

# Same Stereotypes, Different Term? Understanding the “Global South” in AI Ethics

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## Abstract

In recent years, the impact of artificial intelligence (AI) systems on global politics has received growing attention. However, much work remains to understand the connotations, usage, and contradictions of the term “Global South” within AI ethics. In this paper, we complicate existing conceptualizations of the “Global South” by interviewing 20 AI ethics scholars and practitioners who have engaged with global politics. We find a range of definitions for the “Global South,” from geographic regions to places with colonial legacies. We identify four key limitations of the term “Global South”: (1) its tendency to homogenize countries with diverse political power and technological development, (2) its use as a proxy for underdeveloped in AI innovation and regulation, (3) its implication of technological illiteracy, and (4) its suggestion of unidirectional influence with AI technology marketed from centers to peripheries. The “Global South” can thus perpetuate an imperial gaze, similar to the terms “Third World” and “developing countries.” Despite these limitations, many participants we interviewed feel pressured to use the term “Global South” due to research and funding structures that reinforce the United States as a center of resources and knowledge production. Ultimately, rather than simply adopting another term that may inherit the same harmful stereotypes, we encourage scholars and practitioners to: (a) ground their work in specific regions and communities, (b) leverage particular analytical frameworks, such as anti-caste theories, when drawing connections across communities, and (c) make deeper changes to build alternative funding structures and foster solidarity among countries at the peripheries.

## 1 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 focus on creating globally inclusive AI systems and governance. In recent years, government officials from India (ANI 2023), Brazil (Mari 2024), the United States (Harris 2023), as well as Uganda and Ghana (Kagyah 2023) have highlighted the need to “include countries of the Global South” in shaping AI policy. Scholars and journalists have highlighted issues

around beta testing, data colonialism, and labor exploitation for AI development in Kenya (Nyabola 2018; Perrigo 2023), Nigeria (Mohamed, Png, and Isaac 2020; Cadwalladr 2018), and the African continent more broadly (Birhane 2020).

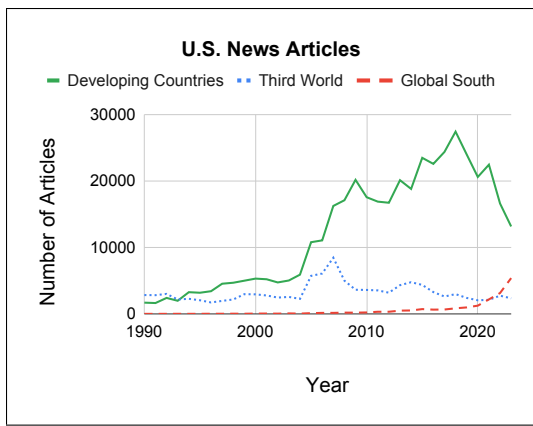
Yet, what does it mean to “represent” over half of the world’s population? More broadly, what purpose does the term “Global South” serve when used in English-speaking AI ethics spaces? Traditionally, the concept of the “Global South” refers to economically developing nations and includes Africa; Latin America and the Caribbean; the Middle East and Asia excluding Israel, Japan, and South Korea; and Oceania excluding Australia and New Zealand (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development 2022).<sup>1</sup> As a term that encompasses more than 70 countries, the “Global South” risks homogenizing diverse cultures and providing simplistic narratives around poverty and illiteracy often associated with developing economies. At the same time, critical scholars have argued for a more nuanced understanding of the term as plural and heterogeneous, with “Souths in the geographic North and Norths in the geographic South” (Mahler 2017). In this way, the “Global South” can serve as a lens, rather than a region, that highlights shared experiences of colonialism, extraction, and resistance across the globe.

Building on these efforts to complicate the concept of the “Global South,” we empirically study the connotations, usage, contradictions, and power dynamics of the term within the field of AI ethics. Our motivation stems from the large and rapidly growing use of the “Global South” in AI ethics and policy 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. Specifically, we ask:

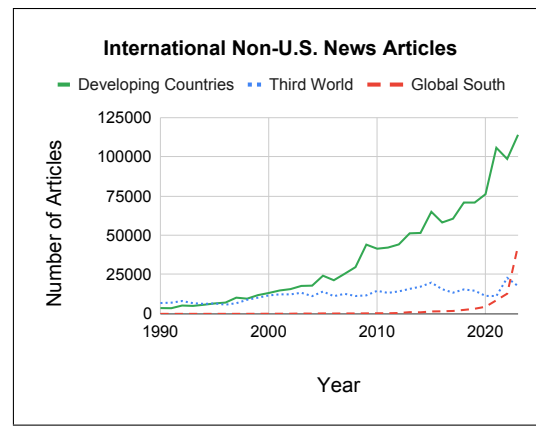
**RQ1:** How do AI ethics scholars and practitioners who engage with global politics conceptualize and use the term “Global South”?

**RQ2:** What are the contradictions and power structures that surround discourses and practices around the term “Global South”?

<sup>1</sup>The terms “Global North” and “Global South” do not align geographically — for example, Australia is in the Southern hemisphere but is associated with the “Global North,” and Mexico, in North America, is often associated with the “Global South.”



(a)



(b)

Figure 1: Number of news articles mentioning the terms “developing countries,” “Third World,” and “Global South” each year from 1990 to 2023. Figure 1a was generated using Nexis Uni’s United States database, which includes articles published in the United States. Figure 1b was generated using Nexis Uni’s International database, which includes articles in any language published globally outside the United States. Nexis covers more than 180 countries, supports 57 languages using Google Translate, and thus can search the aforementioned terms in articles written in non-English languages.

We draw on a qualitative interview-based study of AI ethics scholars and practitioners who have engaged with global politics in their work, alongside a content analysis of their published materials. In this paper, we use the term “Global South” as an emic concept, an idea understood and described from the perspective of our participants (Mostowlansky and Rota 2020), rather than as a reference to a region or framing. Instead, we use the terms *center* and *periphery* to highlight the power dynamics between imperial powers (centers) and the regions they dominate (peripheries) (Wallerstein 1974), while acknowledging the need to disrupt the center-periphery binary upon which imperialism depends (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 2013).

