GLOBAL DEVELOPMENT NETWORK (GDN)
Global Development Conference (GDC 2027) · CONCEPT NOTE · WORKING THEME

GOVERNING AI WITH THE WORLD MAJORITY

Consensus, Evidence, Capacity and a Shared Research Agenda

THE PATH	STARTS	ARRIVES
From projects to a shared AI research agenda, over 12 months	GDC 2026, Tokyo, 15 and 16 December	GDC 2027, last quarter of 2027

01 RATIONALE

While Artificial Intelligence (AI) is rapidly reshaping economies, public institutions and research systems worldwide, it has become evident that Global South constraints are structurally different from those of the Global North. AI adoption is trailing behind the Global North; computational capacity and access to cutting-edge models remain concentrated there; and greater linguistic diversity across the Global South affects the quality and accessibility of AI models built primarily for Northern-language contexts. These are symptoms of the same underlying divide in complementary capital (compute infrastructure, paywalled scientific databases, institutional capacity and international research networks) that has long constrained Southern participation in global knowledge production.

Yet the Global South's vision for AI is more ambitious than closing an access gap: it aims to deploy AI to advance inclusive economic development and improve public services and is already leading this agenda through AI Impact Summits that GDN is responding to directly. **Governing AI with the world majority means bringing the countries where most of the world's people live into decisions on AI, alongside the governments and companies that develop it, not in place of them.**

Several major concerns recur in this agenda across many countries of the Global South. One is whether AI can help close learning gaps, within countries and between them, at a time when many education systems are being reformed. Another is whether AI can work in the languages people speak and learn in, which bears on schooling, public services and research alike. A third is the quality of local data, on which reliable AI depends in every sector, from health to agriculture and education. GDC 2027 places these within the wider question of how AI is governed, and of who takes part in governing it.

GDN already contributes to closing major evidence gaps in digital transformation. Its country-level research in Bangladesh, Benin, Ghana, Chile, Sierra Leone, Indonesia and Ethiopia provides policymakers with insights on the socioeconomic impacts of digital public infrastructure systems; its work on the economics of DPI has brought together researchers, policymakers and practitioners to develop a wider research agenda; and its Open Transaction Networks programme is combining economic theory, empirical research and local research capacity to examine how digital markets function and distribute value.

GDN's AI strategy will be launched in Tokyo, Japan during the 2026 Global Development Conference. It is the next stage of an existing research and partnership ecosystem, which spans research partnerships, policy engagement and programme delivery across the Global South.

GDN'S AI STRATEGY AT A GLANCE

To be launched at GDC 2026, Tokyo

AIM	Evidence on how AI is changing economies and societies in low- and middle-income countries, who gains and who loses, and how countries can steer it.
FIVE FOCAL AREAS	**A · Jobs, firms and the path to growth.** For example, following firms and workers in business-process outsourcing in several countries at once. **B · AI in practice, from applications to outcomes.** For example, following an AI triage tool in clinics or adaptive tutoring in schools beyond the pilot. **C · Who gains from AI, and who is left behind.** For example, extending inclusivity measurement from digital ID and payments to AI-mediated public services. **D · The institutions and market structures behind AI.** For example, how regulators with limited capacity oversee AI in financial services, gig platforms or hiring. **E · AI and the making of knowledge.** For example, testing with GDN grantees how AI tools change the speed and quality of social science research.
HOW WE WORK	A Theory Unit of GDN economists and senior Southern social scientists builds shared frameworks and methods. Research teams, selected competitively and mentored throughout, adapt and test them in their own countries. Methods that work become reusable toolkits.
APPROACH	Comparable studies across countries, drawing on surveys, administrative data and experiments, with policymakers involved from choosing the questions to reading the results.
WHAT PARTNERS GET	Comparable evidence, lasting local AI research capacity and stronger links between research and policymaking.

02

PROGRESSION FROM GDC 2026 TO GDC 2027

The proposed progression at a glance

GDC 2026

IDENTIFY

Use the Co-Creation Labs to develop practical project concepts, build partnerships and surface research priorities and questions about AI and development.

BETWEEN THE TWO CONFERENCES

DEVELOP AND LEARN

Follow selected projects, document what happens in practice to draw empirical evidence, build research methods and launch initial studies that address wider evidence gaps.

GDC 2027

CONSOLIDATE AND BUILD FURTHER

Review results and lessons, identify what merits further research or scale-up, and establish a shared Global South-led AI research agenda.

