IT for Change

Issue Brief:
AI Governance from the South

Redlines to Baselines

This issue brief synthesizes the key insights emerging from the roundtable 'AI Governance from the South: Redlines to Baselines', convened on 18 February 2026 on the sidelines of the India AI Impact Summit in New Delhi.

Credits

Roundtable

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- Global Digital Justice Forum, together with its member organizations, Data Privacy Brasil, Derechos Digitales, EngageMedia, the ETC Group, IT for Change, Research ICT Africa, and Tech Global Institute
- Ada Lovelace Institute
- Centre for Communication Governance (National Law University, Delhi)
- Planetary AI Network (University of Edinburgh)
- The Future Society

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Introduction

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is increasingly positioned as a core infrastructure for economic growth, public service delivery, and geopolitical influence. However, the contemporary AI ecosystem has been structured through institutional and market logics that tend to concentrate control over resources, including data, compute infrastructure, cloud services, and model design. Decisions about how AI systems are built and deployed are increasingly made in advanced economies, while their social, economic, and ecological consequences are dispersed, often most acutely affecting communities in the Global South.

AI systems are introduced into public services, labor markets, and cultural domains under conditions of dependency, where standards are externally set, infrastructures are privately controlled, and domestic innovation ecosystems are closely intertwined with global platforms. The material footprint of data centers and other large-scale AI systems, including energy and water consumption, land use, and ecological stress, raises deep concerns surrounding the sustainability of AI development. These dynamics implicate not only market outcomes, but also labor processes, resource use, ecological well-being, and the capacity of states to serve public interest.

Despite these wide-ranging political-economic concerns, mainstream approaches to AI governance remain narrowly framed. Shaped largely by institutions and actors located in the Global North, these approaches tend to converge on voluntary codes of conduct, ethical principles, and risk-mitigation frameworks. Regulatory attention is directed primarily toward managing risks arising at the point of deployment, focusing on identifying high-risk applications and articulating prohibitions–framed as 'redlines'–against uses deemed to pose unacceptable levels of risk, such as the deployment of AI for the development of weapons of mass destruction. This use-case-centric framing is reinforced by the growing emphasis on 'AI safety', which limits governance to technical and often speculative risks, at the expense of addressing ongoing structural inequalities. In parallel, the constructed opposition between regulation and innovation has enabled the promotion of ethics-by-design approaches and voluntary standards as substitutes for enforceable law, with commitments to equity, accountability, and economic justice operating only at the level of principles.

These limitations point to the need for a shift in how AI is understood and governed. AI is not merely a product or a set of applications. Instead, it operates relationally both as infrastructure and as a mode of production, with control over infrastructure shaping the organization of production. Its development is dependent upon transnational value chains that span extraction, modification, and control over data labor processes, infrastructure control, and natural resources. Governance must therefore engage with these structural dimensions. Recognizing AI as a socio-technical assemblage that reorganizes socio-political and economic relations shifts the focus of governance from downstream harms to upstream structural conditions. This shift also opens up the possibility of reimagining AI innovation pathways beyond extractive and concentration-driven models toward a regenerative AI paradigm, which centers meaningful and dignified work, diversified economies, pluralistic knowledge societies, and planetary flourishing.

Building on this understanding, the Global Digital Justice Forum, together with its member organizations, Data Privacy Brasil, Derechos Digitales, EngageMedia, the ETC Group, IT for Change, Research ICT Africa, and Tech Global Institute, and other partner institutions, the Ada Lovelace Institute, the Centre for Communication Governance (National Law University Delhi), the Planetary AI Network (University of Edinburgh), and The Future Society, convened the roundtable 'AI Governance from the South: Redlines to Baselines' on 18 February 2026. Held on the sidelines of India AI Impact Summit, the roundtable brought together researchers, civil society actors, and

policy practitioners to identify key structural challenges arising from the large-scale production and deployment of AI systems from a Global South perspective, and to articulate non-negotiable conditions that must underpin AI systems across their lifecycle. In this framing, these conditions are articulated as '**baselines**'—non-negotiable requirements relating to labor, ecological sustainability, public accountability, and equitable value distribution that must apply across the AI value chain. Further, **redlines** cover not only prohibited use-cases, but limits that arise when baseline conditions are breached—they signal points at which AI systems, or the conditions under which they are developed and deployed, become unacceptable.

This issue-brief draws on and builds from the deliberations at the roundtable. It synthesizes the challenges identified across four thematic areas, and consolidates the baselines—and corresponding redlines—advanced by participants. In doing so, it seeks to offer a coherent Global South articulation of the structural conditions that must shape the future trajectory of AI development.

Concerning AI Markets

The word 'bubble' has gone hand in hand with AI in recent discourse. The eyewatering sums being poured into Artificial Intelligence is based on the premise that productivity gains from this technological revolution will soon be realized – a staggering $202.3 billion has been invested in the AI sector in 2025 including infrastructure, foundation labs, and applications.[1] Yet the conditions in which these investments and development are embedded simply represent a circular flow of capital among giant corporations.[2] The compact between Big Tech firms (Microsoft, Apple, Google, Meta, Amazon) and emerging AI companies (OpenAI, Anthropic, Nvidia) has led to a consolidation of power and control over this technology in a handful of corporations, foreclosing pathways to dynamic and competitive innovation ecosystems.[3] The weak enforcement of existing antitrust and competition regulation, compounded by the limitations of the ex-post (after the fact) approach, has allowed a deeply unequal and oligopolistic market structure to become entrenched.

Monopolistic Structures in AI Markets

The concentration of critical resources, capital and foundational digital infrastructure is observable across different components of the AI innovation stack, enabled by a range of anti-competitive conduct by large firms.