Based on the material we gathered, we find that our participants define the “Global South” in a variety of ways, ranging from geographic regions, to low- to middle-income countries, to places with colonial legacies. Drawing on the interviews, we identify four stereotypes – prejudiced and oversimplified ideas – often associated with the “Global South”: (1) homogeneous in political power and technological development, (2) underdeveloped in AI innovation and regulation, (3) technologically illiterate, and (4) subject to unidirectional influence with AI technology marketed from centers to peripheries. Much like the terms “Third World” and “developing countries,” the “Global South” often carries imperial connotations that naturalize the center-periphery dynamic. Despite these limitations, many participants feel pressured to use the term “Global South” due to broader power structures that situate the United States as a center of resources and knowledge production. We too confront these imperial dynamics of knowledge production in this project. To challenge these dynamics, we emphasize the need to build alternative funding structures, foster solidarity among countries at the periphery, and make structural changes that consider the plurality of cultures within and across countries.

## 2 Literature Review

### 2.1 History and Usage of the “Global South”

The term “Global South,” which has grown in usage since the 1980s, is often regarded as less loaded than “Third World” or “developing countries,” which gained popularity in the 1950s and 1960s, respectively (Wolf-Phillips 1987). The latter terms reinforce hierarchies by positioning some nations as “first” or “developed,” while casting others as less advanced, often with the demeaning stereotypes of being lazy, ignorant, and backward (Silver 2021). At the same time, these terms have fostered unity in the struggle against racism and colonialism, notably during the 1961 Non-Aligned Movement (Berger 2013; Nash 2003).

The term “Global South” reflects a similar complex usage. It was first used by American activist Carl Oglesby in 1969 in the journal *Commonweal*, where he critiqued the Vietnam War, stating, “With [Vietnam], [the advanced world] announces its refusal to surrender its dominance over the global south” (Oglesby 1969; Grovogu 2011). The term later rose to prominence in the 1980s when German politician Willy Brandt drew a boundary dividing rich and poor countries based on GDP per capita. Considered more palatable than “Third World” and “developing countries,” the term “Global South” has grown exponentially in usage since the 1990s, especially in the last 15 years (Sebastian Haug and Maihold 2021). Increasingly, the term became associated with the Group of 77, a coalition of developing countries that first convened in 1964 to advocate collectively for their interests and strengthen their bargaining power at the United Nations (Patrick and Huggins 2023). As shown in Figure 1, the terms “Third World” and “developing countries” have declined in usage in the United States, while “developing countries” remains prevalent outside the U.S. Meanwhile, the term “Global South” has surged in usage both within the U.S. and globally.

## 2.2 State of Debates in AI Ethics

While computing ethics as an academic subfield and policy space has a long history (Greif 2019; Henry et al. 2007), debates on the ethical, social, and political aspects of AI systems have grown rapidly since the early 2010s. AI ethics has evolved from a focus on “AI for good,” to algorithmic fairness, to systemic technological harms, to, more recently, the global impacts of AI systems.

By the 2020s, discussions have increasingly drawn on decolonial and postcolonial theory, Afro-modernity and Afro-feminism, indigenous sovereignty protocols, and critical caste studies (Amrute, Singh, and Guzmán 2022). Researchers, journalists, and practitioners have linked AI systems to histories of capital and colonial expansion, exposing harms related to the labor of data workers (Perrigo 2023; Li et al. 2023; Hao and Hernández 2022), surveillance and policing (Singh and Park 2022; Marda and Narayan 2020; Hancock et al. 2024), mineral extraction (Friends of the Congo 2024; Sengupta 2021; Ciacci 2023), water and energy consumption (Urquieta and Dib 2024; Bender et al. 2021; Hernández et al. 2024; Luccioni, Jernite, and Strubell 2024), as well as cultural exclusion and misrepresentation (Qadri et al. 2023; Nigatu and Raji 2024; Bella et al. 2024; Sambasivan et al. 2021; Sambasivan and Holbrook 2018).

With this growing attention to global politics, scholars have increasingly adopted the term “Global South,” as illustrated in Figure 2, which shows its usage in Association for Computing Machinery (ACM) publications. Many studies examine the use of AI in a specific region at the periphery but signal the generalizability of their work by invoking the term “Global South,” often in the introduction or conclusion of the publication. Other studies that focus on the use of AI in the U.S. or Europe reference the “Global South” to indicate what lies outside their scope (i.e., not a “Global South perspective”), often without deeply engaging with the power relationship between centers and peripheries. At the same time, much scholarship in critical data studies and other fields has examined and situated the “Global South” within imperial power dynamics, as we discuss next.

## 2.3 Decolonial and Critical Studies of the “Global South”

With the growing usage of the term “Global South” in AI ethics scholarship, we delve into how critical studies have understood and complicated its meaning in the context of colonial and other power structures. Traditionally, the “Global South” has referred to economically disadvantaged nations, but an emerging definition of the term captures “spaces and peoples negatively impacted by contemporary capitalist globalization” (Mahler 2017). No longer tied to a specific territory, the terms “North” and “South” create a metaphorical rather than geographical distinction: “North denoting the pathways of transnational capital, and, South, the marginalized populations of the world, regardless of their actual location” (Dirlik 1996).

Such efforts to complicate the “Global South” have a long history in a variety of fields. To understand these perspectives, we first unpack some terms. An *empire* is a centralized,

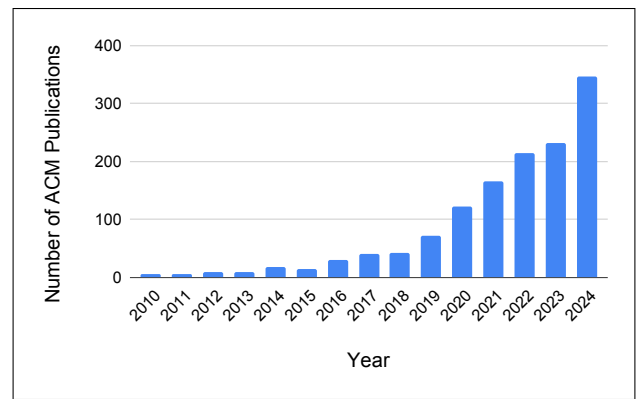


Figure 2: Number of Association for Computing Machinery (ACM) publications mentioning the “Global South” each year from 2010 to 2024. We generated this figure using the ACM Full-Text Collection of all ACM publications, which includes articles from the AAAI/ACM Conference on AI, Ethics, and Society (AIES); ACM Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems (CHI); and ACM Conference on Fairness, Accountability, and Transparency (FAccT).

