Pathways to Inclusion: Advancing Civil Society's Role in AI Governance

Evidence from and for the Global Majority

Paola Gálvez Callirgos

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Abstract

Artificial Intelligence is rapidly reshaping societies and the power to define its direction remains concentrated. The governance of AI which encompasses who sets the rules, whose values are embedded, and whose interests are protected is still largely steered by a small set of influential actors. Civil society, especially from regions across the Global Majority, is underrepresented in fora where critical decisions are made. This policy brief argues that civil society, rooted in communities and accountable to the public interest, is uniquely positioned to act as the counterbalance AI needs to benefit all of humanity by bringing to light the perspective of those that are most affected by AI systems.

This policy brief investigates the role of civil society on AI Governance with particular attention to the Global Majority. The research question explores whether civil society serves as an effective counterbalance to concentrated power in the AI ecosystem to ensure AI systems reflect diverse public interests and values. Additionally, the brief seeks to identify which barriers hinder the participation of underrepresented civil society actors in setting the agenda for and participating in AI governance fora. On top of that, the brief outlines the opportunities for civil society's entry points in AI Governance and key mechanisms to enable more inclusive and impactful engagement.

The analysis draws on desk research and a comparative review of recent multistakeholder initiatives in global AI governance. Additionally, leveraging Globethics' regional centers across the Global Majority, this research incorporates direct input from civil society networks through a survey and semi-structured online focus groups and interviews with civil society representatives from Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, and South and Southeast Asia. These dialogues surface context-specific challenges and opportunities, offering grounded and regionally informed inputs. Together, these insights inform a set of recommendations aimed at civil society actors, policymakers, and international organizations to strengthen the meaningful participation of civil society in AI governance.

This policy brief contributes to the broader conversation on inclusive AI governance for the successful implementation of the UNESCO Recommendation on the Ethics of AI and the Global Digital Compact.

Executive Summary

This policy brief examines the role of civil society in artificial intelligence (AI) governance, with a particular focus on actors from the Global Majority. Its goal is to provide evidence from and for the Global Majority, and to offer actionable recommendations for policymakers, international organizations, and civil society actors to enhance meaningful participation in AI governance. By doing so, this policy brief aims to support the development of a global AI governance ecosystem that reflects the diverse needs and values of all populations. Our findings are based on the contributions of 85 civil society actors from Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, and South and Southeast Asia. These organizations participated in a mixed-methods research process that included a survey tailored to organizations in these regions, online focus groups, and one-on-one interviews. This methodology enabled to capture both broad trends and nuanced insights into how civil society actors engage in AI governance, their perceptions of power dynamics within the AI governance landscape, the challenges they encounter, and what would help strengthen their role.

A snapshot of the engagement

The analysis opens by examining the current landscape of civil society involvement in AI governance. The findings reveal a notable disconnect between the role civil society believes they should play in AI governance and the influence they perceive themselves to hold. Considering AI's global impact, this policy brief argues for inclusive and representative governance that has never been more urgent. Yet, current governance frameworks remain largely exclusionary and unreflective of the diverse interests and values of the global population.

Challenges to meaningful participation

The research points out three main barriers that hinder meaningful participation of civil society actors from the Global Majority in AI governance processes: limited financial resources, insufficient technical expertise, and a lack of awareness about available opportunities to engage. These challenges not only constrain civil society's ability to contribute effectively but also reinforce governance structures that concentrate power in the hands of a few, rather than fostering inclusive and representative decision-making.

Opportunities for engagement

To address the challenges limiting meaningful participation, this section of the policy brief explores a range of entry points through which civil society can influence AI governance. These can be grouped into three broad clusters: generating knowledge and tools, building capacities and collective voice, and influencing policy processes directly. These pathways range from producing research and audits to convening dialogue spaces, fostering coalitions, and contributing to consultations or participating in international forums. These opportunities for engagement provide practical and strategic ways civil society advances more inclusive and rights-based governance of AI.

Policy Recommendations

This brief underscores that unlocking civil society's potential requires urgent and coordinated action to overcome systemic barriers and ensure meaningful participation. To that end, it offers concrete recommendations tailored to the following four groups:

Global Majority Civil Society Actors

Recommendation	Key Actions
Strengthen coalitions and foster networks	Build regional and cross-country coalitions; amplify visibility; avoid duplication; present unified positions
Enhance technical expertise through partnerships	Access training and mentorship via universities, research institutes, fellowships; share experts for audits
Diversify funding models	Develop social enterprises; tap into local philanthropy; monitor grant platforms
Foster strategic partnerships	Collaborate with CSOs, academia, regulators; co-develop projects; maintain dialogue
Link AI to broader rights and justice agendas	Frame AI governance within human rights, labor, democracy, and equity advocacy

Policymakers from the Global Majority

Recommendation	Key Actions
Institutionalize meaningful consultation	Create advisory councils or committees including multiple civil society representatives
Ensure open selection for expert groups	Use clear criteria and open calls with sufficient timeframes
Establish feedback mechanisms	Publish reports showing how civil society inputs influenced policy
Disseminate information and organize workshops	Share details on AI events; hold consultative workshops to form common positions
Allocate resources for participation	Include budget lines for civil society participation and technical assistance programs

Policymakers from Major Powers

Recommendation	Key Actions
Guarantee meaningful participation of Global Majority civil society	Reserve seats; provide translation, travel, and accessible formats
Address resource disparities	Create global funds, fellowships, micro-grants for travel and participation
Support equitable funding channels	Provide direct grants to Global Majority organizations/networks
Share knowledge and resources respectfully	Openly share research, expertise, datasets; adapt practices to local contexts

International Organizations

Recommendation	Key Actions
Create formal seats for civil society	Reserve voting/advisory positions; use open multilingual calls with clear criteria
Run structured consultations with traceable impact	Hold public consultations across time zones; publish response-to-comments reports
Provide fair access and support	Offer travel, honoraria, interpretation, and accessibility measures
Require transparent expert selection	Publish rubrics; disclose conflicts; report group composition
Measure inclusion and publish results	Track indicators (participation, adoption of recommendations, funding); release scorecards

By implementing these recommendations, AI governance frameworks can benefit from more diverse perspectives, resulting in AI technologies that better serve the public good.

Introduction

AI systems differ from previous technological advancements in two ways. First, AI is evolving at an exceptionally rapid pace. Second, AI systems are increasingly capable of making decisions without direct human involvement.

Regarding the first difference, the speed of the evolution of AI systems outpaces the progression of other technologies. This acceleration is driven in part by Moore's Law, which describes the exponential growth of the semiconductor industry, and by the substantial resources being invested in AI research and deployment. As a result, AI capabilities are advancing at a relentless rate. This rapid progress presents significant challenges. It makes it difficult to fully understand, regulate, and oversee AI systems, particularly as they become more autonomous and integrated into diverse areas of society.

The second difference stems from the fact that AI systems are designed to produce outcomes independently once they are in operation. In other words, the core components of AI systems are computing machines. This "autonomy" underscores the need to ensure that their design is closely aligned with human values.

Together, these two characteristics present a profound challenge for society: preparing for a future in which increasingly autonomous AI systems may attain forms of intelligence and capacities that exceed human understanding and control. Managing this transformation and ensuring that the development and deployment of this emerging technology prioritizes human interests may be among the most pressing challenges facing humanity in the twenty-first century.

In response to this evolving landscape, societies must rethink how power, responsibility, and oversight are distributed in the design and use of AI. The complexity and global reach of AI systems demand more than technical solutions or isolated policy responses. They require coordinated, values-driven approaches that address innovation, performance, equity, accountability, and the protection of fundamental rights. Against this backdrop, AI governance emerges as a critical mechanism for shaping the direction of technological progress in ways that serve the common good.

Effective and inclusive governance is therefore essential to address the ethical, legal, and societal implications of AI (Butcher and Beridze 2019). For this policy brief, AI governance refers to the processes, norms, and policies that rule and guide the development and deployment of AI at a national and global level. The delimitation is relevant as governance refers broadly to the combination of formal laws, internal policies, technical standards, and best practices.

Within these governance efforts, civil society plays an essential role in bringing to light the perspective of those that are most affected by AI systems to make sure that the goals and claims of those deploying AI systems are not in conflict with the public interest or the interests of certain communities. Civil society bridges global principles with local realities, surfacing the voices of women, racialized communities, Indigenous peoples, people with disabilities, and other vulnerable populations.

In the context of this research, civil society refers to a wide range of non-governmental and non-commercial actors that operate independently from the state, international organizations, and the market. These include non-profits, advocacy groups, community-based organizations, professional associations, labor unions, FBO, academic institutions, think tanks, Indigenous and grassroots movements, and public interest research networks involved in public interest activities.

Civil Society's meaningful participation helps ensure that AI systems are not only technically sound but also socially legitimate and aligned with public values. Especially in contexts where institutional trust is fragile or regulatory mechanisms are weak, civil society can serve as a counterbalance to concentrated power, holding both governments and private actors accountable and advocating for transparent, inclusive, and rights-based approaches to AI development and deployment.

Yet the conditions under which Civil Society operates vary dramatically depending on geography, political context, and resource availability. For civil society organizations from the Global Majority[1] these variations often mean having less access to global policy spaces, fewer financial and technical resources, and limited recognition of their contributions.

Framing civil society's role in AI governance requires understanding what these actors do, whose participation is considered legitimate, whose knowledge counts, and how power is distributed in agenda-setting AI processes. While many international declarations and strategies recognize the need for inclusive governance, the reality is that much of the AI agenda is still being shaped in English-speaking and often Global North-dominated settings. This makes the presence and leadership of civil society actors from the Global Majority essential for ensuring that AI development will benefit all, leaving no one behind.

How Civil Society Engages in AI Governance

The survey conducted for this policy brief offers a first-of-its-kind snapshot of how civil society across the Global Majority is engaging in AI governance. A total of 85 organizations responded, with the majority based in Africa, followed by Latin America and the Caribbean, and South and Southeast Asia, along with a small number of globally active institutions. Their institutional profiles are diverse, ranging from universities and research centers to non-profit organizations, advocacy groups, and professional associations, each bringing distinct perspectives and capacities to the governance of AI.

Many of these organizations are sizeable, nearly half reported more than 50 staff members, and their expertise spans education, technology ethics, education, social justice, digital rights, economic development, and environmental protection, reflecting the cross-cutting nature of AI's societal impact.

The findings highlight the significant work that civil society from the Global Majority is already carrying out and the urgency of creating more opportunities for engagement. This vision is consistent with the UNESCO Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence (hereinafter, the "UNESCO Recommendation"), which recognizes civil society as a partner in advancing human rights–based, inclusive AI governance. This is underscored in its fourth core principle on *multi-stakeholder and adaptive governance and collaboration*, further elaborated in the Recommendation's policy area 2 *Ethical Governance and Stewardship*, among other sections[2].