- **Concentration of computational resources:** The development of state-of-the-art AI models requires massive computational infrastructure, with training costs for large language models reaching into the millions of dollars. This includes both hardware (semiconductors, chip) as well as software (coding platforms, data management systems).[4]

[1] Teare, G. (2025, December 16). *6 charts that show the big AI funding trends of 2025*. Crunchbase News. https://news.crunchbase.com/ai/big-funding-trends-charts-eoy-2025/

[2] Becher, B. (2026). *Circular financing is quietly fueling the AI boom. Here's why that could be a problem*. Built In. https://builtin.com/articles/ai-circular-financing

[3] Corrigan, J. (2025, May 29). *AI monopolies are coming. Now's the time to stop them*. Tech Policy Press. https://www.techpolicy.press/ai-monopolies-are-coming-nows-the-time-to-stop-them/

[4] Vipra, J., & West, S. M. (2023, September 27). Computational power and AI. AI Now Institute. https://ainowinstitute.org/publications/compute-and-ai

Given the astronomical costs of computational infrastructure, large technology firms benefit, as they are able to incur these huge sums in capital expenditure. The result is a market where only well-funded entities can participate in cutting-edge AI development, creating a de facto oligopoly.

- **Data extractivism leading to data monopolies**: Large-scale AI models require vast amounts of data for training, and major tech companies have accumulated unprecedented data through their dominant market positions in search, social media, e-commerce, and cloud services. This has led to the creation of data monopolies, in which the critical resource fuelling AI is hoarded by a select few firms. These data advantages create network effects that are difficult for competitors to overcome, as new entrants lack the historical data accumulation that gives established players their competitive edge.

- **Brain drain from public interest institutions**: AI talent is similarly concentrated, with top researchers and engineers being drawn to the highest salaries offered for prestigious positions at major tech companies. This brain drain from academia, non-profits, and smaller organizations further entrenches the power imbalance, as knowledge and expertise become concentrated in corporate, rather than public or academic, institutions.[5] While countries such as India are often framed as being 'rich' in AI talent, much of this talent is absorbed into global corporate value chains rather than strengthening domestic public or institutional capacity. Today, over two-thirds of AI researchers work in the private sector, up from less than half in 2001.[6]

- **Unbridled anti-competitive practices:** Dominant platforms use control over data, ranking algorithms, recommendation systems, and default settings to favor their own AI products and services. For instance, Google's AI Overviews has been consciously directing users to engage with AI-generated content, rather than showing them the sites of publishers.[7] Big Tech firms and their AI counterparts demonstrate a pattern of acquiring promising AI start-ups and small companies, thus precluding competitors from even emerging and consolidating innovation capacity within existing power structures. AI firms secure preferential or exclusive deals with data providers, cloud platforms, chip manufacturers, or major enterprise clients, limiting rivals' access to critical inputs and embedding their models as the default choice.

[5] Burn-Murdoch, J., & O'Connor, S. (2026, March 19). *The 'great sucking sound' of AI brain drain*. Financial Times. https://www.ft.com/content/11f193a2-d878-4552-b59c-6b782747b2fa

[6] Burn-Murdoch, J., & O'Connor, S. (2026, March 19). *The 'great sucking sound' of AI brain drain*. Financial Times. https://www.ft.com/content/11f193a2-d878-4552-b59c-6b782747b2fa

[7] Singh, M. (2025, October 6). *The antitrust case against AI overviews*. Harvard Journal of Law & Technology Digest. https://jolt.law.harvard.edu/digest/the-antitrust-case-against-ai-overviews

For example, until recently, Microsoft was the exclusive cloud provider for OpenAI through Azure, investing over $13 billion for a significant stake and access to models.[8] AI firms also 'bundle' their products (such as Nvidia chips coming pre-bundled with its CUDA software) creating further lock-in effects and expanding market share.[9]

Consequences for Public Innovation

An oligopolistic market structure does not favor dynamism nor competitiveness.[10] Instead, it creates a situation of rentier capitalism, backed by massive investments, so as to ensure profits and benefits accrue to the few, rather than the many.

- **Rentier capitalism and market capture**: While several countries are investing heavily in promoting local AI start-ups and initiatives, the fundamental flaws in the market (eg: Nvidia controlling AI-specialized chips and Apple, Google, and Microsoft controlling data and platform infrastructures) ensure that these start-ups are deeply dependent on monopolistic corporations, who exercise significant control over future innovation trajectories by creating a culture of dependence.[11] This is enabled by the fact that this monopolistic control is exerted over what has become a de facto infrastructure, essential for all facets of AI development.

- **Foreclosure of sovereign digital development:** Digital sovereignty has often been offered as a response to the growing problem of dependence on US Big Tech corporations. However, the underlying structure of AI markets forecloses any meaningful pathways for building domestic AI and digital capabilities, due to the fencing off of critical AI infrastructures at a scale that is impossible for most governments to replicate.[12] Crucially, AI monopolies deepen state dependence on privately controlled digital infrastructure, undermining the ability of states to build local technological capacity, shape procurement conditionalities, and retain meaningful regulatory space.

- **Flight of public value:** Dominance by a few firms steers AI development towards the fixed goal of profit, rather than public value maximization. In the absence of a political economy framing that examines the role of the state in breaking up tech monopolies, considers social and redistributive justice, and investigates alternative technological futures, the dividends of the AI revolution are set to benefit the few, and not the public.