hierarchical system in which a center dominates peripheries, mediating their actions and resources (Mann 2013). Peripheries are not naturally marginal but are made marginal through power (Raja 2019), that is, the contested control of domains such as knowledge, authority, the economy, and social norms (Mignolo 2011). Today’s centers of power include the U.S., the G7, and organizations like the International Monetary Fund (Hardt and Negri 2000), although the distinction between centers and peripheries is blurred, given decentralized production and both cooperation with and resistance to these centers (Ho 2004). *Imperialism* describes the behavior of empires to control peripheries (Steinmetz 2013), while *colonialism* is a specific form of imperialism (Smith 2021) that involves the physical appropriation of indigenous lands and people (Tamale 2020).

Postcolonial theory examines the condition that emerges after the formal dismantling of colonialism, when colonial legacies persist within histories, cultures, and knowledge systems (Ali 2016). Postcolonial theorists may define the “Global South” as formerly colonized regions, such as parts of Africa and Asia, where the colonizer is gone. However, this view overlooks the ongoing colonial legacies in places where indigenous communities continue to live under settler colonialism, for example, in Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Northern America, and Palestine (Hiraide 2021).

In contrast, decolonial theory emphasizes “the delinking from the colonial matrix of power” (Mignolo 2007a) and considers settler colonial contexts where there is no spatial separation between center and periphery (Tuk and Yang 2012). Some decolonial and even postcolonial thinkers adopt a pluralistic view of the “Global South” that considers “the global reach of coloniality” (Mignolo 2007b) and describes marginalized peoples beyond geographical boundaries (Milan and Treré 2017; Santos 2016). For instance, scholars have “connected the interior periphery of Latinos,

Latinas and Afro-Americans in the US with activists in British India” (Mignolo 2007b), drawing attention to the “Souths in the geographic North” (Mahler 2017). Others have examined the impact “of the Western colonial matrix of power in a place like Romania, ex-colony of non-Western empires” (Mignolo 2007b), shedding light on the “Norths in the geographic South” (Mahler 2017). In this way, decolonial theory critiques not only “dominant Western frames” but also “dominant middle- and upper-classes within Southern locations” (Amrute and Murillo 2020). Yet other decolonial scholars contend that decolonization must involve repatriation of stolen land and critique expressions like “the South within the Global North” for blurring distinctions between indigenous peoples, formerly enslaved peoples, and immigrants from colonized countries (Tuk and Yang 2012).

Critical geography has formulated “a Global South that is everywhere but always somewhere,” pointing to sites of anti-imperial resistance from “the tent cities of rich country homeless protests” to “the reimagination of the Caribbean, Africa, Asia and Latin America as heterogeneous” (Sparke 2007). Scholars in sociology, anthropology, and international relations likewise characterize the “South” as heterogeneous (Connell 2007; Comaroff and Comaroff 2015) with varied “political regimes, development models, and geopolitical interests” (Weiss and Abdenur 2014).

Since the 1990s, activists and scholars have proposed alternative frameworks to replace the “Global South,” such as “Majority World” (Alam 2008) and “Two/Thirds World” (Esteva and Prakash 1998). These terms draw attention to the world’s majority, focusing on “what it has, rather than what it lacks” (Alam 2008). More recently, scholars in critical data studies have adopted the plural term “Souths” as a more expansive concept than a singular “South”; yet they acknowledge that “Souths” can still lead to false equivalencies or homogenize different experiences, and no term is free from drawbacks (Milan and Treré 2019).

Yet, as Information and Communication Technologies and Development (ICTD) scholars have discussed, a pluralistic view of “Global South” helps us understand the varied models of technological exploitation across contexts: from the harmful exportation of “technology designed in the North” illustrated by Facebook in Myanmar, to the “exploitation of Southern populations by the governing elite within Southern countries” as shown with India’s Aadhaar database, to “South-South exploitation [illustrated by] China’s export of surveillance” (Arun 2020).

While the political and theoretical debates around colonial and imperial dynamics remain vibrant, there has been little empirical research on how the term “Global South” is concretely used and how its usage aligns with these debates. Given the growing body of AI ethics work that engages with the “Global South,” we need a better understanding of how scholars and practitioners conceptualize the term and navigate its contradictions within imperial knowledge regimes.

### 3 Methods and Data

We conducted semi-structured interviews with scholars and practitioners in the AI ethics community who focus on global politics. We chose a qualitative interview approach to

gather rich, in-depth insights into how and why scholars and practitioners engage with the term “Global South,” rather than quantitative survey data or systematic content analysis that may reveal patterns across respondents.

We define AI ethics as an epistemological and policy field that examines the ethical, social, and political underpinnings of AI technologies. Given the interdisciplinary nature of this space, we included the following criteria to identify individuals to interview: scholars and practitioners in human-centered interaction; data or media studies; computer science; sociology; history; digital justice; AI policy; or algorithmic fairness, transparency, and accountability, who have engaged in work related to AI. Our aim is not to impose rigid boundaries on what counts as AI ethics, nor do we intend to normatively distinguish between “good” and “bad” interventions in this space. Instead, we treat AI ethics as an epistemic community that produces a certain type of knowledge, which we examine as an empirical site (Cetina 1999).

To locate individuals in this space, we developed a set of keywords related to AI ethics: AI ethics, AI governance, AI policy, data feminism, digital sovereignty, human-computer interaction, and responsible AI. We also identified keywords related to global politics: Global Majority, Global South, Majority World, decolonial, developing countries, and non-Western. We then contacted people who used both AI ethics and global politics keywords in their biographies, posts, or published works. This criteria allowed us to include people from policy, industry, civil society, and academia.