Civil society's channels of engagement are multiple and layered, but they cluster around knowledge production and advisory functions as the most common entry points. Respondents most frequently reported participating through academic and research collaborations, which enable organizations to co produce evidence, translate technical debates for public audiences, and offer decision makers credible analyses. Multi stakeholder forums are the next most used pathway, providing spaces where regulators, industry, and community actors interact under shared workplans and timelines.

Government consultations and policy processes remain a meaningful route to contribute to national strategies and regulatory projects, though typically with structured opportunities for comment rather than continuous co drafting.

Furthermore, public awareness and advocacy campaigns sit alongside these institutional avenues and help bridge the gap between formal policy conversations and the constituencies most affected by AI deployments. More formalized venues that directly shape technical and legal norms such as standard setting bodies, international negotiations, and strategic litigation are part of the picture but involve far fewer organizations. In our dataset, 42 organizations engaged via academic partnerships; 22 via multi stakeholder forums; 16 in government consultations; 21 through public advocacy; 12 in standard setting; 9 via civil society coalitions and networks; 8 in international negotiations; and 5 through legal challenges. Figure 1 visualizes these channels. These empirical patterns align with the architecture of global AI governance, where multi stakeholder and expert driven processes are key conduits for participation, from national strategies to international initiatives like the UNESCO Recommendation on the Ethics of AI that deliberately convene governments, industry, academia, and civil society.

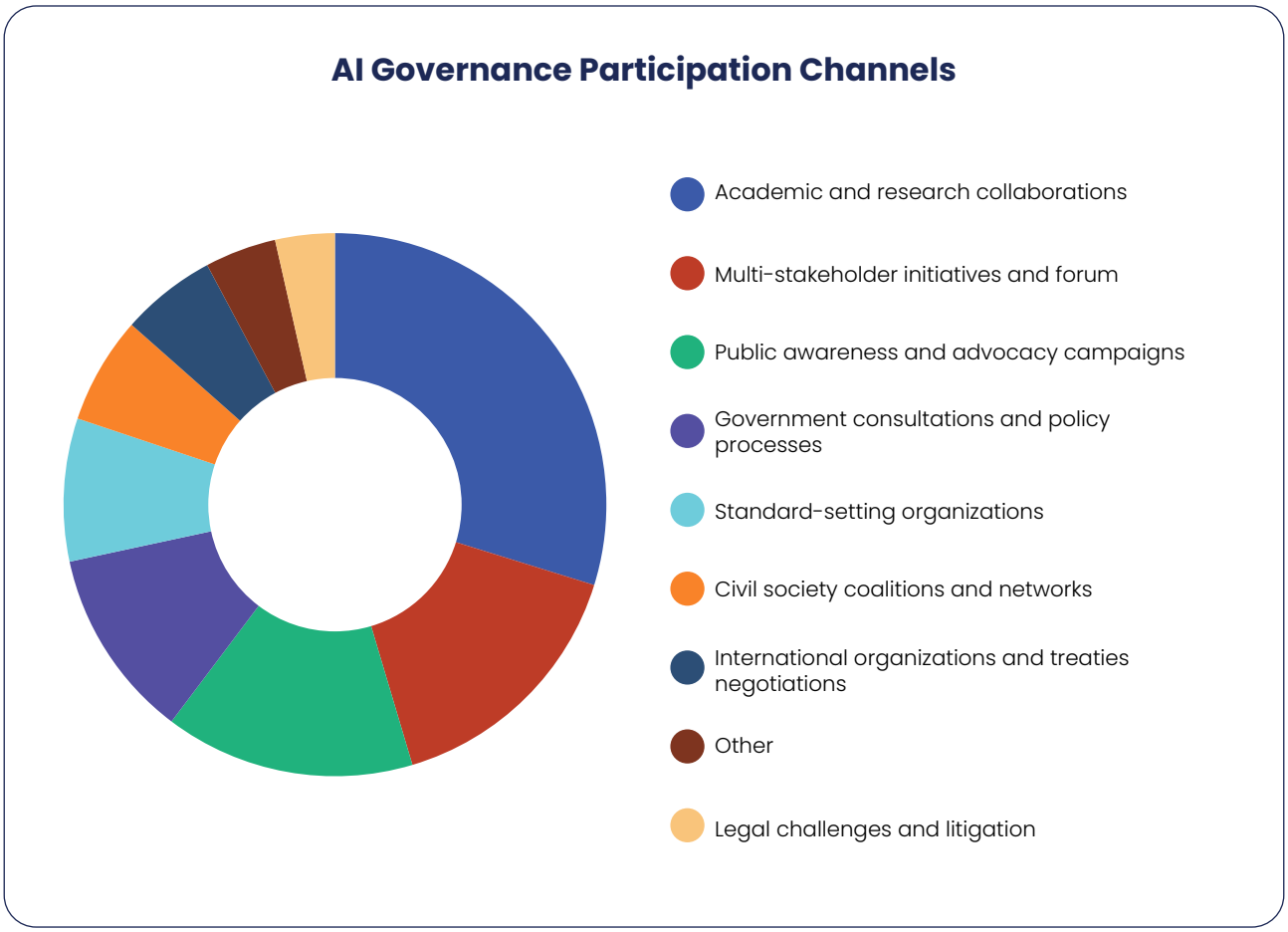

Figure 1 Channels of civil society participation in AI governance (n=85).

The thematic priorities that mobilize civil society from the Global Majority map closely to where organizations see both immediate public need and realistic levers for change. Education and capacity building stand out as the dominant area of work in the survey, with 59 organizations indicating activity. This focus reflects a strategic understanding that meaningful participation in AI governance requires literacies that range from basic data rights to comprehension of model behavior and evaluation. Privacy and data protection, and AI governance and regulation, follow as central areas. These topics connect everyday harms and safeguards including data sharing in schools, biometric surveillance in public spaces, and automated decision making in welfare and health, to the evolving legal and regulatory frameworks at national and regional levels.

AI safety and security indicate a growing orientation toward risk identification and harm reduction that intersects with human rights law. Organizations also report attention to digital divide and accessibility, human rights more broadly, environmental and economic impacts, gender, youth, and the future of work. In combination, these priorities show that civil society does not treat AI as a narrow technical field but as a group of systems embedded in social relations. Figure 2 presents the distribution of these themes in the survey.

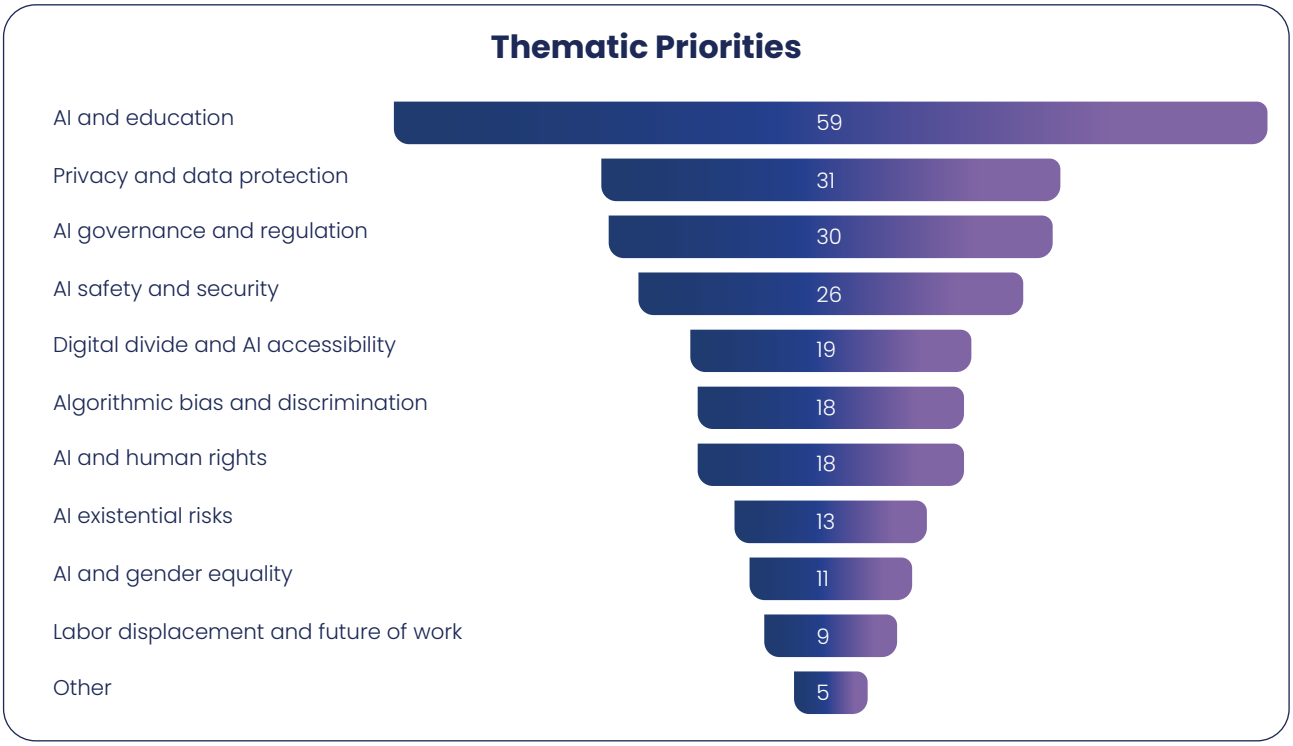

Figure 2 Thematic priorities in AI governance (n=85)

When civil society assesses levels of influence and representation, the picture is one of growing presence coupled with tempered expectations. Among the organizations that have taken part in AI governance processes during the last three years, the average self reported influence is 3.2 on a five point scale, where 1 indicates no influence and 5 indicates high influence. Respondents rated the representation of their region's interests in current governance mechanisms at 2.76 out of 5. These numbers suggest that civil society sees real but incomplete traction.

They also reflect a governance landscape in which agenda setting authority still tends to concentrate in a limited set of government and corporate centers, especially outside the Global Majority, while civil society's contributions, though increasingly invited, are not always determinative. International rule making efforts have begun to recognize the need for broader participation and accountability for impacts, as seen in the UNESCO Recommendation process of elaboration (See Spotlight 1 below).

