

## CSBAG at the 2025 World Bank/IMF Spring Meetings: **Closing the AI gap**



A meeting session at the 2025 World Bank/IMF Spring Meetings in Washington, D.C. Photo: IMF

**As the EU pioneers the concept of sovereign AI and Estonia works to preserve its linguistic heritage through AI, advocates argue that low-income nations deserve the same opportunity to shape their digital futures.**

### **Bridging the AI divide between global North and South**

A striking statistic emerged at the recent World Bank-IMF Spring Meetings: while fixed-line telephony took 76 years to reach 100 million users, ChatGPT achieved this milestone in just two months, and DeepSeek, a new AI tool, in a mere seven days. This exponential growth underscores humanity's swift transition into an AI era, bringing both immense promise and potential peril, particularly for the Global South

A pressing question dominated discussions at the World Bank-IMF Spring Meetings: Will AI exacerbate global inequality or serve as a democratizing force for development? The stakes are particularly high for low-income countries, where the outcome could significantly shape their economic futures.

### **The AI divide, A new frontier of inequality**

A stark reality has emerged: a mere 1% of data centers and ChatGPT traffic originate in low-income countries. As middle-income nations strive to close the gap with their high-income counterparts, countries like Uganda risk being trapped in a "digital low-income trap." The issue goes beyond infrastructure, with closed AI models controlled by tech giants demanding resources and expertise out of reach for local startups and universities.

World Bank official Christine emphasized the need for collective action, stating, "AI governance can't be left to private companies alone." However, open-source AI offers a glimmer of hope. The performance gap between closed and open models narrowed by 75% last year, while computing costs dropped by 99%. This development enables researchers and cooperatives in countries like Kenya and Brazil to access tools previously exclusive to tech giants."

### **Open-source AI: A double-edged sword**

While open-source AI holds promise for democratizing innovation, experts warn of potential risks. These include misuse, such as fueling misinformation or cyberattacks, government surveillance, and perpetuating biases in training data. However, the alternative – relying on closed systems could concentrate power in the hands of a few tech giants.

Joe Berker of the Mozilla Foundation argued that open-source AI can be a game-changer, allowing smaller players to "leapfrog" ahead. A notable example is Estonia's collaboration with Meta to preserve its endangered language using AI, showcasing the potential of open-source models to drive innovation and inclusion

### **Governance: The Missing Link**

A leading digital policy expert, David, has emphasized the need for a collaborative approach to AI governance, drawing parallels with internet regulation. "Like the early web, AI demands collaboration between governments, technologists, and civil society," he said.

To ensure responsible AI development, experts stress the importance of human-in-the-loop oversight to guarantee accountability throughout the AI lifecycle. They also advocate for aligning with global standards, such as the UN's Global Digital Compact and OECD's AI principles. Furthermore, experts recommend funding open-source hubs in low-income countries to develop AI solutions tailored to regional needs, such as drought prediction in the Sahel region. This approach aims to promote transparency, accountability, and inclusivity in AI development.

### **A Call to Action**

The World Bank and IMF are being called upon to take a proactive role in promoting inclusive AI development. Key recommendations include investing in infrastructure, such as expanding data centers and broadband access in underserved regions to bridge the digital divide.

Additionally, they should prioritize funding for ethical open-source projects, particularly AI tools that address pressing issues like healthcare, education, and climate resilience. It's also crucial to amplify marginalized voices by integrating African civil society organizations and startups into global AI policymaking forums to ensure diverse perspectives.

The AI revolution presents an opportunity to break away from the extractive legacy of colonialism. By governing open-source models inclusively, it's possible to empower communities rather than displacing them. As the World Bank-IMF Spring Meetings come to a close, one key takeaway emerges: the choice in AI development isn't simply between open or closed models, but between promoting equity or risking widespread exclusion.