of labour, including slave labour. The European imperial powers filled their coffers without considering the impact of their greed on those they took from, while simultaneously playing the role of the 'saviour' of 'barbarian' populations. They did this with help from some elite members of the colonial lands through a skewed partnership that benefited few over many.

Centuries later, we are seeing a very similar trend. This colonial matrix of power underpins how AI systems are developed and propagated, creating a hegemonic structure where Western tech demand and profits supersede Global South interests, causing a global imbalance of power akin to historical colonialism. Still, instead of blatant brutal force, we now find the power of persuasion and whitewashing the exploitation of the poor behind the guise of technological progress and development.

During the recent LSE Festival, tech scholar Ruha Benjamin engaged the audience in a reflective practice of what kind of government projects easily acquire funding. It seems the enthusiasm of government and investors to pour millions, even billions into ambitious projects with no clear benefits is becoming an increasing norm, whereas social welfare projects that require far less capital and have more tangible results only get a lacklustre, grudging response of *'get real'*. AI is one glamorous project that, in today's hyped world, can get investors to scream *'Be Bold'* and pour billions without a clear understanding of the benefits and consequences.

This hype around AI has almost blinded society to the hazardous implications and impacts of AI on the poor, marginalised communities of the world. The West's reckless exploitation of the Global South is also facilitated by the upper echelons of the Global South, who are willing to profit from the misery of the marginalised other. This is exactly why we need to pause and understand the hidden costs of AI, because they eventually affect us all.

Let me highlight a few:

- **Data extraction**

Artificial intelligence systems are built on vast datasets – linguistic, behavioural, biometric, and more. In the Global South, the growing demand for such data has led to the extraction of digital resources by Global North institutions and tech corporations with minimal transparency, consent, or benefit to the communities being mined. Major tech companies collect vast amounts of data through services like Google Search and Maps, which is often processed and monetised without adequate compensation or benefit to the source countries.

Why are Indigenous communities such as the Māori refusing to be a part the Mozilla's *Common Voice* project, which crowdsources voice data to train speech recognition models by underrepresented communities? It is because they want to retain sovereignty over their linguistic data, expressing concerns about its potential exploitation by global tech firms without proper safeguards or reciprocity. Their stance underscores the broader issue of **data sovereignty** and the need for ethical AI development rooted in local agency and consent.

- **Platform Governance**

AI colonialism extends beyond language to platform governance. Despite most users being outside the U.S., companies like Meta allocate the majority of content moderation resources to the Global North. In 2020, only 13% of Facebook's moderation hours addressed content from non-U.S. regions. Increasingly reliant on AI, these platforms often deploy algorithms that lack cultural context, leading to 'over-removal' of legitimate content and 'slow removal' of harmful material. This not only stifles free expression in the Global South but also leaves communities more vulnerable to mis/disinformation, hate speech, and political manipulation, exacerbating existing social and political tensions.

- **Unfair Practices**

In countries like Venezuela, where economic instability is rife, tech giants like Microsoft, Google, and Amazon outsource AI training tasks to data labelling platforms like *Appen*, which employ people often at shockingly low pay and with little to no labour protections. These workers, essential to the development of modern AI, remain invisible and undervalued.

The imbalance goes even deeper. In Argentina, a Microsoft-backed AI project reportedly collected sensitive information on teenage girls **without their knowledge or consent,** relying solely on interviews with 'heads of families,' often the fathers. The result? An invasive system that would never be tolerated in Western countries, which have stronger privacy laws. It's a stark example of how **data rights and ethical standards are often weaker in the Global South,** allowing exploitative practices that would raise alarms elsewhere.

- **Labour exploitation**

The Global South often bears the hidden human cost of AI. Platforms like Sama and Remotasks, contracted by tech giants such as Meta, OpenAI, and Scale AI, have come under fire for exploitative labour practices. In Kenya, workers were paid as little as $1.50 an hour to moderate traumatic content for AI systems, including material involving abuse, torture, and violence, akin to a 'content moderation sweatshop'. Similar conditions exist in the Philippines, where data annotators face unstable contracts, withheld pay, and sudden dismissal, all while companies shift operations to

regions with even cheaper labour. These cases highlight how AI development relies on precarious digital labour, reinforcing global inequalities under the guise of innovation.