Beyond participation and representation, the survey explored how civil society from the Global Majority evaluates its effectiveness as a counterweight to concentrated power. Their perception is characterized by both conviction and realism. In the survey, 21 organizations described civil society as a very effective counterbalance and 20 as somewhat effective, while 24 judged its role to be limited and 12 not effective at all, with 7 unsure. This near-even split, illustrated in Figure 3, shows a sector that has earned legitimacy as a voice for the public interest but that also recognizes the stark asymmetries of resources, technical expertise, and agenda-setting power that define today's AI governance landscape.

This contrast becomes even clearer when considering how respondents ranked the influence of global actors in AI governance: large technology companies and regulators in developed countries were seen as the most influential, while civil society organizations were placed at the very bottom of the list of influential actors. This contrast highlights a tension: civil society is widely regarded as a necessary counterbalance to concentrated power, yet it is simultaneously perceived as the least influential in practice.

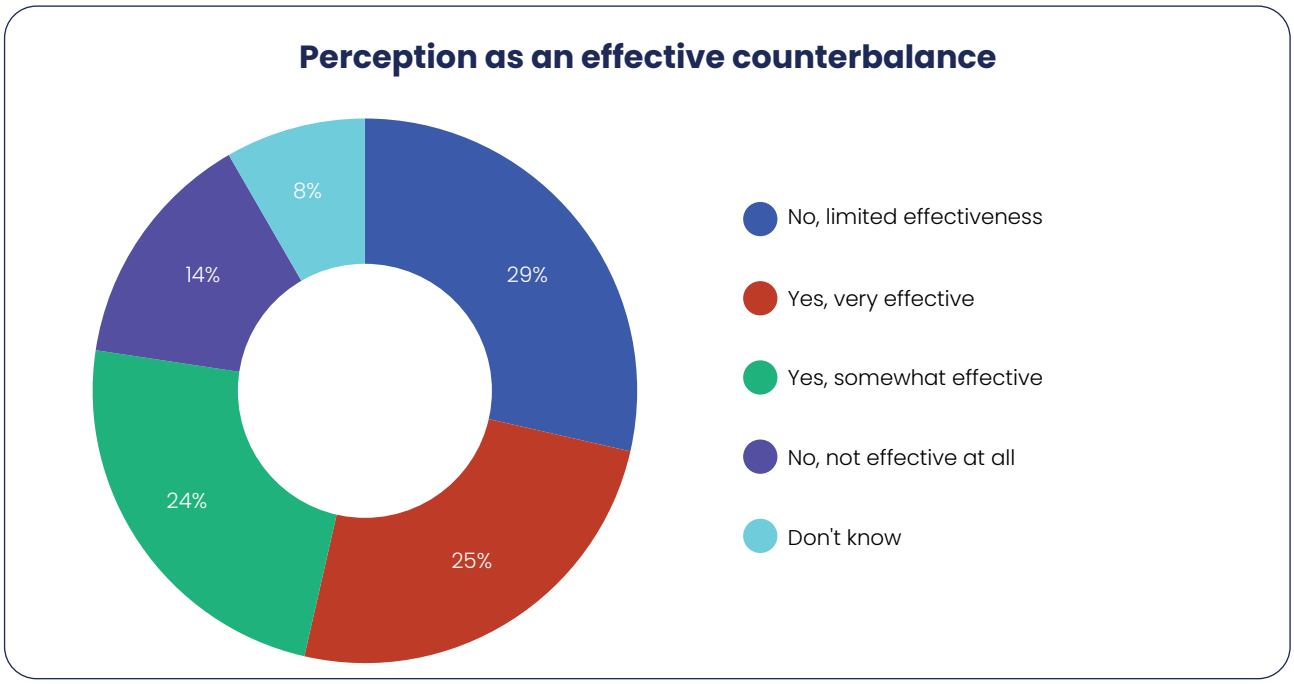

Figure 3 Civil Society perception as an effective counterbalance (n=85)

Together, these findings describe how civil society from the Global Majority engages in AI governance today: by entering through research that confers epistemic credibility, by working on issues that connect directly to lived experience, and by securing modest advances in influence while operating within governance systems that remain predominantly shaped beyond their regions. The next sections examine what currently limits that participation and where the most promising entry points lie to embed it more deeply and equitably.

Spotlight:

UNESCO Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence

This spotlight introduces the UNESCO Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence, the first global normative instrument on AI, adopted unanimously by 193 Member States at the UNESCO General Conference in November 2021. The drafting of this Recommendation followed a distinctly multistakeholder model, with civil society and academia playing an active role throughout its design and negotiation.

The protection of **human rights and dignity** is the cornerstone of the Recommendation, based on the advancement of fundamental principles such as transparency and fairness, safety and security, as well as multistakeholder and adaptive governance. What is more, the Recommendation is unique and stands out from other AI frameworks as it includes **Policy Action Areas**, which allow policymakers to translate the core values and principles into concrete actions with respect to data governance, environment and ecosystems, gender, education and research, and health and social wellbeing, among many other spheres. On top of this, the Recommendation introduces practical implementation tools such as Ethical Impact Assessment and a Readiness Assessment Methodology.

The process began when the UNESCO Executive Board requested the Director-General to examine the feasibility of developing a global normative instrument on AI. In 2019, UNESCO's Secretariat and its World Commission on the Ethics of Scientific Knowledge and Technology (COMEST) conducted a preliminary study[3], which recommended pursuing a global normative instrument. Importantly, from the outset, UNESCO adopted an open consultation approach. Between 2019 and 2020, it organized a global consultation process that engaged not only governments but also academic experts, civil society organizations, and the private sector. Civil society contributions were particularly visible in the series of regional consultations across Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, Asia-Pacific, and Europe, where grassroots organizations, NGOs, and research institutions articulated region-specific priorities.

Building on this input, an Ad Hoc Expert Group (AHEG) composed of 24 independent experts from diverse disciplines and geographies prepared the first draft of the Recommendation[4]. Civil society and academic representatives were able to influence the process by submitting position papers, participating in public consultations, and joining UNESCO-organized thematic debates.

UNESCO reports that this process included a public online consultation that generated more than 50,000 comments from over 600 participants, eleven regional and subregional virtual consultations including two with youth, and partner-organized deliberation workshops that gathered roughly 500 participants. The drafting process was thus enriched by extensive input from universities, think tanks, advocacy groups, and grassroots organizations, many of which came from the Global Majority. For instance, the Latin American and Caribbean consultation emphasized inclusion, accountability, and Indigenous perspectives, while African participants stressed the need for capacity-building, equitable access to AI resources, and safeguards against surveillance.

In 2020 and 2021, Member States negotiated the draft text in intergovernmental meetings. Civil society and academia remained engaged by monitoring sessions, organizing side events, and submitting recommendations through UNESCO's open channels and providing feedback to the Member States taking part in the negotiations.[5]

Public evidence of civil society participation is visible in written submissions and regional dialogues. For example, Global Partners Digital[6] filed a detailed submission during the online consultation, and UNESCO co organized regional consultations such as the Asia Pacific meeting hosted by the Republic of Korea, which convened stakeholders to discuss values, principles, and policy tasks for the Recommendation[7]. These activities illustrate how advocacy groups and academic institutes fed structured input into UNESCO's process alongside government delegations.

These advocacy efforts helped ensure that the Recommendation included principles such as human rights and dignity, fairness and non-discrimination, environmental sustainability, and responsibility of both public and private actors. The final text also incorporated provisions on AI impact assessments and the call for national implementation strategies, reflecting input that many civil society actors had championed during consultations.

The Recommendation was formally adopted by acclamation in November 2021. Its adoption marked a milestone not only for international AI governance but also for participatory global norm-setting. Civil society and academic institutions were not merely passive observers; their engagement in regional consultations, expert debates, and public advocacy directly influenced the scope and ambition of the instrument.

Challenges to Meaningful Participation

Civil society is widely acknowledged as a necessary counterbalance to concentrated power in AI governance, yet actors from the Global Majority remain largely absent from many of the global processes where critical decisions are being shaped. International AI governance dialogues are hosted in the Global North and managed by well-resourced governments and corporations, requiring levels of funding, technical expertise, and political access that many organizations in Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, and Asia cannot easily mobilize. This structural imbalance means that the perspectives of those communities most affected by AI systems are often missing precisely in the spaces where rules that affect regional regulation and global norms are negotiated.

As the United Nations High-Level Advisory Body on Artificial Intelligence emphasized in its final report, one of the most significant gaps in global AI governance is representation. Entire regions remain excluded from international decision-making spaces. As expressed in Figure 4, the report revealed that while seven countries participate in all the major AI governance initiatives surveyed, 118 countries do not participate in any. This stark imbalance underscores the underrepresentation of the Global Majority in shaping global AI governance.

The survey conducted for this brief confirms that even when Global Majority civil society organizations engage, they face recurring obstacles that prevent them from exerting real influence. Respondents highlighted three interrelated challenges as the most significant limitations to their ability to act as an effective counterbalance: limited financial resources, the technical complexity of AI systems, and the lack of a unified civil society voice. These barriers, echoed in academic and policy literature, help explain why civil society continues to be perceived as the least influential actor in practice, despite its recognized importance for ensuring accountability and inclusion in AI governance.

Sample: OECD AI Principles (2019), G20 AI principles (2019), Council of Europe AI Convention drafting group (2022–2024), GPAI Ministerial Declaration (2022), G7 Ministers' Statement (2023), Bletchley Declaration (2023) and Seoul Ministerial Declaration (2024).