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[8] Microsoft. (2025, January 21). *Microsoft and OpenAI evolve partnership to drive the next phase of AI*. https://blogs.microsoft.com/blog/2025/01/21/microsoft-and-openai-evolve-partnership-to-drive-the-next-phase-of-ai/

; Wiggers, K. (2025, January 21). *Microsoft is no longer OpenAI's exclusive cloud provider*. TechCrunch. https://techcrunch.com/2025/01/21/microsoft-is-no-longer-openais-exclusive-cloud-provider/

[9] TechAIHub. (2026, March 16). *California files antitrust lawsuit against NVIDIA over AI chip monopoly allegations*. https://techaihub.net/en/artificial-intelligence/california-files-antitrust-lawsuit-against-nvidia-over-ai-chip-monopoly-allegations

[10] Cirillo, V., Durand, C., Guarascio, D., Rabinovich, J., & Rikap, C. (2025). *Power, knowledge and technology in a finite world*. *Review of Political Economy*, *37*(4). https://doi.org/10.1080/09538259.2025.2524265

[11] Silva, M. (2025, July 7). *The real winners of the AI race*. SOMO. https://www.somo.nl/the-real-winners-of-the-ai-race/

[12] Samdub, M. T. (2026, January 23). *Why digital public infrastructures? Infrastructural promises in India, Brazil and Europe*. Open Future. https://openfuture.eu/publication/why-digital-public-infrastructures/

Baselines and Redlines

In this context, the group on AI Markets worked on outlining how the flagrantly unfair and illegal trade practices of these hegemonic corporations can be reined in, and fair, inclusive and competitive innovation ecosystems can be nurtured.

1. Plural and public-value-oriented innovation pathways

Baselines:

- AI markets must be governed to enable diverse innovation pathways, and support for public, academic, and small enterprise-led models.
- Public policy and investment must actively support plural, contextually-grounded, and socially-beneficial AI ecosystems.

Redlines:

- Market structures that entrench concentration of technological capabilities, and capital within a small number of firms must not be permitted.

2. Equitable access to critical AI inputs

Baselines:

- Access to essential inputs for AI development–including computational infrastructure, large-scale datasets, and skilled talent–must be governed to ensure equitable and non-discriminatory access across firms, public institutions, and researchers.
- Structural barriers arising from cost, scale, or prior accumulation of data must be actively addressed through regulatory and policy interventions.

Redlines:

- Exclusive or preferential control over critical AI inputs that prevents meaningful participation in AI development or forecloses entry of new actors must not be permitted.

3. Limits on anti-competitive conduct

Baselines:

- AI markets must be subject to enforceable ex-ante competition regulation that addresses gatekeeping behavior, anti-competitive acquisitions, and lock-in practices across the AI stack.
- Regulatory frameworks must prevent the vertical consolidation of control across data, compute, cloud infrastructure, and downstream applications.

Redlines:

- Practices such as self-preferencing, killer acquisitions, exclusive dealing, bundling, and lock-in arrangements that extend or entrench market dominance must not be permitted.

4. Public control of foundational digital infrastructure

Baselines:

- Foundational digital infrastructures underpinning AI systems, including Digital Public Infrastructures (DPI) and the data ecosystems that sustain them, must be governed in the public interest.
- Openness and interoperability of digital infrastructures must be accompanied by safeguards for public value creation.
- States must retain the ability to shape access, terms of use, and governance of such infrastructures.

Redlines:

- Exclusive private control over essential digital infrastructures and data that undermines public accountability and human rights must not be permitted.

5. Local capacity-building and technological sovereignty

Baselines:

- AI development, deployment, and procurement must be structured to enable states, particularly in the Global South, to build domestic technological capabilities across data, compute, and model development.
- Public procurement and industrial policy must prioritize long-term capacity-building over dependency on dominant firms.

Redlines:

- AI adoption pathways that entrench structural dependency on a small number of firms or external infrastructures, without enabling domestic capability development, must not be pursued.

Concerning Labor and Livelihoods

Labor in the contemporary AI economy is distributed across transnational value chains that span mineral extraction, data labeling, content moderation, and downstream AI-deployment contexts. This distribution makes it difficult to trace how labor is organized across value chains and how value is produced and appropriated at different stages.

However, mainstream governance approaches (reflected in instruments such as the EU AI Act) focus on deployment-stage harms affecting AI users and in some cases, harms affecting workers subjected to AI systems—such as bias in automated hiring or workplace surveillance. They do not systematically account for labor conditions across the lifecycle of AI systems, and particularly, the harms faced by workers involved in the production of AI systems.

Efforts to introduce such lifecycle perspectives have also faced resistance—for instance, proposals

during South Africa's G20 presidency to include labor and mineral extraction in AI governance,[13] were ultimately diluted following objections from advanced economies.

Organization of Labor in AI Value Chains

Labor within the AI economy is organized through a set of mutually reinforcing structural arrangements and institutional practices that shape working conditions, value distribution, and worker agency.

- **Fragmented and opaque value chains:** Labor is distributed across multiple jurisdictions and mediated through complex subcontracting arrangements including numerous intermediaries, boutique outsourcing firms and online crowdworking platforms, making it difficult to trace accountability or enforce labor standards across the AI lifecycle.[14]
- **Blurring of employment classifications:** Firms and platforms rarely provide clear categorization of data workers facilitating the evasion of labor protections, social security frameworks and regulatory oversight. As a result, data workers are often positioned in ambiguous arrangements, falling between recognized categories of employment and platform-based freelance work.
- **Expansion and institutional embedding of data work:** In economies like India, large segments of the legacy Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) industry are extending into data work, encompassing tasks such as data labelling, annotation and model training.[15] This expansion is actively supported through policy frameworks and programs—often framed as "AI for social good"— which incentivize small firms and startups to organize AI-related data work as a means of absorbing surplus labor in strained labor markets. At the same time, data-related tasks are increasingly embedded within public service delivery, with frontline health workers (such as ASHA workers in India) taking on data enumeration functions that feed data into public-private digital systems.[16]
- **Weakening of labor institutions:** The way work is organized across AI value chains is testing the capacity and capability of existing labor institutions. Trade unions struggle to represent such workers within existing frameworks, and public systems for labor mediation and dispute resolution are often absent or inadequate. These limitations are compounded by the systematic exclusion of worker representatives from AI governance discourses, the weakening of labor inspectorates, and overreliance on executive-led or non-binding regulatory approaches with limited enforceability.