We reached out to individuals using a combination of (a) purposive sampling, identifying individuals via LinkedIn and publications at AIES, CHI, and FAccT, three leading AI ethics conferences, while seeking variation in country of origin and institution; (b) snowball sampling, asking participants for referrals; and (c) convenience sampling, contacting members of the AI ethics community within our networks. This culminated in 60 scholars and practitioners whom we contacted via email and social media direct messages.

Due to our recruitment method and language skills, we were limited to interviewing people who spoke English. As a result, our interview pool is significantly biased, and we miss insights from scholars and practitioners without access to learning English. Additional biases include the high educational attainment of respondents, underrepresentation of individuals in government and the private sector, and gaps in geographic representation given the study’s global scope.

In total, we conducted 20 interviews with individuals based in Brazil, Canada, Ecuador, Germany, Ghana, India, Ireland, Namibia, South Africa, and the U.S. The ethnic identities and countries of origin of these individuals include Black or Negro Brazilian, Black South African, Black Sudanese, Ethiopian, Ghanaian, Indian, Mexican American, Mixed (White and Black African), Nigerian, and Zimbabwean. See Table 1 for additional demographic details. The interviews were semi-structured, lasted 30 to 60 minutes over Zoom or Google Meet, and were recorded and transcribed using Otter.ai. To preserve anonymity, we changed interviewees’ names and their affiliated organizations.

To complement our interviews, we examined how participants and other members of the AI ethics community

Gender	Education	Sector	Country of Institution	Ethnicity / Country of Origin
Woman 10	PhD 15	Academia 7	United States 6	India 3
Man 10	Master's 4	Nonprofit 4	India 3	Black or Negro / Brazil 2
	Bachelor's 1	Academia, Nonprofit 3	Brazil 2	Not reported 2
		Private Sector 3	Germany 2	African / Ghana 1
		Academia, Private Sector 1	South Africa 2	African / Zimbabwe 1
		Government 1	Canada 1	Bengali / India 1
		Self-employed 1	Ecuador 1	Black African / South Africa 1
			Ghana 1	Black African American / Sudan 1
			Ireland 1	Black Ethiopian 1
			Namibia 1	Black Nigerian American 1
				Ethiopia 1
				Latin American 1
				Mexican American 1
				Nigeria 1
				South Asian 1
				Mixed (White and Black African) 1

Table 1: Summary of interviewee demographics.

used the term “Global South” and other keywords related to global politics in their materials online written in English. These materials included their publicly available biographies, social media posts, blog posts, reports, and academic publications, offering us insight into the usage of terms in both formal reports and informal online settings. We primarily used this content analysis to triangulate and examine how participants’ written materials aligned or diverged with their self-reported views on the “Global South.”

We arrived at our results from the data using abductive analysis (Tavory and Timmermans 2014). Our original interview questions were relatively open, focusing on how participants defined the “Global South” and what aspects of the term they found helpful and helpful. Upon triangulating with participants’ online written materials and observing contradictions when analyzing initial interview data, we then added interview questions on contradictions and power dynamics associated with the term, as well as participants’ strategies and recommendations for terminology.

## 4 Findings

### 4.1 Limitations of the Term “Global South”

The participants we interviewed defined the “Global South” in various ways, ranging from geographic regions, to low and middle-income countries, to places with colonial legacies. Based on their insights, we identify four key limitations: the term “Global South” is often associated with political and technological homogeneity, underdevelopment in AI innovation and regulation, technological illiteracy, and positioning as a market for AI technologies from the U.S. and other centers of power. These associations can perpetuate an imperial gaze, as Aida, a Black Ethiopian participant based in Northern America, noted: “[Global South] is not a term that anyone in the Global South would naturally come to...It’s a term from the perspective of a colonizer...To group all these countries together is a very Western thing.”

**“Global South” as politically and technologically homogeneous.** Many participants highlighted how the “Global South” serves as an umbrella term that lumps together countries with different cultures and sociopolitical systems into one entity. Gabriela, a researcher based in Latin America, compared the “Global South” to the phrase “people of color,” noting how both can homogenize a wide range of experiences. As Layla, a mixed-ethnicity researcher at a tech company based in Europe, pointed out, the term “Global South” does not capture differences in political power *across* countries: “China and India are massive global powers with...a different bargaining power than Ghana or Zimbabwe.” Palesa, a South African participant working at a government research organization, further emphasized how China’s power shapes the development of digital infrastructure in Africa:

Because of their strength, we see China’s provision of [Internet cable] infrastructure in Africa. They get to determine the discussions and what things look like...[China and South Africa are] running under the banner of Global South, but their Global South and our Global South is not the same...[South Africa] is basically being battered around by [the EU, the U.S., and China], and one of the powers is reminding us, “Oh, by the way, we are one of you,” but actually not.

The term “Global South” also overlooks the racialization and power imbalances *within* countries, as Carmo, a Black Negro Brazilian participant, explained: “Global South, in some cases, would represent white elites from São Paulo, Cape Town, Rwanda...In a lot of cases, lower castes in India are closer in experience to Black Brazilians than we [Black Brazilians] are to the white elites in São Paulo.”

Additionally, the “Global South” is often used with broad generalizations that suggest uniformity in technology usage and development within and across countries. However, localizing work on data-centric technologies is crucial, as

Kwali, a Nigerian participant based in Namibia, shared:

The level of [social media] use is very different...You [want to] focus on countries [and] highlight factors like access to data, infrastructure...[In] Namibia...the use of smartphones...is almost everywhere. WiFi is also publicly available for many people...But [in] places like Nigeria...economic situation and just use [of a device] is more important. People will access the internet with whatever device they have. They don't care as much about...using a smartphone with high quality pictures...In Western Africa or Nigeria, many people will be the one to buy their devices, whereas many young people [in Namibia] will have the devices given to them by their parents. [The place] also determines which app is popular.

Although the term “Global South” tends to oversimplify and reinforce the center-periphery binary, for several participants, it describes a lens, rather than a region, that points to the homogeneous aspects, like colonialism, within the heterogeneity and captures the “Souths in the geographic North and Norths in the geographic South” (Mahler 2017).