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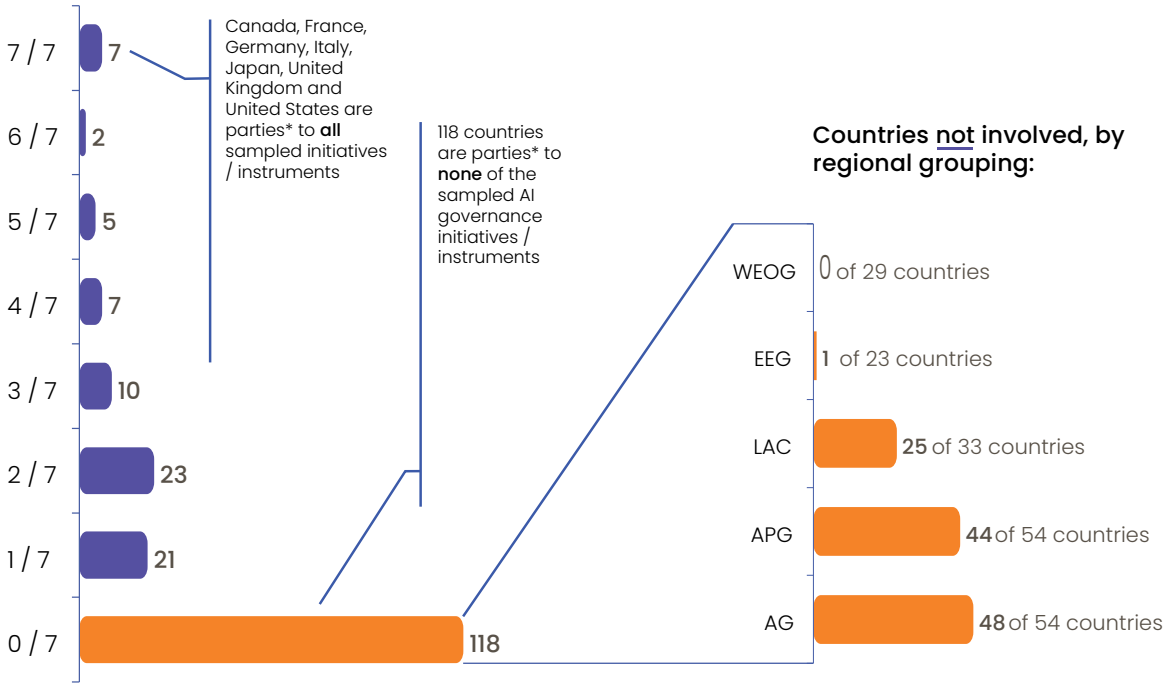

* Per endorsement of relevant intergovernmental issuances. Countries are not considered involved in a plurilateral initiative solely because of membership in the European Union or the African Union. Abbreviations: AG, African Group; APG, Asia and the Pacific Group; EEG, Eastern European Group; G20, Group of 20; G7, Group of Seven; GPAI, Global Partnership on Artificial Intelligence; LAC, Latin America and the Caribbean; OECD, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development; WEOG, Western European and Others Group.

Source: United Nations, Governing AI for Humanity: Final Report of the High-Level Advisory Body on Artificial Intelligence (New York: United Nations, 2024), 9.

Figure 4 Participation of countries in global AI governance efforts.

Limited Financial Resources

The most frequently cited challenge for civil society organizations across the Global Majority is financial scarcity. A majority of survey respondents identified resource constraints as the main limitation to their ability to act as an effective counterbalance in AI governance. Unlike governments or industry actors, most civil society groups operate on fragile budgets, rely on specific-term grants which are usually tied to specific projects and not devoted to fund operational expenses (Renaissance Numérique 2022, 29), and lack the reserves to sustain long-term policy engagement. This situation creates a structural asymmetry: civil society is expected to ensure accountability and vigilance in AI governance, yet it lacks the stable resources needed to fulfill this role.

This imbalance has deepened into a funding crisis. Around the world, digital rights and technology-focused civil society organizations are facing existential pressures as financial support diminishes. Recent surveys highlight that more than two-thirds of digital rights groups in Global Majority countries have already scaled back their programming. In Africa, the crisis is especially acute: nearly 92% of affected organizations report having to reduce activities, with third forced to lay off staff. In some cases, entire teams, representing over 60% of staff, have been dismantled, effectively erasing years of policy, research, and advocacy work (CIPESA, 2024; Tech Global Institute, 2024).

Unless this funding crisis is addressed, the very capacity of civil society to participate in AI governance will continue to shrink. The issue is not a lack of legitimacy or will to engage, but rather the erosion of the financial foundation that sustains advocacy, expertise, and vigilance in the face of rapidly expanding AI systems.

Technical Complexity of AI Systems

A fundamental barrier to meaningful participation in AI governance for civil society organizations in the Global Majority is a persistent lack of in-house technical expertise. In our survey, over half of respondents cited this deficit, particularly in understanding AI systems, data practices, and model behavior, as a key limitation to their engagement in policy discussions. especially when technical knowledge is assumed to underpin credibility and influence. This asymmetry places them at a disadvantage in governance forums where technical language and complex system design are central to policy debates.

Although stakeholders are acutely aware of AI-related injustices such as algorithmic bias, exclusion, or misuse, they frequently lack the technical literacy to translate these concerns into actionable arguments within governance forums. The Southern African Council of Non-Governmental Organizations (SAf-CNGO) highlighted that many NGOs face capacity gaps in cybersecurity and digital literacy.

Similarly, a broader report on democratic standards and AI governance notes that civil society is often “so far behind” in capability that multistakeholder engagement tends to address only the consequences of AI systems, not their design or regulation (Kerley 2023).

Lack of a Unified Civil Society Voice

Another significant barrier to meaningful participation is the difficulty of articulating a unified voice across the diverse spectrum of civil society organizations. In our survey, nearly forty respondents highlighted poor coordination and fragmentation among civil society actors as a limiting factor in their ability to influence AI governance. Diversity within civil society is a major strength. It allows a plurality of perspectives to surface, from grassroots advocacy to academic research. Yet when advocacy efforts are dispersed or uncoordinated, this diversity can also dilute collective impact, making it harder for civil society to match the cohesion of government or industry stakeholders.

This challenge manifests differently across regions. In Latin America and the Caribbean, some organizations have strong visibility and engagement in regional or global processes, while others, often smaller or community-based, struggle to access these same forums. In South and Southeast Asia, a similar pattern can be observed: while regional networks and initiatives do exist, differences in national contexts and capacities can make cross-border collaboration uneven, reducing the visibility of shared concerns in global debates.

In Africa, efforts to build collective platforms demonstrate both the potential and the challenges of unified advocacy. The African Digital Rights Network (ADRN)[8], for example, brings together organizations from more than twenty countries to advance rights-based approaches to digital governance. While initiatives like ADRN have strengthened collaboration on issues such as surveillance and internet shutdowns, according to participants of the Focus Groups, sustaining common positions on AI governance remains difficult due to varied national priorities, resource disparities, and linguistic diversity. These dynamics illustrate that the challenge is not a lack of willingness to work together, but the structural and systemic obstacles that complicate coordination across vast and heterogeneous regions.

Without stronger mechanisms for alignment, civil society's influence risks being dispersed across multiple parallel efforts, reducing its weight in negotiations where unified messaging carries greater impact. This concern is reflected in our survey, where respondents identified better coordination among civil society as one of the key enablers that could most strengthen their role in AI governance.

Additional Barriers

Beyond these three central challenges, several additional obstacles emerged from the survey and focus groups. Many organizations reported limited access to decision-making processes, either because they were excluded from consultations or because entry points were unclear. This lack of access is compounded by the geographic concentration of AI governance institutions in the Global North, which places decision-making far from the communities most affected by AI systems.

Government reluctance to consult civil society and industry resistance to external oversight also play a role. In several countries, AI is framed as a driver of national competitiveness, leading governments to prioritize relationships with industry over accountability to civil society. Last but not least, some organizations cited lack of awareness of opportunities to engage as a significant barrier, especially among smaller grassroots groups. As a result, even when formal participation mechanisms exist, they are often underutilized by those without the networks or resources to access them.

Taken together, these barriers explain why civil society, despite being recognized as indispensable to balancing power in AI governance, remains among the least influential actors in practice. Limited financial resources, the lack of technical expertise, and the difficulty of articulating a unified voice, compounded by additional obstacles constrain the ability of civil society organizations to engage on equal footing with governments and industry. Recognizing these challenges is only the first step. The next section turns to the opportunities and entry points that can strengthen civil society's role in AI governance, highlighting pathways for more inclusive, coordinated, and impactful participation.

Spotlight:

The Framework Convention on Artificial Intelligence

The Council of Europe Framework Convention on Artificial Intelligence and human rights, democracy and the rule of law (The "AI Treaty")[9] is the **first-ever international legally binding treaty** in this field. Opened for signature on 5 September 2024, it aims to ensure that activities within the lifecycle of AI systems are fully consistent with human rights, democracy and the rule of law, while being conducive to technological progress and innovation.

Between 2019 and 2021, the Council of Europe's Ad hoc Committee on Artificial Intelligence (CAHAI) laid the groundwork for negotiations on a global legal framework for AI. CAHAI produced a "Feasibility Study" assessing possible regulatory approaches and, in December 2021, adopted its final recommendations on "Possible Elements of a Legal Framework on Artificial Intelligence Based on the Council of Europe's Standards on Human Rights, Democracy and the Rule of Law." With CAHAI's mandate concluded, the Committee on Artificial Intelligence (CAI) was established in April 2022. Building on CAHAI's recommendations, the CAI was given a specific mandate to negotiate an "appropriate legal instrument."

The CAI decided to split its work between plenary sessions and a drafting group tasked with preparing proposals for the text of the Convention. Civil society organizations were observers of the process; therefore, they were not part of the drafting group discussions. After several rounds of negotiations, the CAI reached agreement on a draft Convention in March 2024. This draft was then examined by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe in April 2024, which issued an Opinion before the Committee of Ministers formally adopted the Convention in May 2024. The first states signed the new Convention in September 2024, including Andorra, Georgia, Iceland, Norway, the Republic of Moldova, San Marino, the United Kingdom, Israel and the European Union on behalf of its 27 Member States, with additional countries such as Canada, Japan, and United States of America, joining thereafter.

Throughout this process, civil society organizations played an active role in pushing for stronger human rights protections and broader accountability. In December 2021, they expressed concern that CAHAI's final recommendations fell short of what was necessary to ensure full respect for human rights, democracy, and the rule of law[10]. At the opening session of the CAI in April 2022, organizations such as Algorithm Watch, Global Partners Digital, among others, reiterated core demands for a robust and effective treaty[11].

Later, in January and July 2023 civil society actors came together to deeply regret[12] that the negotiating States have chosen to exclude civil society observers from the drafting group of the Convention and called on negotiating states to ensure equal coverage of the public and private sectors and to reject blanket national security exemptions. These interventions underscored the importance of civil society participation in shaping an inclusive and effective international framework for AI governance.

The negotiation of the AI Framework Convention provides a clear example of both the potential and the limitations of civil society engagement in international norm-setting processes. On the one hand, the presence of observer organizations such as 5Rights Foundation, AI Transparency Institute, AlgorithmWatch, ALLAI, the Center for AI and Digital Policy, the Centre for Democracy and Rule of Law, Digitale Gesellschaft Switzerland, Digital Security Lab Ukraine, Global Partners Digital, Holistic AI, Homo Digitals, and Pour Demain brought critical expertise to the table. These organizations helped raise awareness of human rights, transparency, and democratic safeguards, and provided a channel to translate complex debates into language accessible for the broader public. Their participation also allowed civil society to monitor developments, identify risks early, and mobilize advocacy networks across Europe and beyond. In this sense, the process highlighted how even limited spaces for participation can empower civil society to act as a watchdog and to inject important ethical, rights-based, and societal considerations into highly technical negotiations.

