

Moving Beyond the Term “Global South” in AI Ethics and Policy

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Introduction

“Who will represent the Global South at the AI policy table?”

This question, raised at a 2023 event on the ethics of artificial intelligence (AI), highlights the growing adoption of the term “Global South” in discussions on building globally inclusive AI systems and governance. In recent years, government officials from Brazil, Ghana, India, and the United States have emphasized the need to “include countries of the Global South” in shaping AI policy. Researchers and journalists have increasingly used the term “Global South” when examining issues of beta testing, data colonialism, and labor exploitation in AI development. For example, Figure 1 shows a drastic uptick in the term’s usage in publications of the Association for Computing Machinery (ACM) — one of the world’s leading venues for AI research — since the 2020s.

What do people mean when they use the term “Global South”? More broadly, what purpose does the term serve when used in English-speaking AI ethics and policy spaces?

Key Takeaways

In recent years, the term “Global South” has increasingly been adopted in discussions on building globally inclusive AI systems and governance. However, much work remains to be done to understand the connotations, usage, and contradictions of the term within AI ethics and policy.

We interviewed 20 scholars and practitioners in AI ethics and policy who have engaged with global politics and found that the term “Global South” often implies harmful stereotypes of homogeneity, underdevelopment, and technological illiteracy.

Despite these implications, many scholars and practitioners feel pressured to use the term “Global South” due to broader research and funding structures that center the United States as a hub for resources and knowledge production.

Rather than adopting another term that may carry similar stereotypes, we emphasize the need to ground AI ethics and policy work in specific regions and power structures, build alternative funding structures, and make deeper changes that consider the plurality of cultures within and across countries.

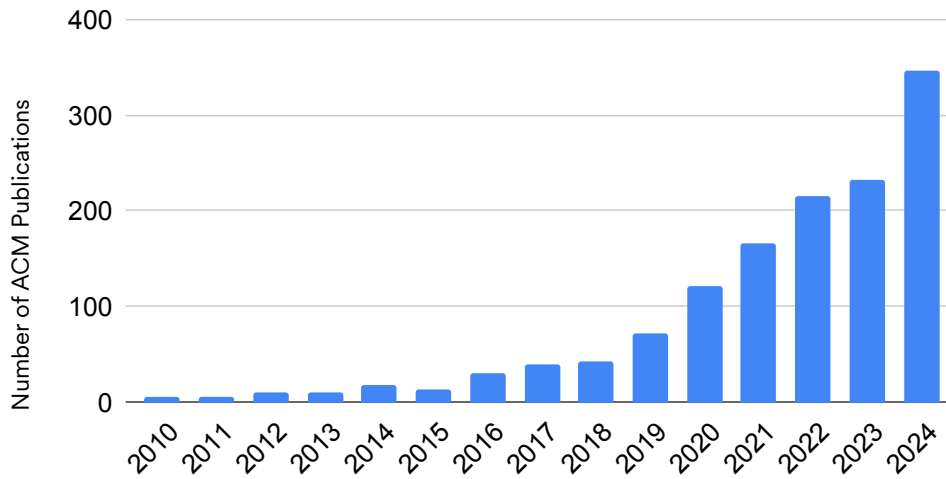


Figure 1: Number of ACM publications mentioning the term “Global South”

The term “Global South” has many limitations and can perpetuate an imperial gaze in AI ethics and policy spaces.

Traditionally, the “Global South” refers to economically developing nations and includes Africa; Latin America and the Caribbean; the Middle East and Asia excluding Israel, Japan, and South Korea; and Oceania excluding Australia and New Zealand. The term is often regarded as less offensive than the terms “Third World” and “developing countries,” which assume a hierarchy of some nations as “first” or “developed” and others as less advanced. Researchers working in a variety of fields have understood the “Global South” not as a single, homogeneous region, but rather as reflecting different marginalized communities across the globe. This view of the “Global South” captures the many forms of technological exploitation beyond geographic boundaries: from the surveillance of immigrants by ICE in the United States to the surveillance of Muslim

communities by the governing elite in India. In this way, the “Global South” can serve as a lens, rather than a region, that highlights shared experiences of colonialism, exploitation, and resistance across the globe.