GDC 2026, Tokyo: launch the AI Strategy

GDN's Annual Conference will kick off a year-long effort to develop GDN's work on AI. The Co-Creation Labs will bring together project hosts, technical and research specialists, practitioners and potential funders to address one concrete obstacle facing each project, several of which will relate to AI. Each table will develop a two-page scale-up concept, identifying possible solutions, partners and next steps.

Together, these concepts will form the Tokyo Portfolio. It will be a starting point for selecting projects for follow-up, developing partnerships and identifying research questions that emerge from implementation.

Between GDC 2026 and GDC 2027: Develop projects and build the evidence base

The year between the two conferences will have two connected strands of work.

First, GDN will follow up on selected concepts from the Tokyo Portfolio, working with project hosts and prospective partners to refine designs, identify the technical and institutional conditions for implementation, and pursue opportunities for testing and scale-up. Progress will be documented, including implementation challenges, results and lessons that may be useful to other settings.

Second, GDN will use this experience, alongside consultations with researchers, policymakers and partners, to develop its AI research programme. This will include identifying questions that recur across projects and countries, assessing where existing evidence is insufficient, and developing common research methods where these can support meaningful comparison. These questions will inform the Theory Unit's work and the development of initial country studies.

GDC 2027 (last quarter of 2027): consolidate the portfolio and set the longer-term agenda

Planned for the last quarter of 2027, GDC will bring together the researchers, project teams, policymakers, technical partners and funders involved in GDN's emerging AI programme.

The conference will take stock of progress since Tokyo, including the development and implementation of selected projects, lessons from early experience, partnerships established and progress in developing the AI research programme. Where available, it will present initial findings from research activities, while identifying the questions that require further investigation.

GDC 2027 will also provide a forum to agree on the next phase of GDN's work: which research questions deserve priority, where comparative studies could add value, what methods and local research capacity need to be developed, and which projects or approaches merit further testing or scale-up.

Drawing on GDN's international research network and its role as a neutral convenor, the conference will connect research institutions across Africa, Asia and Latin America with policymakers, practitioners and funders. The ambition is to establish a shared, Global South-led direction for AI research and development, with concrete partnerships and opportunities for support to carry the work forward.

PROVISIONAL THEMES FOR GDC 2027

The conference could be organised around four themes. Each draws on several of the five focal areas of GDN's AI strategy, so that communities working on education, languages, research systems and public policy can each find their priorities within one programme.



Governing AI in the economy and the state.

How AI is changing jobs and firms, how governments with limited capacity can regulate it and use it in public services, and how they can respond to concentrated market power.

It draws mainly on areas A, C and D of the AI strategy.



AI and learning, from early childhood to university.

Whether and how AI can help narrow learning gaps along the whole education chain, rather than one cycle at a time, and how education systems can use AI to evaluate their own progress continuously.

It draws mainly on areas B and C of the AI strategy.



Languages and local data as public infrastructure.

How AI can work in the languages people speak and learn in, what it would take to build and govern language data as a shared resource, and what this means for schools, public services and research, and how data ecosystems need to evolve to build locally relevant AI.

It draws mainly on areas B, C and D of the AI strategy.



Research systems and knowledge sovereignty.

Whether AI widens opportunities for Southern researchers and universities, or deepens their dependence on tools, data and publication systems controlled elsewhere.

It draws mainly on area E of the AI strategy.

These themes are a working proposal and will be refined with researchers, policymakers and partners over the coming year. Each is open to partners who wish to support or co-design it, whether through a dedicated session at the conference or through research on that theme in the year leading up to it.

BY GDC 2027, THE AIM IS TO HAVE

- ✓ Progress on selected portfolio projects, including what did not work
- ✓ A draft research agenda, discussed and agreed upon during the conference
- ✓ The Theory Unit's first frameworks, and the first country teams at work
- ✓ Funding and partnership commitments for the next phase

The progression is deliberate

1. The portfolio is launched in Tokyo. The Co-Creation Labs are one of the routes through which research priorities and partnerships for 2027 are being identified.
2. The intervening 12 months will be used to develop projects and turn interest into commitments. GDN is already in conversation with funders, research institutions, companies and agencies interested in shaping this agenda. This period also allows GDN to identify more research opportunities and refine its priorities on AI research.
3. GDC 2027 will take stock of the results, mobilise support for scale-up and establish a shared research agenda for the years ahead. Further details, including confirmed venue and dates, will follow.