At the same time, the Council of Europe's official list of participants[13] revealed clear shortcomings in terms of representation. Civil society participation was largely confined to actors based in Europe or North America.

The drafting group, where the actual wording of the Convention was negotiated, remained closed to observers, making plenary sessions the only forum for input and accountability. The absence of civil society organizations from Africa, Latin America, and Asia meant that perspectives from the Global Majority were effectively absent from the official process. A joint call for Global Majority input was published by organizations such as Fundación Karisma, Transparencia Brasil and the Nigeria Network of NGOs (NNNGO), among others, to ensure that the Convention is really global in nature[14].

Unfortunately, issues such as data extractivism, unequal access to computational resources, or the risks of AI deployment in fragile democracies were still less visible in the negotiations. This imbalance stands in contrast to the Convention's global aspirations and highlights the gap between ambition and inclusivity.

Constructively, this experience points to areas for improvement in future international AI governance processes. The Council of Europe's openness to including civil society observers in the plenaries was an important step, but the reliance on existing European networks for outreach resulted in a narrow circle of participants. A more deliberate strategy to involve Global Majority civil society through financial support for participation, structured consultation processes, or the recognition of regional civil society platforms could have helped ensure that the Convention reflected a broader diversity of experiences and needs.

Beyond the negotiation process itself, civil society has continued to play a role in shaping how the Convention is received and implemented. A strong example of global civil society advocacy is the **#AITreatyNow** campaign launched by the Center for AI and Digital Policy (CAIDP) to mobilize support for the AI Treaty. Through this initiative, CAIDP has not only provided policy advice to national governments but also issued public statements urging them to sign and ratify the Convention. The impact of such advocacy is tangible: in December 2024, CAIDP sent a letter to the Government of Canada calling for signature and ratification of the Convention[15]. Canada, already recognized as a leader in AI governance for its role in endorsing the OECD/G20 AI Principles, co-founding the GPAI with France, and promoting responsible AI practices across government, responded by signing the Convention in February 2025[16]. This demonstrates how sustained civil society action can help bridge global policymaking processes with national-level commitments, reinforcing the legitimacy and uptake of international AI governance frameworks.

Opportunities for Engagement

While the previous section highlighted the barriers that make civil society participation in AI governance difficult, the story does not end there. Across regions, civil society has shown remarkable creativity and persistence in identifying ways to make its voice heard and to influence decision-making. This section turns to those strategies that organizations are already using to shape debates and advance the public interest in AI governance.

The table below provides a snapshot of ten key entry points through which civil society is engaging in AI governance, offering a quick overview and a source of inspiration for further action.

Table Key Civil Society AI Governance Entry Points

Cluster	Entry Points	Short Description
Generating Knowledge and Tools	Policy research and publications	Producing reports and studies that provide evidence and policy guidance.
	Developing practical tools for ethical AI	Creating frameworks and tools to operationalize ethical principles.
	Independent audits and oversight	Scrutinizing AI systems through technical or participatory audits to ensure accountability.

Cluster	Entry Points	Short Description
Building Capacities and Collective Voice	Strengthening capacities	Enhancing knowledge, skills, and confidence of civil society, policymakers, and other actors to engage in AI governance.
	Fostering collaborative networks	Connecting CSOs at local, regional, and global levels to amplify shared advocacy.
	Convening dialogue platforms	Creating inclusive forums where diverse stakeholders' debate and co-shape AI agendas.

Cluster	Entry Points	Short Description
Influencing Policy Processes Directly	Advocacy and awareness raising	Mobilizing public opinion and shaping narratives.
	Contributing to consultations	Providing formal input into draft strategies, policies, or regulations.
	Participating in international forums	Engaging in multilateral and multistakeholder debates where global AI norms and commitments are defined.
	Joining expert groups and standard-setting bodies	Bringing public-interest perspectives into highly technical standardization processes.

The clusters presented in the table illustrate how civil society's contributions are diverse yet interconnected. Some strategies focus on producing the evidence and tools needed for sound policy, others on building collective voice and capacity, others on directly shaping decision-making, and still others on ensuring accountability when governance falls short. Seen as a whole, they show that civil society is active along every stage of the governance cycle, making its role indispensable to a more inclusive AI ecosystem. The following sections explore each cluster in turn, illustrating how these entry points work in practice and the impact they are already having.

Generating Knowledge and Tools

A first way civil society contributes to AI governance is by generating the knowledge and instruments that underpin informed decision-making. By publishing evidence, developing frameworks, and carrying out independent assessments, organizations provide the foundations on which advocacy, policymaking, and oversight can build. These efforts are crucial because they allow civil society to provide evidence to the debate.

Policy research and publications have become one of the most visible contributions. Reports not only consolidate expertise but also position civil society as a credible source of policy-relevant knowledge. For instance, the Global Index on Responsible AI[17], developed by the Global Center on AI Governance[18], benchmarks 138 countries' progress on implementing responsible AI, grounded in human rights and development goals, that informs both domestic and international debates (Adams et al. 2024). Similarly, the Center for AI and Digital Policy[19] publishes annually the AI and Democratic Values Index[20], a comprehensive review of AI policies and practices worldwide, ranking 80 countries based on 12 metrics established to assess alignment with democratic values (Center for AI and Digital Policy 2025).

In Latin America, AISur[21] consortium, a network of 11 civil society and academic organizations working to strengthen human rights in the region's digital environment, has produced Regulatory Pathways for AI in Latin America[22], a report that examines experiences in Brazil, Mexico, Peru, and Colombia (AISur 2024). The study offers a critical analysis designed to inform policymakers, civil society organizations, and activists, ensuring that debates on AI are grounded in human rights and attentive to the specific contexts of Global South countries.

In Africa, AI Policy Lab by Lawyers Hub[23] publishes constantly insights and analysis to provide valuable information for understanding trends and the impact of AI in various sectors of AI in Africa such as the Report 5 years of AI Regulation in Africa[24] and the brief Policy Guidelines for the Integration of Artificial Intelligence in African Judicial Systems[25], aiming to promote responsible AI adoption through shared standards, mutual learning, and contextual innovation.

Spotlight: Women of Uganda Network (WOUGNET), Uganda

Advancing Gender Justice in AI through Data, Voice, and Civic Empowerment

Artificial intelligence is taking on greater strategic importance across Africa. Countries such as Nigeria[26], Kenya[27], and South Africa[28] have advanced draft AI strategies. These national efforts are nested within the African Union's broader Continental AI Strategy which seeks to align AI's potential with Agenda 2063 and the SDGs, emphasizing ethical, inclusive, and development oriented deployment across five strategic areas: harnessing AI's benefits, building capabilities, minimizing risks, stimulating investment, and fostering cooperation.

Civil society organizations across the continent are seeking to shape these emerging AI conversations by stimulating public discourse, producing contextual research, and participating in policymaking processes.

Women of Uganda Network[29] (WOUGNET[30]), founded in 2000 as a coalition of women's organizations, is one of the most active civil society actors working at the intersection of gender, technology, and governance in Africa. Headquartered in Kampala, WOUGNET has consistently sought to ensure that women and girls are not left behind in digital transformation, promoting access to and meaningful use of ICTs as a pathway to empowerment, civic participation, and inclusive development. Its approach is firmly rooted in feminist principles and a vision of a just society where digital technologies serve as enablers of equity and rights rather than drivers of exclusion.

Over the years, WOUGNET has built strong partnerships with international networks, including the Association for Progressive Communications, the Global Network Initiative, UN Women, and the World Wide Web Foundation. This positioning has allowed it to amplify African perspectives in global debates on digital rights and AI ethics, while also strengthening local communities' ability to engage with the policies shaping their digital lives.

A landmark initiative that exemplifies WOUGNET's contribution to AI governance is the project *Advancing Data Justice Research and Practice in Uganda*[31], implemented in collaboration with the Alan Turing Institute. The project responded to the growing recognition that data justice is critical to the governance of AI and machine learning systems, especially in societies marked by structural inequalities.

WOUGNET carried out a desk review, interviews, and surveys across Uganda to identify gaps in how data-driven systems consider issues of equity, power, and participation. The research was translated into a practical guide[32] that introduced policymakers, developers, and civil society to six pillars of data justice: power, equity, access, identity, participation, and knowledge. By bringing these principles into local debates, WOUGNET equipped stakeholders with a framework to critically assess AI deployments in areas such as agriculture, education, and social protection. This effort expanded the conceptual understanding of data justice in the Ugandan context and offered concrete tools for communities to articulate demands for fairness, accountability, and inclusivity in AI systems.

WOUGNET's advocacy extends beyond research to active participation in high-level debates, such as the African Internet Governance Forum[33] and the Digital Rights and Inclusion Forum hosted by Paradigm Initiative. Ms. Sandra Aceng, WOUGNET's Executive Director, joined a panel organized by the International Center for Not-for-Profit Law on "Artificial Intelligence and Other Emerging Technologies and Their Impact on Civil Society[34]" highlighting both the risks and opportunities that AI poses for democratic participation in Africa. Alongside such engagements, WOUGNET develops policy briefs and toolkits on data privacy, freedom of expression, and online gender-based violence, and convenes campaigns like FemTech-Africa[35] to strengthen safe digital spaces for women.

By linking grassroots realities to global AI governance discussions, WOUGNET demonstrates how feminist civil society can reframe debates on emerging technologies through the lenses of equity and justice. Its work underlines the importance of grounding AI governance in lived experiences and ensuring that those most affected by technological change have the knowledge, tools, and voice to shape the policies that govern it.

Developing practical tools for ethical AI moves from principles to practice. Civil society is increasingly developing tools to operationalize ethical AI through assessment, monitoring, and accountability mechanisms. EcoLogits[36], for instance, is a tool created by the association GenAI Impact[37] to track the energy consumption and environmental impacts of generative AI models. Another compelling example is the fAIr LAC[38] Initiative, an effort led by the Inter-American Development Bank in collaboration with public and private sectors, civil society and academic institutions, designed to influence public policy and the entrepreneurial ecosystem in the promotion of the responsible and ethical use of AI across Latin America and the Caribbean. This initiative supports pilot projects for AI deployment and creates models for ethical evaluation and toolkits intended for governments, entrepreneurs, and civil society to better understand, assess, and guide the responsible use of AI systems. The fAIr LAC in a box[39] provides five tools for the application of the ethical principles of AI in all phases of a project. The Digital Empowerment Foundation[40] (DEF) goes beyond developing tools as its flagship initiative "Just AI – Data & Algorithms for Communities" recognises three best practices in India that have leveraged the use of AI in building projects, initiatives, and solutions at the grassroots level. DEF's initiative developed in partnership with the Emerging Technologies Wing of the Government of Telangana and the World Summit Awards highlights and promotes impactful models across various sectors of the economy and society that critically address the ethical issues in task automation, data privacy breaches, algorithmic biases and discrimination.

