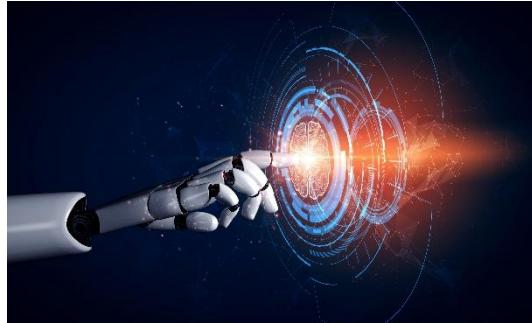


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The Global South's AI moment has arrived: Time to build, not borrow



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Article Content:

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The Snowden revelations showed how data from many countries could be accessed, stored, and analysed under foreign laws, simply because the digital infrastructure did not belong to them. Emails, photos, government records, and even sensitive national information travelled across borders without consent or control.

At the time, this was framed as a surveillance issue. It was something bigger: a warning about digital dependence. More than a decade later, the risk has multiplied with Artificial Intelligence.

Today, governments across the Global South rely on imported cloud infrastructure, foreign AI models, and external digital platforms to run health systems, welfare schemes, education, finance, and public services. Algorithms trained elsewhere are being adapted locally – often without understanding local languages, contexts, or realities. This is no longer just a technology choice. It is a question of sovereignty, resilience, and long-term economic power.

The Global South did not miss the digital revolution, but it entered it as a user, not a builder. Most AI systems in use today are trained on datasets, values, and assumptions from the Global North. When these systems are deployed in Emerging Economies, gaps appear quickly: rural healthcare data is invisible, informal economies are misunderstood, and local languages are underrepresented.

The result is not neutral technology. It is important intelligence. If public systems increasingly rely on these tools, then decision-making power also quietly shifts outward, away from domestic institutions and citizens. This is why data sovereignty matters! Data sovereignty is not about isolation or shutting borders. It is about ensuring that countries can build, govern, and improve digital systems within their own legal and democratic frameworks. And encouragingly, the Global South has already begun.

When the Global South Builds, Systems Work Better

Public health offers one of the clearest examples. India's Ayushman Bharat Digital Mission created a unified health backbone – linking patients, hospitals, and insurers through digital IDs and shared standards. Records became portable. Services became scalable.

South Africa approached the problem from another angle. MomConnect, built on simple tools like SMS and USSD, are focused on trust and access. In just 17 months, over 600,000 women enrolled, turning

healthcare from one-way messaging into a two-way support system. Each model solved a different problem. Together, they show the power of context-first design.

Imagine if African health systems adopted India's health ID architecture, while India integrated MomConnect-style feedback loops into programs like Kilkari 2.0. Healthcare would move from broadcast to conversation – building trust, not just reach.

Laws Matter, but People Matter More

Technology without regulation creates risk. Regulation without usability creates apathy. South Africa's POPIA law and India's Digital Personal Data Protection framework both recognise that citizens must have rights over their data. But one persistent problem remains: consent in practice.

Most people click "I agree" without understanding what they are giving away. India's innovation here is worth global attention. Consent Managers allow citizens to view, grant, revoke, and time-limit data sharing from a single dashboard, without exposing the data itself. Consent becomes active control, not a checkbox. If such frameworks are adapted across Africa and the Global South, data protection can move from legal compliance to real user agency.

Digital Identity and Skills: The Quiet Enablers

Ownership also depends on inclusion. India's Aadhaar system showed how digital identity could unlock access to banking, healthcare, and welfare at scale. That idea has travelled through MOSIP, an open-source identity platform now adopted by several African countries.

The impact is tangible: millions of people gaining legal identity for the first time. At the same time, skills matter as much as systems. Through programs like ITEC, India has trained tens of thousands of African professionals in technology and governance. This matters because infrastructure without skilled people only deepens dependency.

The future digital economy, especially AI, fintech, and digital public infrastructure, will reward those who invest early in human capability.

What Must Happen Next?

The opportunity before the Global South is clear, but it requires deliberate action.

First, **infrastructure must be built locally**. Shared data centres, regional GPU clusters, and sovereign cloud capacity can keep data under domestic law while reducing costs through collaboration.

Second, **financing models must evolve**. Public-private funds, innovation bonds, CSR channels, and targeted tax incentives can reduce risk and unlock private capital for local digital infrastructure.

Third, **skills and innovation hubs must scale**. Training must be rooted in local challenges – health, agriculture, climate, public services and not abstract benchmarks imported from elsewhere. None of this requires isolation. It requires confidence and coordination.

The Moment Before Us

The Global South stands at a familiar crossroads. Once, it primarily consumed technology built elsewhere; with AI, it now has the chance to build, shape, and govern intelligence on its own terms.

IndiaAI Impact summit hosted by MeitY in Delhi during February 2026 – the first global AI summit in the Global South arrives at precisely this moment, not as a showcase but as a checkpoint, an opportunity to align countries that share challenges, values, and ambitions. The choice is simple: remain a market for other people's intelligence, or become a creator of intelligence that reflects its people, languages, and futures.

The Summit's theme, anchored in the Three Sutras, People, Planet, and Progress, and operationalised through the Seven Chakras, frames a shared approach to global cooperation on sustainable and inclusive AI. The summit is focusing on themes like Human Capital, Inclusion, Safe AI, and AI for Development, with global challenges like & AI for ALL& and AI by HER showcasing solutions for a human-centric AI future.

The People Sutra envisions AI as a force for human progress, respecting cultural diversity, preserving dignity, and ensuring inclusion in its design and deployment and affirms that technology must remain

human-centred, advance people-first development, and uphold safety, trust, and shared benefit. This time, it must choose ownership, guided by those principles.