**“Global South” as underdeveloped in AI and policy.** Many participants emphasized that the term “Global South” is too often a shorthand for poverty or underdeveloped, positioning peripheral regions as inferior with respect to the development at centers. Omari, a Zimbabwean researcher based in Europe, described this common association: “The moment someone mentions Global South, what comes to your mind is starving kids, senseless killings, underdevelopment...But there are people starving in Europe and the U.S.” In the context of AI, this stereotype often manifests in the view of peripheries as underdeveloped in AI innovation and regulation. For example, Hakim, an Ethiopian participant based in Europe, recounted their experience on a global panel on AI ethics and policy, streamed across audiences in Asian, African, and European countries: “The facilitator kept throwing me Global South questions... [that] come from the assumption that the Global South is a homogeneous thing that can be generalized. [They were] asking me about AI policies or regulations in Africa. There is no African-wide regulation. It's over 54 independent, individual nations that vary vastly. The conversation was that, ‘There they're backwards, what should we do to help them?’ ”

This narrative of underdevelopment erases much of the “bubbling efforts across the African continent, where so many people are doing extraordinary work” to develop their own AI systems, as Hakim pointed out. Moreover, the upholding of data and AI regulation in the U.S. and Europe as the gold standard can undermine more community-oriented approaches to policy, as Kwali from Nigeria explained: “The concept of privacy and data protection is a Global North agenda pushed on the South. It doesn't mean that we don't care about privacy in our own way. I might be concerned about privacy for my siblings, my mother, my neighbors.” These connotations can also affect scholars and practitioners in their everyday experiences, as Omari indicated: “The moment you see me as coming from the Global South, you already start doubting my credentials and my capabilities.”

Participants pointed out that the narrative of underdevelopment is especially problematic because it excludes reasons such as colonialism that contribute to it. While a few participants posited that the term “Global South” could shift the focus from underdevelopment to colonialism or the political potential of countries, others argued that it has become a harmful proxy for underdeveloped.

**“Global South” as technologically illiterate.** Several participants highlighted how “AI harms in the Global South” are framed as “a Global South issue” due to the narrative that “they don't know how to use the AI,” as Diego, a Black Brazilian participant, explained. Diego shared that when the police's use of facial recognition at a Copacabana New Year celebration led to unlawful arrests, the media reaction was: “Oh, people from Brazil cannot use this technology because they don't use the right database for facial recognition technology...It's not a problem with the technology [nor] the use of AI by police, but this is a problem of the Brazilian police department...We have to learn from the U.S. police departments.” For Diego, this narrative of technological illiteracy is “not just a matter of the North view” but is “more intense” among Brazilian elites.

These narratives associated with the term “Global South” reflect colonial dynamics in which peripheries depend on the resources and knowledge of centers like the U.S. However, such connotations are ironic, as technologies developed at centers themselves rely on the resources and knowledge at peripheries. As Aditi, a researcher based in India pointed out: “You just can't club people from the Global South and say, ‘They don't really have the money or intelligence or wherewithal to understand our great technologies that we're developing.’ That you're developing, basically, from our help, from the minerals or background work or cheap labor you're getting from the so-called Global South.”

**“Global South” as a market for AI technology.** As several participants illuminated, the term “Global South” is often associated with a view of peripheries as opportunities for the center to sell technologies and provide aid, reinforcing an imperial dynamic where the center influences the periphery. Aditi from India described: “We are looked as markets for Global North countries. The way America looks at India for its CCTV cameras...the way things are pushed here in terms of the use of this software [or] hardware. I saw the same happening in South Africa and similar stuff happening in Rio with these society management apps.” Countries at the periphery are sometimes seen as receiving “technology garbage,” where the “[Global North] can sell the stuff [like facial recognition] that [they] don't want anymore,” as Diego from Brazil shared.

This push of technologies from the center to the periphery reflects broader patterns of rapid technological change at the periphery. Arjun, a South Asian researcher at a non-profit in Northern America, shared the example of countries in Africa and South Asia shifting from no phones to mobile phones, thus “leapfrogging over certain technological advancements” like landlines. Countries at the periphery are often portrayed as needing to catch up with current technologies due to depictions of “being left behind,” as Gabriela

from Latin America described.

A couple of participants also pointed to the capitalist pressure to scale new technologies, which does not align well with local needs. Aditi described how 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.” She noted that despite flawed maps due to many areas being inaccessible by GPS, hotspot mapping tools for predicting crime are sold in India, often implicating marginalized communities in those areas.

Several participants challenged this idea of unidirectional influence in the form of aid and technology from centers to peripheries. Aditi remarked: “We don’t need [facial recognition for check-in at airports]. We have labor...Why are we replacing [people] with technology?...Because rich elites from our country collud[e] with [America]...We are trying to use something that was never in our culture, that was not something that we ever wanted.” Omari from Zimbabwe further contended, “We have what it takes to determine our path...When you look at the mineral world...Africa has an abundance. We have the people power in abundance.”

## 4.2 Imperial Power Structures

Despite the limitations of the term “Global South,” many participants face pressure to use it due to research and funding structures that reinforce an imperial dynamic of the U.S. as the center of resources and knowledge production. We sought to understand how these structures shape their usage of the term. In addition to direct conversations with participants, we analyzed the online publicly available, English-language content of the 20 participants, specifically their biographies, social media posts, blog posts, reports, and publications. We found that 18 individuals used the term “Global South” at least once, with only two doing so in openly critical ways. Two participants did not use the term, opting instead for alternatives: “non-Western” and “developing countries.” Some also referred to related concepts such as “digital colonialism.” This section delves into the structures that shape how and why individuals used the term “Global South” despite its problematic associations.