Independent audits and oversight deepen accountability by exposing how AI systems operate and whose interests they serve. Oversight mechanisms are vital for holding AI systems accountable, particularly in contexts where regulation lags technological adoption. Civil society initiatives are beginning to shape approaches that bring greater transparency to opaque systems and document their social impacts. ForHumanity[41], a global nonprofit, involves experts[42] from around the world, including across the Global Majority, in open, independent audits of algorithmic systems, developing certification schemes that assess risk, bias, and compliance with ethical standards. Humane Intelligence[43] promotes participatory audits, which invite affected communities to evaluate algorithmic systems and co-produce evidence of bias or discrimination. Another inspiring case comes from the Algorithmic Justice League[44]'s CRASH Project[45] (Community Reporting of Algorithmic System Harms), which establishes a bug-bounty style framework that empowers individuals to safely report AI-related harms, turning those most affected into central actors in oversight.

Building Capacities and Collective Voice

Civil society's influence in AI governance depends as much on its ability to act collectively and articulately as on its knowledge. In many regions, organizations are strengthening capacities, building alliances, and creating spaces for dialogue, laying the groundwork for more inclusive and effective engagement.

Strengthening capacities is a two sided strategy that equips both civil society and the policymakers to engage effectively in AI governance. On one side, it refers to empowering civil society actors with the knowledge, analytical skills, and institutional backbone necessary to engage with the technical, social, political, and ethical complexities of AI governance. As revealed in our Survey, organizations need access to technical literacy, global policy frameworks, and strategic understanding across the AI lifecycle to engage meaningfully in policy discussions, standard-setting, and advocacy. Capacity building, the foundations of meaningful participation, ensures that civil society can contribute substantively to multi stakeholder processes, articulate rights-based critiques, and represent marginalized perspectives. As the United Nations System White Paper on AI governance notes, broader inclusion of civil society and academia requires capacity enhancement so that a wider pool of experts can effectively participate in governance and standards development (United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination 2024).

On the other side, it focuses on building the capacities of policymakers and users, ensuring that public officials, regulators, educators, and communities can embed human rights and public-interest values in AI adoption. The UNESCO Recommendation underscores public understanding through education, digital skills, AI ethics training, and media and information literacy. Complementing this, OECD guidance highlights the importance of AI related education and skills for decision makers and the wider public to anticipate impacts and govern responsibly (OECD 2025).

Universidad Austral in Argentina has launched the Observatory on AI and Innovation in Government[46], a space dedicated to training public officials and researchers on the responsible use of AI in public administration. In Southeast Asia, EngageMedia[47] has developed extensive capacity-building programs that equip activists, journalists, and community organizations with knowledge of algorithmic harms and governance pathways. These initiatives illustrate how capacity building can empower both state institutions and grassroots actors to engage more effectively in AI governance.

Spotlight: EngageMedia, Indonesia

Deepening Civil Society's Role in Indonesia's AI Governance

South and Southeast Asia hold a pivotal and dynamic position in the global AI governance landscape, marked by a diversity of approaches and rapid evolution. Scholars observe that many governments across the region are adopting *state guided AI strategies* seeking to strike a delicate balance between swift technological deployment and regulatory oversight, unlike the market driven model of the U.S. or the risk-based approach in the EU (Vikram, 2025).

MIT Technology Review notes that AI is becoming a major growth driver across Asia Pacific, spurring economic development while generating ethical concerns around bias and inclusion. Regionally, at least 16 jurisdictions have begun implementing formal or voluntary AI governance mechanisms, reflecting an expanding recognition of the need for regulatory frameworks that respond to local contexts. Meanwhile, UN backed initiatives such as UNESCO's Global CSO and Academic Network on AI Ethics and Policy, launched at the 3rd Global Forum on the Ethics of AI in Bangkok in June 2025, are actively creating platforms for civil society and academic actors that include a number of representatives from the South and Southeast Asia region to shape global and national AI norms.

In Indonesia, civil society organizations have been at the forefront of shaping debates around AI, digital rights, and governance. EngageMedia is one of them.

EngageMedia has been working on equipping civil society with critical tools to understand and respond to the societal impacts of AI, combining awareness-raising with direct engagement in policy processes. Founded in 2005, EngageMedia builds on its long-standing focus on digital rights and technology justice. The organization expanded its activities into AI governance through trainings, consultations, and evidence-based research.

In February 2024, it convened a two-day workshop[48] with 12 civil society organizations, the Ministry of Communication and Informatics, and experts in data protection law. The sessions clarified distinctions between different forms of AI, introduced the risks of foundation models, and encouraged civil society to scrutinize the stages where bias and discrimination emerge.

The Ministry presented its roadmap for AI governance and explained its preference for soft-law instruments, while participants explored strategies such as strategic litigation and peer collaboration. The initiative helped build a community of individuals interested in the topic as they provided a clear understanding of how participants' individual works could complement one another in their shared goal of collaborating on AI engagement activities with the government. Trainings like this one contribute to the positioning of civil society as a knowledgeable dialogue partner.

This focus on strengthening capacity continues. In May 2025, EngageMedia hosted a three-day workshop for civil society[49] "Unpacking AI through an accountability lens" in collaboration with the International Centre for Not-For-Profit Law (ICNL), UNESCO, the Khazanah Research Institute, Wikimedia Foundation, and GIZ. Participants, ranging from journalists and lawyers to rights advocates, were introduced to key concepts of AI and a guiding framework to help them identify and document potential harms arising from AI use at different stages of AI development, as well as the actors involved at each stage. The discussions also provided practical knowledge of AI incidents, ways to map and analyze them, which is intended to guide civil society in gathering relevant evidence needed for crafting actionable recommendations, advocacy plans, and strategic engagement with policymakers and government stakeholders

EngageMedia has also invested in empirical evidence generation. Through its regional report Governance of AI in Southeast Asia[50] (2021), EngageMedia mapped the layered nature of AI governance and set out recommendations for civil society roles across technical, ethical, and socio-legal domains. Similarly, its recent report 2022–2024 Media Monitoring: Documenting the Impacts of AI in Indonesia[51] identified 29 incidents where AI systems produced harmful effects, from deepfake misuse in online platforms to unfair algorithmic practices in ride-hailing services. The report categorized these harms and linked them to existing legal frameworks such as human rights law and the Personal Data Protection Act. By anchoring advocacy in concrete cases, the study offered policymakers and regulators tangible evidence of how AI is already affecting citizens, and where oversight mechanisms are most urgently required.

In a further demonstration of its commitment to human rights centered AI governance, in late July 2025 EngageMedia, together with ICT Watch and a broad coalition of civil society organizations, contributed to a joint civil society position paper titled *"Centering Human Rights in the National AI Strategy towards #IndonesiaEmas2045" (Menembus Batas: Pemusatan Hak Asasi Manusia dalam Strategi AI Nasional Menyongsong #IndonesiaEmas2045)*.

This paper was the outcome of a structured engagement process initiated through two virtual consolidation meetings in June and finalized in an in person meeting on July 28. The civil society coalition articulated three key recommendations for Indonesia's AI Roadmap and officially presented the position paper to Deputy Minister Nezar Patria of the Ministry of Communication and Digital Affairs, aiming to embed human rights protections into the conceptual framework of Indonesia's national AI governance from the start.

Taken together, these initiatives show how civil society can strengthen AI governance by combining technical literacy, public accountability, and context-sensitive research. EngageMedia is actively contributing to empowering civil society to advance the public interest in AI governance discussions. The organization recognizes that achieving this goal requires urgent efforts to build the capacity to understand AI systems and their ideal governance. Each of its initiatives represents a concrete step toward that vision, offering best practices for ensuring that civil society becomes an influential and informed voice in shaping the future of AI.

Fostering collaborative networks refers to the ways civil society organizations connect to share knowledge, coordinate advocacy, and amplify their influence in AI governance. Networks include local and regional coalitions, large international alliances, professional associations, or thematic communities of practice. At the local level, networks help organizations rooted in communities articulate common concerns and develop shared strategies to address immediate challenges of AI deployment. Regional coalitions allow civil society to influence governance processes that often take place at supranational levels, such as in trade blocs or regional organizations, while global networks enable cross-regional solidarity and the ability to challenge dominant narratives in international fora. "Networked governance" structures, as referred by Ansell and Gash (2008), provide legitimacy and resilience in complex policy domains by linking actors across different scales and contexts.

This dynamic is evident in UNESCO's Global CSO and Academic Network on AI Ethics and Policy[52], launched at the 2025 Global Forum on the Ethics of AI, which provides a platform for CSOs and academic institutions worldwide to come together, share expertise, and contribute to the discourse on governance of AI technologies globally. A long-standing collaborative effort is the Association for Progressive Communications (APC)[53] which links 73 organizations across Asia, Africa, and Latin America, working together in a mission to strengthen collective organizing towards building a transformative movement to ensure that the internet and digital technologies enable social, gender and environmental justice for all people. In Latin America, the AISur[54] consortium brings together civil society and academic organizations from across the region to strengthen human rights in digital and AI governance debates. Beyond shaping a regional agenda, AISur plays a critical role in ensuring that Latin American perspectives are visible in global processes such as the negotiations on the Global Digital Compact[55]. This participation is significant in a region where policy discussions are often overshadowed by Global North priorities; by coordinating input from diverse local contexts, AISur helps articulate a collective regional voice that foregrounds equity, human rights, and development concerns specific to Latin America.

Convening dialogue platforms provides civil society with a means to bring diverse stakeholders together to discuss the societal implications of AI, identify risks, co-develop governance solutions, prepare a joint narrative, and identify common agendas. Unlike consultations initiated by governments, dialogue spaces organized by civil society are often more inclusive of grassroots perspectives, foregrounding human rights concerns that may otherwise be sidelined. These platforms create trust across sectors, open channels for mutual understanding, and enable collective agenda-setting, functions that are essential when navigating a technology as transformative and contested as AI.

The Digital Rights and Inclusion Forum (DRIF), organized annually by Paradigm Initiative[56], has become one of Africa's most influential convenings on digital policy, bringing together policymakers, civil society, academia, and the private sector to discuss emerging issues including AI, data governance, and digital rights. Its open and participatory format allows engaging dialogues. In Southeast Asia, ICT Watch[57] recently organized the AI Literacy Summit Indonesia[58], a multi-stakeholder event that gathered educators, policymakers, journalists, and civil society groups to explore how AI literacy can support rights-respecting and inclusive governance.