[13] G20 South Africa Presidency. (n.d.). *Task force 3 concept note: Artificial intelligence, data governance and innovation for sustainable development*. https://www.g20.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/TASK-FORCE-3-CONCEPT-NOTE.pdf

[14] Anwar, M. A. (2025, June 16). *Value chains of AI: Data training firms, platforms, and workers* (pp. 198-213). In A. Larsson & A. Hatzigeorgiou (Eds.), *The future of labour: How AI, technological disruption and practice will change the way we work*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003391333-15

[15] Kalia, S. (2025, October 10). *Living in a ghost world: These data workers make the internet possible*.BehanBox.https://behanbox.com/2025/10/10/living-in-a-ghost-world-these-data-workers-make-the-internet-possible/

[16] Goswami, P. (2025, November 19). *From care labor to data labor: India's door-to-door health activists*. Data & Society.https://datasociety.net/points/from-care-labor-to-data-labor-indias-door-to-door-health-activist/

Moreover, employers actively prevent workers from organizing or associating through contractual restrictions (such as non-disclosure clauses) or informal control mechanisms.[17]

- **Global labor arbitrage and absence of value distribution mechanisms:** Lead firms systematically outsource labor-intensive segments of AI production through layers of subcontracting to less visible intermediaries in the Global South, where lower wages and weaker labor protections shape the conditions of work. These production networks remain highly flexible, allowing firms to relocate operations in response to regulatory pressure, labor organising or public scrutiny. For instance, following litigation and public exposure of harmful working conditions in content moderation operations in Kenya, Meta shifted operations to Ghana, while maintaining similar labor practices.[18] Further, these arrangements are not accompanied by mechanisms for value redistribution, contributing to a neocolonial labor regime where wealth is transferred at scale from workers and communities in the Global South to actors in the Global North.

- **Alignment of skilling systems with short-term corporate demand:** National skilling programmes are frequently aligned with short-term corporate demand rather than long-term workforce preparedness, resulting in training pathways that produce narrowly specialized, non-transferable skills. This locks workers into low-value segments of AI production, limits occupational mobility and reinforces their positioning within subordinate roles in global labor markets.

Consequences for Labor Conditions

- **Income precarity and sustained psychological strain:** The organization of this work combines insecure and low-paid labor with the absence of basic labor guarantees. Content moderation and data annotation require workers to engage with large volumes of graphic and violent material on a daily basis, making dissociation between their working selves and lives outside work necessary for sustaining this labor.[19] The harms from such exposure are magnified in the absence of psychosocial support systems or other occupational safety safeguards.

- **Deskilling and limited occupational mobility:** While data work arrangements are positioned as opportunities for advancement in the digital economy, many forms of this work are characterized by deskilling and lack of mobility. Tasks described as "data analytics" often consist of repetitive annotation work, such as tagging images, transcribing audio or classifying datasets, with limited scope for skill development.

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[17] Bhutani Vij, A. (2023). *Women workers behind the AI revolution: Production and reproduction work on data annotation platforms*. University of Toronto.https://utoronto.scholaris.ca/server/api/core/bitstreams/3685297e-9bb6-4d97-837f-bca733bc51d0/content

[18] Jackson, J. (2025, April 27). *Social media moderators' lives are getting worse. Big Tech needs to take responsibility*. The Bureau of Investigative Journalism. https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/stories/2025-04-27/social-media-moderators-lives-are-getting-worse.-big-tech-needs-to-take-responsibility

[19] Behal, A. (2026, February 5). *'In the end, you feel blank': India's female workers watching hours of abusive content to train AI*. The Guardian. https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2026/feb/05/in-the-end-you-feel-blank-indias-female-workers-watching-hours-of-abusive-content-to-train-ai

In many cases, formally trained workers including engineers are deployed in these roles, revealing patterns of deskilling and downward occupational mobility.[20]

- **Appropriation of labor-derived value and hollowing out of local productivity:** In creative industries, generative AI systems routinely extract and reproduce artistic styles, performances and outputs without compensation, raising concerns surrounding large-scale appropriation and loss of income for artists and other creative workers. Similar dynamics are observable in professional domains, where knowledge outputs such as lectures and educational materials are used as training data without consent or compensation. Over time, these practices contribute to the hollowing out of local productive potential, as value is extracted from existing knowledge systems without reinvestments in the communities that sustain them.
- **Uneven distribution of harms and intensification of gendered labor:** Environmental pressures associated with data centres and other AI infrastructures reconfigure access to land, water, and energy, intensifying unpaid labor required for household provisioning.[21] These burdens are disproportionately absorbed by women, who take on additional responsibilities such as water collection and resource management, often without recognition or compensation. The effects are intergenerational, often resulting in the withdrawal of girls from schooling to sustain household labor. Moreover, digital work is frequently taken up by women as supplementary income alongside existing care responsibilities, reinforcing gendered divisions of labor.[22] These dynamics intersect with existing hierarchies of caste, class, and migration status, affecting who is exposed to these precarious and harmful forms of work. For instance, Syrian refugees in Lebanon, lacking work permits, are pushed into low-paid clickwork,[23] which potentially contributes to AI systems deployed in automated warfare in their home country.

Baselines and Redlines

In this context, the group on Labor and Livelihoods sought to articulate the structural baselines and corresponding redlines that must govern labor across the AI value chain.

1. Labor governance and transparency in the entire AI lifecycle

Baselines:

- Labor conditions must be governed and disclosed across the full AI value chain, with traceability of labor sourcing, subcontracting, and working conditions.