**Research structures.** Several participants explained how research structures pressure them to use the term “Global South” in ways that reinforce the imperial power relationship between centers and peripheries.<sup>2</sup> Gabriela from Latin America shared that the “Global South is mostly a term used by the Global North in the Global North.” Even though she is situated at the periphery, she often needs to use the term “Global South” when communicating to the center: “When I give a talk in Spanish...the terminology doesn’t make much sense...But most of the papers we write are for the community [that] has been trained in the Global North. You have to

<sup>2</sup>Sid, a South Asian faculty member based in Northern America, shared a different experience that these structural challenges in research are reducing. Earlier, reviewers would ask Sid and his co-authors to specify the study location, such as “in South Africa,” in their paper titles but would not make such requests for studies conducted in U.S. or European contexts. Now, Sid noted, reviewers no longer ask to add the particular context.

often use the terminology that the community you want to publish in is using.” Gabriela called out the pressure to adopt the term “Global South” to be legible to the center, despite the refusal of researchers at the center to classify themselves using the concept:

[U.S. researchers] don’t ever mention that [their work] is U.S.-centered...It’s like URLs. They just say .com and that’s the U.S. It’s exactly like that for papers...Whereas, if it’s research in [my country], we have to. There’s a tendency to say, “Hey, that work has already been done in the U.S., etc. Why is it important?” I have to frame it as it’s informing work in the Global South...You have to almost bring that terminology from the very beginning in the intro and position your work within that, versus the people in the Global North don’t have to make any cases for that or use the terminology “Global North.”

Similarly, Hakim from Ethiopia shared how the term is enforced on them: “The term Global South is imposed from other people onto me...rather than a term I go to...but I use it, especially in writing to indicate a specific region. But academic papers do not exist in a vacuum...I have a much better chance of getting the attention of Westerners if I use terms such as the Global South that they are familiar with.”

A few participants linked this pressure to frame research using the term “Global South” to systemic issues within the institution of research. Gabriela remarked: “The institution of knowledge production...forces us to speak in terms of generalizations.” Aditi from India echoed this concern, emphasizing the center’s tendency to generalize in research: “In America, people want to generalize a theory and everything, but they’re not generalizable in the sense that you can generalize information from India and [apply it] to the world. No, no, don’t do that.” These pressures to adopt the center’s terminology and research approaches reinforce the center-periphery power dynamic, which is mirrored in funding structures, as explored next.

**Funding structures.** A number of participants emphasized how technology companies and government organizations fund experts, research, infrastructure, and skills development around ethical AI in ways that reinforce unidirectional flows of influence from centers to peripheries. For example, Kwali from Nigeria described how foreign organizations collect and store data from countries like Nigeria and Namibia: “The developed economy will take everything and commercialize. Facebook gets value from the most rural areas of the [African] continent. It doesn’t matter if you don’t have electricity. Social media still gets there...[Similarly,] much of our public health data is funded by American development agencies like CDC...No other organization in Namibia knows that much. [America] has more data about us [and has] built data infrastructure.”

Jules, a Latin American participant working on responsible AI at a large tech company, illuminated how their organization can reinforce the center-periphery binary, despite efforts to challenge harmful narratives about the periphery. The company has brought together experts on responsible AI from across Africa, Latin America, and Oceanic. Through

these engagements, Jules' team has realized the importance of developing context-aware AI systems and recognizing innovation at the peripheries, challenging both homogenizing and deficit-oriented narratives about these regions. At the same time, Jules' company views peripheral places as opportunities to invest in AI skilling and resources:

There's a significant skilling gap between the Global North and South...For AI companies, this is a huge opportunity because the future users will be in the Global South...They're adopting technologies faster...The opportunity to [enter those markets quickly] with AI is through AI skilling...To teach people how to use [our chatbot and products], how to use AI systems and do meta-prompting...We [will] release laptops with embedded AI...It's great for the Global South and creates a long-term relationship with a future customer...We've invested in internet access and infrastructure...That's multi-billion dollars...Once we invest several million dollars, it's a catalytic investment. The World Bank or U.S. government or USAID will come in and...invest the real money.

These examples show how funding structures tend to reinforce the dependency of peripheries on the center, often shaping the work to fit funders' priorities. As Ayanda, a faculty member in South Africa, shared, when a significant portion of funding comes from Big Tech, even in the form of gifts, "you would obviously want to also keep them happy...make them look good, or assist in keeping the relationship going." As a result, "[many] tech companies have a lot of sway" over what and how data is collected, as well as how the data or models are licensed upon project completion. Without alternative funding sources, saying no to such suggestions becomes difficult: "If...you get money from [the International Development Research Centre]...all of these different development agencies...you have to now incorporate whatever it is that they want. Not having large local research investments means that you don't have a balancing force that is a local funder." For instance, as Ayanda explained, local funders would approach AI and climate research differently; they might understand that the largest emitters are not in the African continent and consider, "How do the ways that you mitigate climate change actually empower local communities, as opposed to thinking about it from a perspective of reducing carbon emissions?"

At the same time, scholars and practitioners at the periphery are sometimes excluded from funding opportunities in the first place. Hakim shared an example of how many of their colleagues across the African continent face systemic discrimination despite their groundbreaking work:

A bunch of researchers from Bamako in Mali are working on machine translation. They're developing their own technology based on quality data from their own communities...They face all kinds of financial or structural issues... You don't hear [about them] on the media...They applied for funding specifically designed...[for] groups that are working on technology [and] helping advance local communities...And they were rejected. But this wasn't their first rejection...

The irony is that a researcher from London got the funding from the Gates Foundation to go and do the data collection.

To challenge these imperial power dynamics, it is critical to develop alternative research and funding structures that serve local needs and disrupt the reliance of peripheries on the center. As Ayanda, based in South Africa, noted, this could entail local government investment in AI research and development, public-private partnerships with local companies, AI education in local languages, and opportunities for students and professionals on the African continent.

### 4.3 Strategies for Engaging With the Term "Global South"

Given these limitations and structural pressures, participants explained how they approached using the term "Global South," ranging from strategic usage to refusal. One perspective is to strategically use the "Global South" as a way of "playing the game," as Hakim described, or as a way of "choosing your battles" when a longer conversation is "not worth having," as Aida noted. Using the term strategically can help communicate important work to audiences at the center, as Gabriela shared. Yet even within this tactical use, participants like Hakim expressed their hope for a broader cultural shift: "One wish would be to cleanse that term from the deficit narratives. When we think of Global South or Africa, I don't want us to think of war, hunger, drought, disease...It's a continent that has contributed in every domain. Look at philosophy...medicine, mathematics. You have historical intellectual giants that contributed hugely to the field but their names are systematically erased."