Influencing Policy Processes Directly

Beyond building knowledge and collective capacity, civil society also shapes AI governance by engaging directly in policymaking arenas. This cluster highlights entry points where organizations interact with governments, regulators, and international institutions seeking to influence agendas and decisions in real time. Through advocacy and awareness raising, contributing to formal consultations, participating in international forums, and joining expert groups or standard-setting bodies, civil society makes its voice heard within the processes where norms and rules are defined. These avenues do not always grant equal power, but they are essential for injecting rights-based and public-interest perspectives into spaces that might otherwise be dominated by industry and state actors.

Advocacy and awareness raising are central strategies through which civil society can shape the public and political agenda around AI governance. By translating complex technical issues into accessible narratives, advocacy efforts make visible the risks, inequities, and opportunities embedded in AI systems. This work helps counterbalance the dominance of industry-led discourses and ensures that policy debates do not lose sight of human rights, accountability, and social justice. Awareness raising also fosters informed publics, creating the political momentum necessary for governments and institutions to act. In this way, advocacy serves both as a watchdog function and as a constructive input that steers governance frameworks toward the public interest.

One of the most iconic advocacy campaigns is the one led by Dr. Joy Buolamwini, whose research and advocacy through the Algorithmic Justice League[59] have significantly raised global awareness of algorithmic bias. Her project *Gender Shades*[60] revealed that facial recognition systems misidentify darker-skinned women at dramatically higher rates than lighter-skinned men. This evidence, coupled with her public advocacy has played a pivotal role in reframing how companies address bias in AI systems. Another powerful campaign is the call to expand on Global AI Summit on Africa 2025: Making AI more participatory and inclusive for the benefit of all Africans[61]. A joint campaign developed in collaboration by Mozilla, Pollicy, ACM Nigeria, Innovation for Policy Foundation, MISA, Niyel, the Namibia University, and the Collaboration on International ICT Policy for East and Southern Africa (CIPESA) is urging African policymakers and summit organizers to transform "inspiration into impact" by ensuring inclusive participation and concretely actionable governance commitments.

Contributing to consultations offers civil society a formalized avenue to influence AI policy and regulatory design. When governments, international organizations, or regulatory bodies open draft texts or strategies for public comment, civil society submissions provide critical expertise and perspectives that might otherwise be absent. These inputs ensure that policymaking processes are not solely guided by technical feasibility or economic interests but also by ethical considerations and community priorities. The impact of such participation lies in its ability to embed human rights and social justice principles into the legal and regulatory architecture of AI governance. Even when not all recommendations are adopted, the act of contributing strengthens transparency, pushes institutions to consider alternative viewpoints, and builds a record that civil society can later use for advocacy and accountability.

Participation in international forums enables civil society to shape AI governance agendas that transcend national borders. Global discussions often set norms, guidelines, and principles that cascade down into regional and national frameworks, making civil society presence in these spaces particularly consequential. By engaging in multilateral negotiations, expert meetings, and multi-stakeholder assemblies, civil society brings local realities and underrepresented voices into arenas where global standards are defined. This participation broadens the diversity of perspectives

Joining expert groups and standard-setting bodies gives civil society the opportunity to influence the technical foundations of AI governance. These bodies develop the benchmarks, guidelines, and norms that determine how AI systems are designed, evaluated, and deployed. Civil society participation is critical here because standards often shape policy indirectly, defining what is considered trustworthy or compliant before regulation is enacted. By engaging in this highly technical space, civil society ensures that ethical principles, social impacts, and human rights considerations are integrated into technical frameworks that might otherwise be driven by industry priorities alone.

Taken as a whole, these entry points highlight not only practical avenues for civil society participation but also strategic means of redistributing influence in AI governance. They show that civil society engagement is possible across the full governance spectrum. from knowledge production and capacity building to advocacy, and direct participation, each offering a pathway to make decision-making more inclusive and rights-respecting. At the same time, it is important to note that the entry points described here are not exhaustive. Many other innovative practices are emerging in different contexts, reflecting the creativity and resilience of civil society actors worldwide. The aim of this policy brief is not to present a definitive list but to inspire further exploration, exchange, and action.

Spotlight:
The National Center for Artificial Intelligence (CENIA), Chile

A pioneering model for strengthening regional voice through evidence and innovation

Founded in 2021, CENIA[62] emerged as a frontier research initiative driven by a group of researchers from four Chilean universities who secured public funding with a dual focus: developing a national AI index and a large-scale language model.

From the outset, CENIA adopted a collaborative vision that prioritized coordination over centralization. As interest in AI expanded across Latin America and the Caribbean, CENIA scaled its scope to the regional level, engaging actors from different sectors. Rather than positioning itself as a leader, CENIA acts as an orchestrator of a growing Latin American AI community, committed to ensuring that AI serves the people of the region.

Latin American AI Index

The first edition of the Latin American AI Index[63] (known as ILIA for its acronym in Spanish), published in 2023, was developed by CENIA with support from the Inter-American Development Bank, the Development Bank of Latin America and the Caribbean - CAF, the Government of Chile, Google, and AWS. In addition to technical assistance from the Organization of American States, UNESCO, LinkedIn, GitHub, Pontifical Catholic University of Chile, University Adolfo Ibañez, among other contributors.

This pioneering study revealed the state of AI in 12 of the region's countries, considering the region's social and cultural context and covering dimensions such as infrastructure, human capital, data availability, regulations, among other factors.

The second edition of the ILIA marked a significant step forward in multi-actor collaboration. This edition expanded its scope to cover 19 countries, drawing on contributions from a wide network of universities, research centers, international organizations, industry and civil society actors. CENIA refers to this process as a *collaborative infrastructure*, in which each contributor plays a clearly defined role from the outset.

To prevent delays common in multi-actor initiatives, CENIA emphasizes operational agility over bureaucracy, opting for trust-based collaboration. This clarity of expectations, combined with structured governance mechanisms, including ILIA's technical advisory committee, executive committee, and editorial board, has allowed the ILIA to grow while maintaining methodological rigor and credibility across the region.

CENIA's work on the ILIA positions it as a leading regional knowledge hub. The ILIA consolidates evidence on AI research, development, and policy across multiple countries, providing a regional lens that is often absent in global AI measurement efforts. This kind of regional data infrastructure is critical for enabling civil society and academia in the Global Majority to engage with AI governance based on locally relevant indicators and patterns rather than imported benchmarks with the potential to inform adequately advocacy and policy dialogue.

LATAM GPT

The collaborative spirit that allowed for the construction of the ILIA has laid the groundwork for another great regional challenge: the development of the first Latin American Large Language Model: LATAM GPT[64], specifically created for and in Latin America.

This collaborative initiative, led by Chile's Ministry of Science and CENIA, brings together more than 30 institutions across the region. LATAM GPT aims to support technological sovereignty, preserve linguistic and cultural diversity, and mitigate algorithmic bias in AI applications.

From a participatory governance perspective, CENIA's approach strengthens agenda-setting power for Latin America in two ways:

1. By providing credible, locally grounded data to influence decision-making spaces often dominated by Global North metrics.
2. By demonstrating technical capability that allows the region to contribute not just to policy discussions but to the creation of AI tools adapted to regional languages, culture, and socio-economic needs.

Conclusions and Policy Recommendations

The accelerating integration of AI is reshaping societies worldwide, bringing both opportunities and risks for governance, human rights, and development. This policy brief has examined the role of civil society in these debates, with particular attention to voices from the Global Majority. The findings highlight the persistent disparities in representation and influence but also underscore civil society's unique capacity to ground AI governance in the lived realities of communities most affected.

Our analysis reveals several key findings:

Civil society engagement is active but constrained. Organizations across the Global Majority are contributing to AI governance through advocacy, research, and participation in policy processes, yet their presence often remains peripheral to decision-making.

Systemic barriers undermine meaningful participation. Chronic underfunding, limited technical expertise, and insufficient staffing capacity restrict the ability of civil society to engage meaningfully in AI governance. Representation within existing mechanisms is still perceived as weak.

Strengthening civil society requires targeted support. Building technical expertise, ensuring sustainable resources, and fostering greater coordination among organizations are essential steps to amplify civil society's role in shaping inclusive AI governance.

Across the 85 civil society organizations that responded to our survey, 51% reported having participated in AI governance initiatives in the past three years. Their most frequent modes of engagement included academic and research collaboration, multistakeholder forums, and government consultations. Despite this activity, civil society's influence was rated only 3.2 out of 5 on average, underscoring that participation does not yet translate into substantial agenda-setting power.

The obstacles to deeper involvement are substantial. 60% of our research respondents identified limited financial resources as a major barrier, 49% pointed to lack of technical expertise, and 42% cited insufficient staff capacity. Additional challenges included poor coordination among civil society actors, the complexity of governance processes, and the geographic concentration of decision-making in the Global North. This combination of barriers translates into a sense of weak representation, with respondents giving an average score of 2.7 out of 5 for how well current AI governance mechanisms reflect their regions and communities. Despite the importance of this role, the voices of civil society organizations remain largely absent in global AI governance frameworks. The consequences of this exclusion are profound, as AI systems may reinforce existing social inequalities or create new forms of discrimination when developed without diverse input.

When asked directly what would most strengthen their role, respondents prioritized three enablers as shown in Figure 5: technical capacity building and training, increased funding for AI-related work, and better coordination among CSOs.