- **AI's Testing Ground**

Southeast Asia is emerging as a testing lab for high-risk AI tools like deepfakes, often without adequate safeguards. In Hong Kong, a deepfake video call led an employee to transfer £20 million, mistaking it for a legitimate request from senior staff. During India's recent elections, deepfakes amplified political disinformation, threatening democratic integrity. Weak data protection laws, such as in Pakistan, further expose citizens to scams and enable AI-driven surveillance, prioritising control over rights. These cases reveal how experimental AI is disproportionately trialled in the Global South, often at the expense of safety, privacy, and democratic resilience.

- **Environmental degradation**

AI's resource demands are staggering. Training large models requires **immense water and electricity** resources, already scarce in many developing countries. As semiconductor production (cobalt and lithium) expands to meet AI demand, **land grabs, energy diversion, and water depletion** are becoming flashpoints in regions like Africa, Asia and Latin America, where land is cheap and environmental regulation is weak.

The Democratic Republic of Congo supplies over 70% of the world's cobalt, yet mining often involves hazardous conditions and modern-day slavery. Some tech companies were sued over the deaths and injuries of child miners. In Chile's Atacama Desert, lithium extraction drains scarce water resources, causing ecological harm and affecting Indigenous communities. On top of that, AI data centres consume vast amounts of water for cooling, further straining supplies in regions already grappling with water scarcity, threatening local agriculture and livelihoods Mass protests were held in Uruguay following the government's decision to allow Google to build a data centre in the country that had faced its worst drought in 74 year. From water to minerals, this urges us to rethink whose voices and territories matter in the era of AI.

- **Risks Without Rewards: AI's Unequal Footprint**

AI development remains concentrated in the Global North, where tech giants like Google and Microsoft control the infrastructure, funding, and decision-making. In contrast, many AI deployments in the Global South, like Nuru's crop disease app in Africa, or Google's banana disease detection in Uganda, are designed *for* communities, not necessarily *with* them. While these tools benefit smallholder farmers, the core AI model and infrastructure are designed and managed by institutions in the Global North, reinforcing a top-down, extractive model of innovation, reminiscent of colonial development models.

Infrastructure gaps further widen the divide. Three of the five countries with the greatest infrastructure needs are in Asia (China, India and Japan), with those countries comprising 39% of global infrastructure investment needs. China alone is expected to need $28 trillion in infrastructure investment, which is more than half of Asia's total needs and 30% of global needs. Limited internet access and unreliable power in parts of Asia, Africa, and Latin America hinder AI adoption, while rising automation threatens key outsourcing jobs, especially in IT-reliant economies like India.

These examples make one thing clear: **the rules of AI aren't being applied equally across the globe**. Without fair global governance and equitable participation, AI risks becoming another form of colonialism that extracts value from the Global South while leaving behind economic and environmental harm.

Bridging the AI Divide

To ensure AI benefits are shared equitably, the Global South must be more than a testing ground or labour pool. It must be an active co-creator. Bridging the AI divide requires systemic change:

1. **Invest in Local Innovation & Core Competencies**
Support universities, startups, and national institutions to build foundational AI capabilities, such as algorithm design, data governance, and infrastructure, rooted in local knowledge, languages, and needs.

2. **Democratise Infrastructure Access**
Expand affordable access to electricity, high-speed internet, and data centres to enable meaningful participation in the AI economy across underserved regions.

3. **Promote Ethical & Inclusive Data Governance**
Shift from extractive data practices by ensuring consent, protecting indigenous data sovereignty, and fostering community ownership of training datasets.

4. **Secure Technology Intellectual Property Rights**
Enable countries in the Global South to develop, retain, and benefit from AI-related IP through fair licensing regimes, local patent capacity, and technology transfer mechanisms.

5. **Advance Global Governance with Equity**
Ensure meaningful representation of the Global South in setting international AI regulations, particularly on surveillance, labour rights, environmental standards, and data protections.

Together, these steps can move us from ***AI colonialism to global co-creation***, balancing innovation with equity, accountability, and justice. As AI reshapes our world, inclusive development is not optional; it is essential.

This post gives the views of the author and not the position of the Media@LSE blog, nor of the London School of Economics and Political Science.

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About the author

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Dr Ruhi Khan, FRSA, is a journalist and an ESRC researcher at the London School of Economics. Drawing on decolonial and feminist frameworks, her research critically examines media systems, gender, and the political economy of AI and technology, shaping academic and industry perspectives on inclusive and equitable tech development.

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