[20] Gurumurthy, A., Zainab, K., & Sanjay, S. (2021). *The macro frames of microwork: A study of Indian women workers on AMT in the post-pandemic moment*. IT for Change. https://itforchange.net/sites/default/files/2392/The%20Macro%20Frames%20of%20Micro%20Work%202021.pdf

[21] Tironi, M., & Albornoz, C. (2025). *Divergent futures in a damaged territory: The rise of data centers and water conflicts in Santiago de Chile. Journal of Urban Technology*. https://doi.org/10.1080/10630732.2025.2546784

[22] Gurumurthy, A., Zainab, K., & Sanjay, S. (2021). *The macro frames of microwork: A study of Indian women workers on AMT in the post-pandemic moment*. IT for Change. https://itforchange.net/sites/default/files/2392/The%20Macro%20Frames%20of%20Micro%20Work%202021.pdf

[23] al-Hammada, R. (2024). *"If I had another job, I would not accept data annotation tasks": How Syrian refugees in Lebanon train AI*. In M. Miceli, A. Dinika, K. Kauffman, C. Salim Wagner, & L. Sachenbacher (Eds.), *Data workers' inquiry*. https://data-workers.org/roukaya/

Redlines:

- AI systems lacking verifiable, system-level disclosure of labor conditions along the value chain should not be permitted for deployment.

2. Universal labor protection irrespective of classification

Baselines:

- All workers engaged in AI production must be covered by enforceable labor rights – including minimum wages, social security, occupational safety, and collective bargaining – regardless of contractual status, with effective mechanisms to ensure their implementation in practice.

Redlines:

- Contractual classification must not be used to deny workers labor protections.

3. Joint accountability across value chains

Baselines:

- Lead firms, intermediaries, and subcontractors must bear joint and several liability for violation of labor protections across the AI value chain.

Redlines:

- Lead firms cannot externalize all responsibility for labor protections to intermediaries.

4. Occupational health and safety

Baselines:

- Labor standards must include enforceable protections against physical and psychological harm, including exposure limits, monitoring, provision of psychological care and the right to refuse harmful tasks without loss of livelihood. Violations of these standards must be subject to clear legal liability, with enforceable penalties for firms and employers.

Redlines:

- AI systems dependent on exposure of workers to extreme or traumatic content without enforceable safeguards must not be permitted.

5. Worker participation and collective rights

Baselines:

- Workers must have guaranteed rights to organize and bargain collectively through recognized institutions.
- Workers and their representatives must be mandatorily consulted in decision-making on AI deployment and governance at the national, sub-national, sectoral, and firm levels.

Redlines:

- Labor arrangements or management practices that restrict or prevent worker organising or representation (directly or indirectly) must be prohibited, and subject to clear legal liability and enforceable penalties.
- AI systems must not be integrated into workplaces and industries without meaningful consultation with worker representatives.

6. Public interest orientation of skilling and labor transition

Baselines:

- Public investment in skilling and AI deployment must be aligned with long-term industrial strategy to support transferable capabilities, labor mobility and safeguards against displacement.
- Firms must mandatorily assess and report labor displacement impacts of AI systems prior to deployment.

Redlines:

- Public funds must not be invested in skilling programmes that reinforce dependency on short-term, corporate demand-driven roles.
- AI deployment resulting in or projected to result in large-scale labor displacement should not be permitted without prior assessment and mitigation, such as implementation of specialized social protection measures.

7. Equitable value distribution across jurisdictions

Baselines:

- AI governance must incorporate mechanisms for fair distribution of value across jurisdictions contributing labor, including through reforms in international trade and taxation.

Redlines:

- AI systems that depend on offshore labor without compliance with minimum labor standards and without mechanisms for fair value distribution should not be permitted.

Concerning Climate and Ecology

AI systems are embedded within a resource-intensive industrial infrastructure that includes data centres, energy systems, water use and extractive supply chains. This material basis of AI remains obscured, with AI governance approaches focused primarily on the computational layer. As a result, ecological impacts are neither systematically measured nor regulated across the AI lifecycle.

Structural Drivers of the Ecological Impacts of AI Systems

The ecological footprint of AI systems must be understood as a part of a broader regime of digital extractivism, where land, water, energy, and minerals are mobilized at scale to sustain digital infrastructures. These impacts are actively produced through corporate practices and policy frameworks that shape how resources are appropriated across the AI lifecycle.

- **Opacity and selective disclosure:** There is an absence of reliable and disaggregated data on the ecological footprint of AI systems. Corporate disclosures do not enable attribution of energy or water use to particular AI systems or activities, and ESG filings by listed companies fail to distinguish AI-related infrastructure from other business operations.[24] Further, the absence of contextual benchmarks and assessment methodologies, particularly for tropical and water-stressed regions, makes sustainability claims difficult to verify.

- **Lack of differentiation between AI systems:** Large-language models (LLMs) and generative AI systems, such as GPT-4 and image generation models like Stable Diffusion, are significantly more resource-intensive than smaller or context-specific systems.[25] Similarly, hyperscale data centres, such as those operated by Amazon, Microsoft and Google, consume significantly more resources than others.[26] However, governance frameworks fail to differentiate between systems based on their ecological footprint, enabling the rapid proliferation of resource-intensive systems with limited scrutiny.

- **Competition over finite ecological resources:** States in the Global South promote data centre development and digital industrialization as engines of growth, often without integrating ecological considerations into planning frameworks or aligning with climate commitments. AI infrastructure is embedded within systems of resource allocation, where data centres compete with agriculture, manufacturing, and household consumption for finite water, energy, and land. This reallocation often prioritizes industrial and corporate uses, while increasing pressure on public utilities. Moreover, decisions regarding land, water, and energy allocation for AI infrastructure are made without transparent disclosures to or meaningful participation of affected communities and local governments, limiting local control over resource use.

- **Territorial concentration of ecological burdens**: The ecological impacts of AI infrastructures are spatially concentrated. Data centres, renewable energy installations, and mineral extraction sites are frequently located in regions where resources are available at lower costs. Governments also actively facilitate land acquisition for these activities through various regulatory relaxations. This produces localized ecological burdens, including land displacement, water stress, and ecological degradation, while the benefits of AI systems accrue to firms located elsewhere.