Yet, as a term that is often used to encompass more than 70 countries, the “Global South” risks homogenizing diverse cultures and perpetuating harmful stereotypes around poverty and illiteracy often associated with developing economies. Despite vibrant political and theoretical discussions about the term, there has been little empirical research on how the term is concretely used in AI ethics and policy and how that aligns with these debates.

In our paper, “Same Stereotypes, Different Term? Understanding the ‘Global South’ in AI Ethics,” we empirically study the connotations, usage, contradictions, and power dynamics of the term within AI ethics and policy spaces. Our motivation stems from the large and rapidly growing use of the “Global South” in these spaces, and from a recognition of the power that language holds in shaping practices. Studying this term allows us to surface power dynamics embedded in practices around the term and to identify interventions that disrupt these dynamics.

The term “Global South” has many limitations and can perpetuate an imperial gaze in AI ethics and policy spaces — for example, by reinforcing the framing of U.S. and European AI regulations as the gold standard. Instead of adopting another broad term that may carry similar stereotypes, AI ethics and policy work should be grounded in specific regions, countries, and communities to focus on the power structures that are culturally and historically relevant.

“It’s a term from the perspective of a colonizer . . . To group all these countries together is a very Western thing.” — Aida, Black Ethiopian interviewee based in North America

Limitations of the Term “Global South”

We interviewed 20 scholars and practitioners in AI ethics and policy who have engaged with global politics about their perceptions of the term “Global South” in the field. Our interviewees work primarily in the academic or nonprofit sectors, come from various ethnic backgrounds, and are based in a range of countries, including Brazil, Canada, Ecuador, Germany, Ghana, India, Ireland, Namibia, South Africa, and the United States.

Our interviewees defined the “Global South” in various ways, ranging from particular geographic regions, to low- and middle-income countries, to places with colonial legacies. Based on their insights, we find that the term “Global South” can perpetuate an imperial lens in four key ways:

1. The term tends to **homogenize** countries with diverse cultures, sociopolitical systems, and technology usage and development. “Global South” serves as an umbrella term that overlooks racialization and power imbalances and suggests uniformity within and across countries.
2. The term is frequently **shorthand for underdeveloped** or being “behind” in AI innovation and regulation. For example, Europe’s data protection policy is upheld as a gold standard, which can undermine more community-oriented approaches to policy outside these regions.

“Because of their strength, we see China’s provision of [internet cable] infrastructure in Africa. . . [China and South Africa are] running under the banner of Global South, but their Global South and our Global South [are] not the same.” — Palesa, South African interviewee working at a government research organization

3. The term often **implies technological illiteracy**, reinforcing the flawed narratives that countries at the periphery lack the means or intelligence to understand how to use AI and that AI harms are issues specific to these countries. Such connotations are ironic, considering that the technologies developed in the United States and Europe rely on the minerals, labor, and knowledge from these countries.
4. The term frequently positions countries at the periphery as a **market for AI technologies** from the United States and other centers of power. Countries at the periphery are often portrayed as needing to catch up with new technologies due to depictions of being left behind amid the capitalist pressure to scale.

“Engineers often add plug-ins to sell technology to India, such as cash payment options for Uber, but they “never invent a plug-in when it’s not about selling.” — Aditi, India-based researcher

“The term Global South is imposed from other people onto me ... but ... I use it, especially in writing ... I have a much better chance of getting the attention of Westerners if I use [it].” — Hakim, Ethiopian interviewee based in Europe

Uses and Power Dynamics of the Term “Global South”

Despite these connotations of the term “Global South,” many scholars and practitioners in AI ethics and policy face pressure to use it due to research and funding structures that reinforce an imperial dynamic of the United States as a hub for resources and knowledge production. Interviewees shared that they often must generalize their research and use the term “Global South” in publications for their work to be noticed and understood. Funding structures also reflect this orientation toward the United States and other centers of power: Technology companies and government organizations often fund AI ethics research, data infrastructure, and AI skills development in ways that prioritize their interests. For example, Meta funds AI ethics research in Africa, India, Asia Pacific, and Latin America, which can result in work that supports their products and priorities over local community needs.