Another perspective is a strategic refusal of the term, as Aditi described: "Initially...we were trying to make things easier in a very U.S.-based conference...to make things palatable...Now it's kind of a resistance...I don't want to be in your conference...We have our conferences." Aditi highlighted that this stance of refusal extends to those in the U.S. and other centers of power: "Even though I really want the U.S. to not be the center stage for anything, it is, in reality. The knowledge that it produces has far-reaching effects...If researchers in the U.S. can center stage voices from India or South Africa or wherever, and say that 'this is not the Global South' and say that 'this is what it is,' I think that would be great."

A few participants preferred the term "Majority World," as it reframes the relationship between the center and peripheries by emphasizing the power and strength of the world's majority. Yet "Majority World" is still limited and can homogenize vastly different countries similar to "Global South." Palesa, a South African researcher, pointed out, "The people who use [the Global Majority term] are...formerly Global South scholars operating in the Global North...Their positionality is very different because they're already in the Global North...In terms of our research spaces generally, it isn't something that has resonated with anybody...You don't see it being used often on this side of the world." Moreover, no single term can capture the nuances and histories of the people and places to which the "Global

South” or “Majority World” aims to refer. As Aida articulated, “I think it’s more of a sentence than a word. Countries that have historically been colonized by XYZ country. It requires so much specificity...There’s so many more stories that it’s hard to say in one word.”

## 5 Discussion

### 5.1 The Political Value and Pitfalls of the Term “Global South”

Our findings suggest that the “Global South” often carries the same imperial connotations of homogeneity, underdevelopment, illiteracy, and unidirectional influence associated with the terms “Third World” and “developing countries,” offering empirical support for conceptual critiques in the literature (Arun 2020; Santos 2016; Milan and Treré 2019). In practice, the “Global South” may be on a **euphemism treadmill** (Taylor 1974), a linguistics term for when new polite words are invented to refer to offensive concepts, but the euphemism becomes tainted by association (Pinker 1994). The “Global South” may seem to be a more “neutral label...to refer to states that have historically been relegated to the margins of the world order” (Darnal 2023). Yet, in its attempt to serve as both a neutral term and an analytic term that speaks to power relationships, the “Global South” often falls short of fulfilling either role. As our findings show, the term often naturalizes the dynamic between the center and periphery, even though the periphery is marginal through imperial power. Thus, justifying the use of global binaries like “North” and “South” can seem hard given their “litany of problems” (Harding 2016). However, simply switching to a different term will not eliminate these connotations; for example, the term “Majority World” may come to evoke problematic imagery of masses of poor people at the periphery flooding countries at the center, akin to the Great Migration in the U.S. Thus, running away from the term “Global South” may only perpetuate the euphemism treadmill.

Despite its limitations, “Global South” retains “a certain political value” (Mohanty 2020). It can make salient analytical aspects like colonialism, extraction, and resistance and make work legible within research and funding structures. Although “Global South” is traditionally defined as a geographic region, several participants described its metaphorical use, as a lens or framing that includes “Souths in the geographic North” (Mahler 2017), draws attention to colonial dynamics, and fosters opportunities for inclusion and solidarity.<sup>3</sup> Drawing on Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s notion of **strategic essentialism** (Spivak 2004) in the context of gender binaries, mobilizing “the group on the exploited side of a binary” can serve as a political tactic even as “the group is trying to dismantle the binary itself” (Harding 2016). It can be useful for members of the group to temporarily “essentialize” themselves by drawing upon their shared identity to build a collective consciousness and advocate for certain rights (Campbell-Stephens 2021), for example, for scholars

<sup>3</sup>One participant, Sid, argued that the term’s meaning is shifting in positive ways. He framed the “Global South” not in terms of its benefits and harms but as a boundary object (Star and Griesemer 1989), where the boundaries of the term’s usage can change.

to access research funding or for practitioners at the periphery to have a seat at the AI policy table.

At its worst, the “Global South” reinforces imperial logics, for example, of underdevelopment and illiteracy. At its best, the “Global South” can be used strategically towards solidarity – as a means to an end, not an end in itself. Using the term may serve as a temporary tactic, but it does not by itself dismantle imperial logics and, in fact, can often reinforce them. If we rely only on using the term “Global South” to shift from the narrative of underdevelopment associated with “developing countries” to a different narrative of anti-imperial resistance, we can easily fall into performative rhetoric and virtue-signaling.

Similar to the discourses on performative rhetoric in anti-racism (Connors and McCoy 2022), intersectionality (Jibirin and Salem 2015), and diversity, equity, and inclusion (Ballard et al. 2020), we must do more than just naming the “Global South” or simply including people from the periphery. For example, when hosting an AI ethics conference like FAccT in Brazil, we should offer conference-wide translation services to make it accessible to the local community and ought to build long-term relationships with local activists, scholars, and practitioners in non-extractive ways that go beyond the conference. We might also commit to acknowledging the context of settler colonialism on the land where the conference takes place and how stolen land benefits settlers (Tuk and Yang 2012). These changes are only the tip of the iceberg, working within the system of a U.S.-led conference hosted in Brazil. There should be deeper structural changes, for example, to help build alternative research structures and to shift our relationship and interactions with land, which future work might explore more closely.

### 5.2 Imperial Entanglements of Knowledge Production

Our findings in Section 4.2 reveal the imperial entanglements of knowledge production around AI ethics. Imperialism can be understood as the domination of a central power over peripheries, which is often driven economically by the center’s quest for wealth-generating resources like capital, labor, and raw materials in the peripheries (Steinmetz 2013). Knowledge is also a wealth-creating factor (Cetina 1999); just as chip manufacturing factories, data labeling workers, and the silicon needed for GPUs are building wealth around AI, so is knowledge around AI ethics.

The United States and Europe tend to dominate and centralize knowledge production around AI ethics, and peripheries often depend on this centralization. This dynamic manifests in two key ways.