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[24] de Vries-Gao, A. (2026). *The carbon and water footprints of data centers and what this could mean for artificial intelligence*. *Joule, 7*(1), 101430. https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2666389925002788

[25] Caravaca, F., Cuevas, Á., & Cuevas, R. (2025). *From prompts to power: Measuring the energy footprint of LLM inference*. arXiv. https://arxiv.org/abs/2511.05597

[26] Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory. (2025, January 15). *Berkeley Lab report evaluates increase in electricity demand from data centers*. https://newscenter.lbl.gov/2025/01/15/berkeley-lab-report-evaluates-increase-in-electricity-demand-from-data-centers/; Uptime Institute. (2024, March 28). *Uptime Institute global data center survey results 2024*.https://uptimeinstitute.com/resources/research-and-reports/uptime-institute-global-data-center-survey-results-2024

- **Financialization and greenwashing of infrastructure development:** Data centre expansion is increasingly shaped by speculative investment logics, with infrastructure built as financial assets rather than in response to socially determined demand. This contributes to overbuild and intensified resource use. Moreover, corporate investments in renewable energy for data centres are used to position AI infrastructure as sustainable (for example, "green data centres"), while obscuring total resource consumption, lifecycle emissions, and critical mineral extraction.

Consequences for Ecology

These structural features and associated practices generate interrelated ecological and social consequences that are spatially uneven, cumulatively intensifying, and often externalized onto vulnerable communities:

- **Unregulated expansion of resource-intensive systems:** Current approaches, reflected in frameworks such as the EU AI Act, rely on voluntary disclosures and efficiency gains rather than defining absolute thresholds for resource use. Without such limits grounded in local ecological conditions, AI development continues to exceed environmental capacities. Further, methodologies of "real cost" accounting remain absent from public investment decisions and corporate valuations.

- **Weak and fragmented governance:** Regulatory approaches that incorporate environmental considerations focus narrowly on operational efficiency, without addressing water use, material extraction, or lifecycle impacts. In many jurisdictions, including India, sustainability is articulated at the level of principles without translation into enforceable standards.

- **Redistribution of ecological burdens and displacement**: Rising utility costs owing to AI infrastructure expansion are transferred to households, effectively socialising the costs of firm-driven investment and resource use.[27] Parallelly, the concentration of infrastructure and extraction in particular geographies produces land displacement, water stress, and loss of traditional livelihoods in already vulnerable regions.

[27] Lane, C., & Kane, J. W. (2026, March 13). *Confronting and addressing rising energy bills linked to data centers*. Brookings Institution. https://www.brookings.edu/articles/confronting-and-addressing-rising-energy-bills-linked-to-data-centers/

- **Escalation of conflict and risks to environmental defenders:** Expansion of AI-related extraction and infrastructure is intensifying contestation, including legal challenges and community mobilization around land, water and resource use. In several contexts, affected communities are invoking environmental rights frameworks to assert collective claims over information, participation, and redress—for instance, legal challenges over the use of Indigenous land for hyperscale data centre development in Chile,[28] and the mobilization of regional instruments such as the Escazú Agreement.[29] These forms of resistance are accompanied by growing risks to environmental defenders, including disinformation and online abuse,[30] underscoring the need to bridge environmental and digital justice movements.

Baselines and Redlines

In this context, the group on climate and ecology attempted to situate AI systems as resource-intensive infrastructures embedded within ecological systems, and to articulate structural baselines and corresponding redlines towards aligning AI development with ecological limits.

1. Lifecycle assessment and accountability for ecological impacts of AI

Baselines:

- Ecological impacts of AI systems must be assessed, disclosed and mitigated across the full AI lifecycle, including extraction, infrastructure, model development and deployment.
- Ecological considerations must be embedded as a core regulatory dimension within AI governance frameworks.

Redlines:

- AI systems that have not undergone lifecycle ecological impact assessments should not be permitted for development or deployment.

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[28] *Municipality of Cerrillos (Google Data Center) v. Evaluation Commission of the Metropolitan Region*, Second Environmental Court (Chile), Decision of September 26, 2024. https://www.climatecasechart.com/document/municipality-of-cerrillos-google-data-center-v-evaluation-commission-of-the-metropolitan-region_7d3a; Mendoza, D. (2024, February 29). *Chile puts brakes on Google data center over environmental concerns*. Semafor. https://www.semafor.com/article/02/28/2024/chile-google-data-center-gets-permit-partially-revoked;

Urquieta, C., & Dib, D. (2024, May 31). *Chile: Tech giants build dozens of data centers while activists raise environmental concerns*. Business & Human Rights Resource Centre.https://www.business-humanrights.org/en/latest-news/chile-tech-giants-build-dozens-of-data-centers-in-chile-while-activist-raise-environmental-concerns/

[29] Montgomery, B. (2025, November 10). *Datacenters meet resistance over environmental concerns as AI boom spreads in Latin America*. The Guardian. https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2025/nov/10/data-centers-latin-america; Vallejos, R. (2025, November). *Data centers go to court in Latin America*. Data Center Boom. https://datacenterboom.net/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/Data-centers-go-to-court-in-Latin-America-1-1.pdf

[30] Global Witness. (2025, July 16). *Toxic platforms, broken planet: How online abuse of land and environmental defenders harms climate action*. https://www.globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/digital-threats/toxic-platforms-broken-planet/

2. Differential regulation based on ecological footprint

Baselines:

- AI systems and infrastructures must be classified on the basis of resource intensity, including energy, water, land, and material use, with regulatory thresholds and approval processes aligned accordingly.
- Public investment must prioritize low-resource and context-appropriate AI systems.

Redlines:

- AI systems or infrastructures exceeding defined ecological thresholds must not be permitted.

3. Transparency and verifiability of ecological impacts

Baselines:

- Energy, water, and material use attributable to AI systems and infrastructures must be assessed at a system level and publicly disclosed.
- The methodologies used for ecological impact assessment must be publicly accessible, and must include long-term and region-specific impacts.
- Disclosures of ecological impact assessment must be subject to independent auditing.