In response to these limitations and structural pressures, interviewees took different approaches to using the term "Global South." While some use the term strategically to navigate U.S.-centered spaces, others reject the term entirely to resist such spaces. Some interviewees prefer an alternative term such as "Majority World," as it highlights the power and strength of the world's majority, but even this term can still homogenize vastly different countries. There is simply no single term that can capture the nuances and histories of the people and places encompassed by the "Global South" or "Majority World."

Our findings suggest that the "Global South" may be on a euphemism treadmill: The term often carries the same harmful connotations — of homogeneity, underdevelopment, and illiterate communities dependent on centers of power — associated with "Third World" and "developing countries." Simply switching to an alternative like "Majority World" risks repeating this cycle of choosing a seemingly better term only to have it acquire the same stereotypes.

At the same time, the term "Global South" can draw attention to colonial histories and make work recognizable and understood within research and funding structures. At its best, the term can temporarily unite marginalized communities under a collective label to access funding, visibility, or policy influence. However, the term alone cannot dismantle imperial power structures without structural changes.

Recommendations for Moving Beyond the Term "Global South"

Our opening question on "who will represent the Global South at the AI policy table" reveals how the term can virtue-signal inclusion while flattening diverse regions and communities. Rather than adopting another broad term that may inherit similar stereotypes, we provide three key recommendations for how scholars, practitioners, and policymakers around the globe might move forward.

We encourage grounding AI ethics and policy work in specific regions, countries, and communities to focus on the power structures that are culturally and historically relevant.

First, when referring to geographic boundaries, we encourage grounding AI ethics and policy work in **specific regions, countries, and communities** to focus on the power structures that are culturally and historically relevant. Situating this work in particular places can enable deeper engagement with the social movements, government structures, and colonial legacies at play. For example, researchers studying AI regulation in Brazil have drawn on the interconnected experiences of Black and Indigenous peoples in the Americas to understand the racial and colonial structures that shape policy.

Second, we suggest using **specific analytic frameworks**, such as Afro-feminism, anti-caste principles, or Indigenous justice, when drawing connections across communities. These frameworks can guide practices for building solidarity and collaboration across communities. For example, the research group AmericasNLP draws on Indigenous justice principles in connecting native communities across the Americas to develop technology that centers sovereignty and language revitalization.

Finally, we must make deeper changes to develop **alternative research and funding structures** that serve local needs and disrupt the dependence on the United States and Europe. The recent closure of the U.S. Agency for International Development and other foreign aid programs underscores the need for such alternative funding structures. For example, international policymakers might invest in AI research and development led by local universities and community organizations to offset reliance on external development agencies and U.S. tech companies. They might also establish public-private partnerships with local tech companies to build internet and data infrastructure that takes into account environmental impacts and supports privacy-preserving, culturally sensitive AI development. Additionally, policymakers can support education on AI skills and AI ethics in local languages and orient these programs toward community needs and cultural contexts.

Dismantling the historical and ongoing impacts of colonialism in AI ethics and policy spaces requires more than changing our words. The recommendations we propose can help center the plurality of global cultures within and across countries.

Reference: The original article is accessible at Radiya-Dixit, E. & Christin, A. (2025). **Same Stereotypes, Different Term? Understanding the “Global South” in AI Ethics**. Proceedings of the AAAI/ACM Conference on AI, Ethics, and Society, 8(3), 2081-2093. <https://doi.org/10.1609/aies.v8i3.36697>.

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