First, AI ethics research is often *extroverted* or externally oriented toward the U.S. and Europe (Hountondji 2002). Research is one way through which the underlying logic of imperialism manifests and is regulated (Smith 2021; Connell 2013). AI ethics researchers at the peripheries often feel pressured to migrate to institutions in the U.S. and Europe, write for English-language publications, and use the term “Global South” to frame their work in the context of generalizations. The “Global South” framing is often imposed on them, and their background is frequently conflated with

their expertise. As Hakim reflected: “Even though I’m from the Global South, sometimes I just want to be perceived as an expert in my own training rather than a representative of the Global South...Even when Global South people are put at the table, it’s more as a token or to talk about Global South stuff, rather than being there for their expertise.”

Second, funding for AI ethics knowledge production often comes from U.S. companies or international institutions where the U.S. is a leading player. Historically, U.S. banks, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund have provided loans to peripheries through structural adjustment programs, a form of economic imperialism (Mann 2013). AI ethics funding structures mirror these practices of imperial intervention under the narrative of helping those at the periphery given their economic reality. For example, Meta funds AI ethics research in Africa (Meta Research 2020), India (Meta Research 2019a), Asia Pacific (Meta Research 2019b), and Latin America (Andrade 2020). This can result in funding work at the peripheries in ways that are oriented toward the center. For example, as Jules shared, large tech companies fund AI skilling programs that reinforce the use of their products, and such funding often catalyzes investments from international organizations like the World Bank. Many funding opportunities also tend to privilege people who speak English and are privileged within their own countries. As Hakim and Kwali revealed, this external orientation can also manifest in funding work in the U.S. and Europe to collect data and knowledge about the peripheries, reinforcing imperial dynamics of representing those at the periphery “through the eyes of the West” (Smith 2021).

### 5.3 Solidarity Across Peripheries

Our work reveals ways of disrupting the imperial entanglements of knowledge production. If an empire can be conceptualized as a rimless wheel where “the peripheries communicate to and through the core but not directly to each other, so that the core controls the flow of all major resources” (Mann 2013), then solidarity across the peripheries can help disrupt the core’s dominance over them.

Solidarity can and ought to be multifaceted. For example, ideological solidarity might involve shifting from imperial logics to ideas that center interconnectedness and collective liberation. One participant, Naomi, an independent researcher from Ghana, shared an example of how the African “ubuntu principle” of “I am because you are” can be put into practice: U.S. companies developing AI models for disease detection often do not include participants from Ghana or India in their clinical trials, despite selling their products to these regions. In response, countries like Ghana and India can come together to expose the resulting harms and biases.

Economic solidarity may focus on challenging economic structures that perpetuate dependency and extraction by imperial powers. For example, Kwali discussed the importance of digital sovereignty in Africa: “Global South people need to create their own...African governments need...to incentivize local companies [to] create infrastructure...and allow [them] to press foreign companies to sell out...We don’t have a future as long as we keep depending on [America] and we don’t go through the process of building...[and] invest as

much as them.” The recent shutdown of the U.S. Agency for International Development and other foreign aid programs (Huckstep et al. 2025) illustrates the need for such alternative funding structures that reduce dependence on the U.S. and Europe.

Finally, political solidarity might involve building coalitions and pushing for policies that resist or hold imperial powers accountable. Such solidarity should not be mediated through countries at the center, as Aditi from India emphasized. Amidst the lack of response from the United States, including from most members of the U.S. AI ethics community, on Gaza, Aditi shared her realization that “American research is not emancipatory for me” and her vision of those at the periphery coming together: “If the U.S. didn’t say anything against [the genocide in] Palestine...[and] tomorrow Modi does the same in India, do I look at the U.S. to save us? No. Who should I look at? I surely should look at...what South Africa did for Palestine,” referring to South Africa’s decision to take Israel to the International Court of Justice. This sentiment echoed other participants who emphasized embracing the power of the peripheries, rather than hoping for help from the center, like how the term “Majority World” can center the strength of the globe’s majority.

## 6 Conclusion

This article captures the usage, limitations, contradictions, and power dynamics of the term “Global South” based on a qualitative study of AI ethics scholars and practitioners. AI ethics is a domain where we can and should be internally consistent with our values of being globally inclusive. This examination is important, as language is a political site through which both domination and resistance have long been enacted (Klemperer 2006; wa Thiong’o 1986). For example, using the “Global South” as a proxy for “underdeveloped” in AI policy can reinforce the framing of U.S. and European AI regulation as the gold standard. Our findings thus surface entry points for interrogating the term’s often simplistic and imperial nature.

Our opening vignette on the aspiration to “represent the Global South at the AI policy table” reveals how the term can virtue signal inclusion while flattening diverse regions and communities, for which a substitute label risks doing the same. So, how do we move forward? First, when referring to geographic boundaries, we encourage scholars and practitioners to name and ground their work in specific regions, countries, and communities to focus on power structures that are culturally and historically relevant. Second, when invoking the “Global South” as a lens for transnational solidarity, we suggest using particular analytic frameworks, such as Afro-feminism (Tamale 2020), anti-caste theories (Roy, Ambedkar, and Anand 2014), or indigenous protocols (Lewis et al. 2020), to draw connections across communities. Finally, while the term “Global South” may serve strategic purposes, we must make deeper changes, such as building alternative funding structures and fostering ideological, political, and economic solidarity across peripheries. Moving toward decoloniality cannot be outmaneuvered with words, and these efforts can help center the plurality of global cultures in AI ethics and beyond.

## Positionality Statement

The first author, who led the research design, interviews, analysis, and writing, grew up in the United States as the child of South Asian immigrants. During the interviews, participants likely perceived them as a racially brown person and seemed fairly open in their critique, for example, of U.S.-based AI ethics conferences and the terms “Global South” and “people of color.” At the same time, the first author is embedded within structures of power and colonialism, given their caste privilege and their studies at a private university in the United States associated with AI development and harms, positionalities that may have shaped participants’ openness and interactions.

The second author, who contributed to the framing and revising of the analysis, grew up in Western Europe – a region that massively benefited from colonialism – and immigrated to the United States to attend graduate school at a private university. While identifying as a critical technology scholar, they are deeply embedded in structures of power, whiteness, and colonialism, both because of their national and racial background and due to their full-time position teaching and conducting research at a private university associated with AI development and extraction.

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