Redlines:

- AI systems and infrastructures that lack verifiable, disaggregated ecological disclosures must not be permitted.
- Sustainability claims based on incomplete or non-transparent methodologies should not be accepted by regulators.

4. Equitable resource allocation and participatory governance

Baselines:

- Decisions regarding land, water, and energy allocation for AI infrastructure must be preceded by mandatory ex-ante assessment of resource allocation and territorial impacts, including impacts on public utilities, essential services, and local livelihoods.
- Affected communities and local governments must be guaranteed meaningful participation in decision-making through institutional channels, alongside rights to environmental information and public consultation.

Redlines:

- AI infrastructure that diverts critical resources from essential local uses or impose disproportionate costs on local communities without demonstrable public purpose should not be approved.

- AI infrastructure projects must not proceed without prior free, prior and informed consent of affected communities, pursuant to meaningful public consultation.

5. Binding ecological limits and real cost accounting

Baselines:

- Affected communities and local governments must be guaranteed meaningful participation in decision-making, alongside rights to environmental information and public consultation.
- Lifecycle "real cost" accounting must be integrated into public investment decisions and corporate valuation,
- Established environmental law principles, including the precautionary principle, polluter pays and common-but-differentiated-responsibility, should be extended to AI infrastructure projects.

Redlines:

- Governance frameworks must not rely solely on voluntary or principles-based sustainability commitments.
- AI infrastructures that cannot demonstrate ecological viability and compliance with defined ecological limits must not be permitted.

6. Regulation of cross-border ecological impacts

Baselines:

- AI supply chains and infrastructure siting must be governed through frameworks that address cross-border ecological impacts, including energy use and critical mineral extraction.
- Enforceable safeguards must guarantee fair benefit-sharing for affected communities and protect commons-based rights over land, water, and natural resources.

Concerning Democracy

Artificial Intelligence threatens to spur democratic regression across the board, and accelerate the already well-known threats of digital technologies to democratic integrity. The distortion of political advertising through surveillance capitalism in the 2016 American elections and the proliferation of misinformation and deepfakes during election cycles (primarily targeted at marginalized groups and political opposition) demonstrate the risks to electoral processes.[31] Beyond this, we also see the increasing use of AI technologies in the expansion of the surveillance state and suppression of dissent, through the use of FRT and predictive policing.[32]

[31] Raina, P. (2024, August 6). Year of elections: Lessons from India's fight against AI-generated misinformation. World Economic Forum. https://www.weforum.org/stories/2024/08/deepfakes-india-tackling-ai-generated-misinformation-elections/

[32] Tang, J., & Hiebert, K. V. (2025, May 22). *The promises and perils of predictive policing*. Centre for International Governance Innovation. https://www.cigionline.org/articles/the-promises-and-perils-of-predictive-policing/

Most concerningly, military use of these hitherto civilian technologies is becoming increasingly normalized. Investigations have found Big Tech and other digital corporations (eg: Airbnb)[33] complicit in apartheid, genocide and war crimes in occupied Palestine,[34] while OpenAI just concluded an agreement with the Pentagon to provide support in the ongoing aggression against Iran.[35] While these examples demonstrate the stripping away of individual civil and political liberties, these concern broader societal and collective rights, as we allow AI to circumscribe the boundaries of what legitimate elections, speech and dissent comprises.

Structural Risks to Democracy

Democracy as a value is now at risk of being eroded by AI. These risks manifest across critical pillars of democracy.

- **Compromised electoral integrity:** AI is transforming the scale, precision, and increasing the plausibility of electoral interference. Generative AI enables deepfakes, synthetic media, and hyper-targeted political messaging at scale. Importantly, this also has the effect of fragmenting the public sphere, where political discourse instead takes place in echo chambers, precluding contestable and public democratic debate.[36] This can be weaponized against both the electorate and political opponents, as well as create a breeding ground for foreign interference in elections. The result is a profoundly asymmetric and manipulated electoral environment, where democratic choice is no longer meaningfully free or informed, but engineered and distorted by digital technologies.

- **Expanding surveillance and shrinking dissent:** AI-enabled surveillance infrastructures are heralding the dawn of a deeply anti-democratic monitoring regime, enabled through a compact between the state and corporate behemoths. Through facial recognition, biometric tracking, and predictive analytics, both states and corporations can exercise continuous, granular control over populations, often without consent or oversight.[37] This creates a powerful chilling effect, where individuals self-censor, withdraw from public life, and avoid dissent due to fear of retaliation or profiling. These systems enable pre-emptive suppression of protest and dissent, undermining the very foundations of democratic participation. Central to the AI economy is the harvesting of data, which includes both personal and non-personal data.

[33] Hunter-Green, Z., Aguilar García, C., Leach, A., Townsend, M., Duncan, P., & Shah, P. (2025, February 27). *Seized, settled, let: How Airbnb and Booking.com help Israelis make money from stolen Palestinian land*. The Guardian. https://www.theguardian.com/world/ng-interactive/2025/feb/27/seized-settled-let-how-airbnb-and-bookingcom-help-israelis-make-money-from-stolen-palestinian-land

[34] Marsi, F. (2025, July 1). *UN report lists companies complicit in Israel's 'genocide': Who are they?* Al Jazeera. https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/7/1/un-report-lists-companies-complicit-in-israels-genocide-who-are-they

[35] OpenAI. (2026, February 28). *Our agreement with the Department of War*. https://openai.com/index/our-agreement-with-the-department-of-war/

[36] Podimata, C., & Cen, S. H. (2025, November 21). *AI is transforming politics, much like social media did*. Time. https://time.com/7334897/how-ai-is-reshaping-politics/

[37] Raval, P. (2025, May 8). *AI tools are powering the expansion of state control in India*. Center for the Study of Organized Hate. https://www.csohate.org/2025/05/08/artificial-intelligence-state-control-in-india/