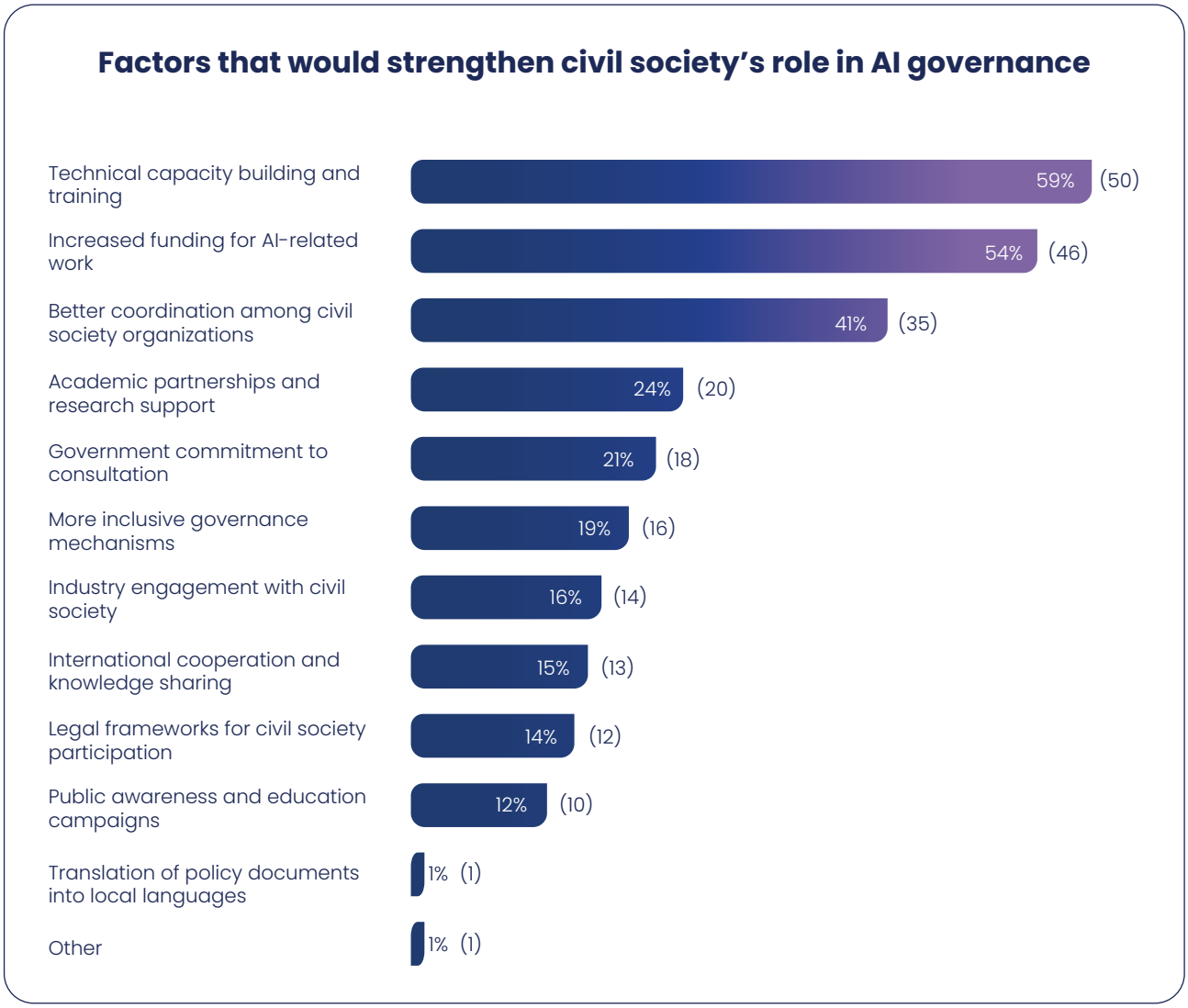

Figure 5 Survey results: Priorities for strengthening civil society's role in AI governance (n=85)

The evidence points to a clear inflection point. Civil society from the Global Majority has proven its commitment and capacity to engage in AI governance, as shown with the several examples cited in section VI of this policy brief, but without immediate steps to remove systemic barriers, its influence will remain marginal at a time when decisions are rapidly shaping the future of AI. What is needed now is coordinated action to expand resources, strengthen expertise, and institutionalize inclusion. Drawing on our analysis, as well as the perspectives of civil society respondents to our survey and those who participated in interviews and focus group discussions, the following recommendations chart concrete pathways to secure the sustainability of civil society organizations and position them as empowered actors in AI governance processes.

Policy Recommendations

For Global Majority Civil Society Actors

Strengthen coalitions and foster networks to build shared agendas and common narratives. Regional and cross-country coalitions can amplify visibility, avoid duplication, and present unified positions in governance fora.

Enhance technical expertise through partnerships. Access training and mentorship by collaborating with universities and research institutes, participate in existing global and regional programs such as Mozilla Fellowships[65], and pool resources across coalitions to share technical experts for audits or impact assessments.

Diversify funding models for sustainability. Explore innovative approaches such as social enterprises that reinvest revenues into advocacy or tapping into local philanthropy ecosystems. Monitor newsletters and portals that aggregate grant opportunities (e.g., Fund for Global Human Rights[66], CIVICUS[67]).

Foster strategic partnerships. Build long-term collaborations with other CSOs, academic institutions, and regulators to co-develop projects, exchange expertise, and maintain continuous dialogue channels.

Link AI to broader rights and justice agendas. Frame AI governance work in connection to existing advocacy on human rights, education, labor, democracy, and equity to mobilize wider constituencies and resonate with donors and policymakers.

For Policymakers from Global Majority nations

Institutionalize meaningful consultation. Create standing advisory councils or multi-stakeholder committees on AI policy that formally include more than one civil society representative.

Ensure open and transparent selection processes for expert groups. Guarantee that appointments to national AI commissions or advisory bodies are made through clear, published criteria and open calls accessible to civil society, with sufficient timeframes for applications.

Establish feedback mechanisms. Publish reports that explain how civil society submissions and recommendations have been considered in shaping national AI strategies, laws or regulations.

Disseminate information on major AI events and organize consultative and multistakeholder workshops to build the countries common positions prior to major global events.

Allocate resources for participation. Dedicate funding lines in national digital or AI strategies to cover civil society participation costs, complemented with technical assistance programs that build civil society capacity.

For Policymakers from major powers

Guarantee meaningful participation of Global Majority civil society in multilateral AI governance. Reserve seats for representatives from Global Majority organizations in international negotiations, advisory bodies, and standard-setting fora, and provide translation, travel support, and accessible formats to enable their full engagement.

Address resource disparities through dedicated funding mechanisms. Establish competitive global funds, fellowships, and South-South exchange grants specifically for Global Majority civil society participation in AI governance, building on models used in climate and human rights fields. Set up a micro-grant program that covers travel, visas, per diem, and connectivity for Global Majority civil society invited to official hearings, expert meetings, or consultation roundtables hosted by your government.

Support equitable funding channels. Provide direct grants to Global Majority organizations and regional networks, rather than routing funds primarily through large Northern intermediaries, to ensure that resources reach actors closest to affected communities.

Share knowledge and resources without imposing models. Make research, technical expertise, and datasets openly available, facilitate training opportunities for Global Majority civil society, and ensure that shared practices respect local contexts rather than promoting one-size-fits-all frameworks.

For International Organizations

Create formal seats for civil society in governance bodies. Reserve voting and advisory positions for Global Majority civil society in working groups, expert panels, and negotiation tracks. Publish open calls with clear criteria, multilingual materials, and application windows of at least 30 days.

Run structured consultations with traceable impact. For each policy or guidance document, hold at least two public consultation rounds across time zones relevant to Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, and Asia, onsite and online each to include those that are still unconnected. Publish a response-to-comments report that shows how inputs from civil society were considered and where they changed the text.

Provide fair access and participation support. Offer travel, visa, per diem, connectivity, and accessibility accommodations for invited civil society participants. Pay honoraria for expert contributions and ensure simultaneous interpretation in widely used languages.

Require transparent selection for expert groups. Use published evaluation rubrics, disclose conflicts of interest, and report the composition of groups by region, gender, discipline, and stakeholder type.

Measure inclusion and publish results. Track indicators such as number of Global Majority civil society participants, share of recommendations adopted, and funding disbursed by region. Release an annual scorecard and adjust programs accordingly.

Research Scope, Approach and Limitations

This policy brief explores the role of civil society in AI governance, focusing on Sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, and South and Southeast Asia. These regions were selected for their growing involvement in digital policy debates and their limited representation in global AI fora. While insights may also apply to other parts of the Global Majority, such as the Middle East, North Africa, and Oceania, these areas were not systematically covered.

The research used an exploratory design combining four methods. A desk review mapped existing literature, policies, and civil society statements. In June 2025, a survey shared across the mentioned regions gathered evidence on perceptions of influence, barriers to participation, and entry points. Between July and August 2025, online focus groups and semi-structured interviews provided qualitative perspectives and helped contextualize survey findings.

Reliance on Globethics' networks for survey distribution and focus group recruitment means findings reflect the perspectives of organizations connected to these networks, which may not fully capture the diversity of civil society in each region. While Globethics' regional centers in Sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, and South Asia enabled grounded engagement, the study was coordinated from the head office in Europe, with interviews and focus groups conducted online. Language constraints may have reduced participation, as English was the primary medium of engagement except for Spanish for the regional focus group and interviews with stakeholders from Latin America and the Caribbean. The literature review drew primarily on English, French, and Spanish sources, limiting inclusion of materials in other local languages. Differences in resources and access to AI technologies between international actors and local civil society organizations may also have shaped responses. The dynamic nature of AI governance means that findings capture a moment in time rather than fixed trends.

While research design techniques were used to mitigate these limitations, the author acknowledge them and hope this policy brief elucidate key dynamics and entry points that can strengthen the inclusiveness of AI governance in the Global Majority.

About the Author

Paola Gálvez Callirgos[68] is a global AI governance and tech policy expert with extensive experience advancing human-centric digital governance across the private sector, government, and multilateral organizations. She holds a Master of Public Policy from the University of Oxford, and her contributions have shaped national and international AI strategies, influencing regulatory frameworks and capacity-building initiatives. Paola is AI Ethics Manager at Globethics and has been appointed as expert member of two distinguished UNESCO networks, AI Ethics Experts Without Borders and Women for Ethical AI. She also serves as Steering Committee Member and trainer at the UN Women AI School and AI Policy Fellow at the Center for AI and Digital Policy. Former experience includes working at Microsoft, the Peruvian Prime Minister's Office, the OECD, among others.

About Globethics

Globethics[69] is an international non-governmental organisation, in consultative status with UN ECOSOC, dedicated to advancing ethical leadership worldwide. Building on 20 years of expertise and global trust, Globethics leverages its international network and strategic Geneva location to support the civil society, international organisations, private and public sectors in developing solutions to ethical dilemmas – moving beyond compliance towards impactful, values-driven governance and action across areas including technology, peacebuilding, higher education, and business.

Firmly aligned with the SDG Agenda – especially SDG 16, the UN Pact for the Future, the Global Digital Compact, and Declaration on Future Generations, Globethics applies agile strategy and management to respond effectively to new needs, resources, and opportunities for ethical transformation.

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1. The author's use of "Global Majority" is a conscious linguistic choice that highlights that people from Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, Asia, and Oceania that represent around 85% of the world's population, underscoring their collective agency. At the same time, in fields like AI governance, this term invites plurality of perspectives and empowerment by acknowledging that these populations have often been excluded from agenda-setting processes, even though they are disproportionately affected by technological developments and are key contributors to alternative models of innovation and governance. UNESCO. 2022. Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence. Paris: UNESCO. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000381137
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