However, the micro-targeting infrastructure enabling the skewering of democratic ideals is built on the commodification of sensitive personal data, allowing digital intelligence to be generated on political beliefs, emotional vulnerabilities, and cognitive biases. The increasing alignment between tech corporations and repressive regimes heightens the threat posed by these data extractive practices.[38]

- **Degradation of the information ecosystem:** Research has already highlighted how the design of dominant social media platforms amplifies extremist content and misinformation, thus diluting the information integrity of the public sphere. The advent of generative AI in particular, has unleashed a flood of synthetic and fake content on these platforms (commonly known as "AI slop"), creating a deeply polluted and unstable information ecosystem. Malicious actors can now saturate public discourse with misleading, contradictory, and manipulative narratives, eroding any shared basis for truth or collective understanding and creating a systemic breakdown of epistemic integrity.[39]

- **Military use of civilian technologies:** AI has no legitimate place in warfare. Its use normalizes distancing humans from the moral weight of violence, escalating risks to global peace and stability.[40] Autonomous weapons systems risk removing accountability, which erodes transparency and public oversight, concentrating power in military and technological elites. AI-driven surveillance and targeting tools can easily be turned inward, threatening civil liberties and dissent. Rather than enhancing security, military use of AI accelerates arms races and destabilizes global order.

- Lack of algorithmic accountability: The proprietary ML algorithms that are used to shape political discourse today operate within controlled and opaque enclosures, shielding corporations from meaningful scrutiny while conferring on them unprecedented power over information flows. The regulatory wild west in which AI is currently operating comes with an absence of measures (eg: independent social audits, algorithmic transparency laws and institutional oversight) that could provide a glimmer of accountability, thus contributing to the dangerous governance vacuum.

- **Manipulative platform design and gamified environments:** The relentless loop of data extraction through user engagement means that dominant platform models are designed to maximize engagement by privileging content that is sensational, hyperbolic, or emotionally charged (especially those that targeted historically marginalized groups), creating the systemic conditions for AI-enabled misinformation and deepfakes to be amplified. Platform architecture thus actively structures and engenders democratic harms, by embedding manipulated content within the logic of digital capitalism.

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[38] Jones, M. O. (2023, September 27). *Big tech's partnership with authoritarianism*. Middle East Research and Information Project. https://www.merip.org/2023/09/big-techs-partnership-with-authoritarianism/

[39] Patnaik, P. (2026, April 3). *Algorithms of falsehood: The challenges of governing AI-generated disinformation*. Observer Research Foundation. https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/algorithms-of-falsehood-the-challenges-of-governing-ai-generated-disinformation

[40] International Committee of the Red Cross. (2025, September 26). *UN Security Council: We cannot let AI be deployed on the battlefield without oversight and regulation* [Statement]. https://www.icrc.org/en/statement/we-cannot-let-AI-be-deployed-on-battlefield-without-oversight-and-regulation

Consequences for Democratic Values

What is at stake therefore, is not simply the integrity of our democratic institutions, but also the fundamental value-laden pillars of a democratic polity – representation, accountability and trust. This leads to the displacement of the rule of law and democratic backsliding:

- **Representation:** AI is fundamentally reshaping the question of voice – it determines who is visible, heard and represented in public discourse. Critically, it also sets boundaries on the contestability of public-interest decisions, which are increasingly mediated through algorithms. This creates a deeply fragmented and unequal politics of representation, where fault lines are exploited to reinforce systemic inequalities.
- **Accountability:** The liability question looms large over modern AI systems, as governments increasingly reckon with who is responsible for AI-enabled harms. The structural accountability vacuum allows both corporations and governments to deflect blame on to "algorithms", where contestability, redressal and reparation become ancillary rather than fundamental to democratic processes.
- **Public Trust:** The most critical democratic value underpinning the functioning of institutions and infrastructures is under siege – the value of trust. As tech corporations race to consolidate political power (including by reneging on promises, eg: on military use of AI), and the winner-takes-all paradigm we are living in, a deep legitimacy crisis is brewing, where citizens lose faith not only in political actors and institutions, but in the credibility and functioning of democracy itself.

Baselines and Redlines

In this context, the group on Democracy worked to identify the normative framework that should underpin digital governance efforts.

1. Integrity of electoral processes

Baselines:

- Electoral processes must be protected through enforceable transparency in political communication, including disclosure of targeting, funding, and provenance of content.
- Regulatory frameworks must ensure that digital infrastructures support informed, contestable, and inclusive democratic debate.

Redlines:

- AI-enabled deepfakes, synthetic media, or hyper-targeted political messaging designed to mislead, suppress participation, or influence electoral outcomes must not be permitted.

2. Limits on surveillance and militarization

Baselines:

- The deployment of AI systems in surveillance and policing must be subject to strict necessity, proportionality, and independent oversight.

Redlines:

- AI-enabled systems for mass or indiscriminate surveillance, including facial recognition and predictive policing, must not be permitted.
- Civilian AI systems must not be repurposed for surveillance or military uses.
- AI systems must not be deployed in autonomous weapons systems or in applications that remove meaningful human accountability in the use of force.

3. Algorithmic accountability and platform design

Baselines:

- Algorithmic systems shaping public discourse or democratic processes must be subject to transparency, explainability, and independent audit.
- Institutional mechanisms must ensure contestability, redress, and clear attribution of responsibility for harms arising from algorithmic amplification and platform design.

Redlines:

- Algorithmic systems that systematically amplify misinformation, disinformation, or manipulative content must not be permitted.
- Platform architectures that embed or incentivize the amplification of harmful or polarising content must not be permitted.

4. Democratic governance of data and platform power

Baselines:

- The collection and use of personal data must be governed to prevent political profiling and manipulation.
- Governance frameworks must ensure that control over information flows does not become concentrated in a small number of corporate actors.

Redlines:

- Sensitive personal data must not be extracted or used for political profiling or behavioural manipulation.