



ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE, POWER, AND GLOBAL INEQUALITY: THE UK–AFRICA DEVELOPMENT DIVIDE

**Anya Adebayo Anya¹, Akinwale Victor Ishola², Kelechi Adura Anya³,
and Eke Kehinde Anya⁴.**

¹Department of Political Science, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife.

Email: adeanya@summalogix.com

²Department of Peace, Security and Humanitarian Studies, University of Ibadan.

Email: victorakinwale2@gmail.com

³Computer science, Landmark University Omu-Aran, Nigeria.

Email: anyakelechiadura@gmail.com

⁴Scottish Power Headquarters, Glasgow.

Email: eanya@spenergynetworks.co.uk

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ABSTRACT: *The paper examines the notion of artificial intelligence (AI) as a strategic resource that determines the current influences in the world's power relations, with examples of the development gap between the United Kingdom and African nations. It questions the reproduction or adaptation of historical patterns of inequality with the use of AI, its governance, and its deployment and evaluates the consequences of inequalities in technological capacity, regulatory structures, and institutional power on the outcomes of development. The analysis, through a comparative perspective, reveals how the UK has consolidated structural power through policy, research and innovations in comparison with the limited bargaining power, capacity and inability to resist dependency and data colonialism in Africa. The paper promotes a normative standpoint in support of fair AI regulation, capacity building, and inclusive co-production of technology and knowledge, suggesting avenues to decrease structural injustices of global AI ecosystems. Findings reveal that AI will continue to foster the current world's inequalities unless a strategic approach is taken to it, yet it can be used as an instrument towards sustainable and context-specific development.*

KEYWORDS: Artificial Intelligence, Power, and Global Inequality.



INTRODUCTION

Artificial intelligence has rapidly emerged as a signature of modern world affairs, going far beyond its technical uses to become a strategic asset that defines power relations between states and regions. More and more, the ability to create, implement, and regulate AI systems defines economic competitiveness, national security, institutional efficiency, and geopolitical power. Power over sensitive AI-related resources or assets such as data infrastructures, computational resources, human capital, and regulation systems has thus become a core focal point of power accumulation and exercise within the global system. In this respect, AI is not simply an instrument of innovation but a structural predeterminer of world hierarchy.

The historical pattern of inequality, colonialism, uneven development, and asymmetrical integration into the global economy – long-standing inequality – is being restructured in the wake of the rapid spread of artificial intelligence. As developed economies adopt AI in government structures, production and security systems, much of the developing world is bound by inadequate digital infrastructure, regulation, and the ability to access funds and human talent. These differences threaten to transform AI into a new tool of reproducing and enhancing the inequalities that existed before, as technological benefits multiply old economic and political asymmetries. Concurrently, advocates of AI-driven development point to the growth of emerging technologies as a potential to speed up growth and improve service delivery and leapfrog in less industrialised settings, which are still debated and ongoing issues.

These dynamics are better illuminated in the comparison of the United Kingdom and African contexts. The UK is relatively advantaged, having an established AI ecosystem, research potential, and increasing authority in global AI governance standards. However, African countries are marked by a wide but uneven distribution of AI use, which is influenced by structural factors, national development priorities, and foreign reliance. Such an asymmetry enables critically analysing the distribution and exercise of power, capacity, and influence in the AI age and how these distributions affect developmental outcomes. The UK-Africa comparison has thus stepped out of the abstract discourse of global inequality by basing its analysis on real, tangible institutional, economic, and political comparisons.

Although the role of AI in international policy and the scholarly discourse has become increasingly significant, it has been met with limited critical analysis concerning the manner in which artificial intelligence is remaking global power politics and reinforcing or sustaining the development gap between developed and developing worlds. While most of the literature has been centred on interrogating issues on technology innovation, particularly in developed economies and the developmental prospects of AI, little attention has been paid to examining the power imbalances that surround AI governance, access, and benefits across different regions. This disjuncture obscures how AI can act as a novel vector of power where dominance among technologies favours more technologically powerful players and limits the agency of less resourced territories.

This paper therefore seeks to fill this gap by analysing artificial intelligence as a field of power and inequality in the global political economy through the UK-Africa relationship through a comparative framework. The central aim of the paper is to examine the power relations between the United Kingdom and African contexts on the basis of how AI is redefining global inequality. Specifically, the paper seeks to:

- (i) Examine AI as a strategic resource that structures contemporary global power relations;



(ii) Analyse how historical patterns of inequality are being reproduced or transformed through AI adoption and governance; and

(iii) Assess the implications of UK–Africa asymmetries in technological capacity, regulation, and influence for development outcomes.

AI and the Political Economy of Power

The modern system of world capitalism is highly integrated with the role of artificial intelligence (Weatherby & Justie, 2022), where it operates not as an inert technological solution but as a primary source of accumulating capital and concentrating the market. In the AI economy, data is extracted, processed, and commodified to create value, making data a key resource in the industry just as capital and labour have been in past stages of capitalist development. Companies and governments with access to superior computational infrastructure, private algorithms, and scaled datasets can transform technological power into economic power, strengthening hierarchies in the world political economy. In that regard, AI can also hasten the monopolisation tendencies, prioritising other actors who have the resources to invest in infrastructures and innovation ecosystems that are both high in cost and resource-intensive in their research.

The extraction of data is the core of AI-controlled capitalism and a highly important process where power is concentrated in regional inequalities (Bhimavarapu, 2025). The ability to gather, store, and commercialise data is extremely asymmetrical, and sophisticated economies and multinational technology corporations have a disproportionate control over worldwide data flows (Chartron & Broudoux, 2015). In most developing areas, such as most of Africa, data are created in the local area, but are captured, processed, and valorised elsewhere with no corresponding economic reward or regulatory controls. This process has prompted theorists to describe modern data relations as a kind of data or digital colonialism whereby information sources are ripped out of peripheral areas and incorporated into value chains controlled by dominant forces in the Global North.

In addition to financial mining, Artificial intelligence consolidates power through the domination of technological frameworks (Murdock, 2025). The AI systems are based on computational capacity, cloud services, and digital platforms, although the availability of these infrastructures is very uneven. States and companies that own such infrastructure can dictate the conditions of developing and implementing AI technologies in the world. Likewise, the capacity to influence technical standards, ethical standards, and regulatory frameworks exerts a lot of structural power since these norms dictate whose values, risks, and priorities are entrenched in AI systems. It is a type of power that is less obvious but still persistent because standards developed by technologically advanced actors tend to become distributed all over the world even in situations when they are not quite appropriate to local developmental conditions.

The political economy of AI, therefore, demonstrates how traditional material power forms have been replaced by more diffuse and embedded structural and ideational forms of power. The ability to control the data, infrastructure, and standards enables the powerful players to construct markets, forms of governance, and knowledge generation in a manner that favours them. In the case of countries like the United Kingdom, it would mean the ability to contribute to the regulation of AI worldwide and gain the economic and strategic advantages of AI-driven development. In contrast, most African countries are functioning in limited technological ecosystems, making them less able to challenge the leading models or claim the right to



establish their own paths of AI-based development. The interpretation of AI in terms of political economy is thus critical to the mechanism of technological dominance, production and reproduction and how this impacts the continuation of global inequality.

The UK: AI Leadership, Institutional Capacity, and Global Influence

The United Kingdom is strategically well-positioned in the world of artificial intelligence, with robust institutional capacity, thriving research infrastructure, and a more assertive position in AI regulation. The UK has made AI one of its key elements of economic and national policies over the past decade, with the growing technologies being incorporated into more grand strategies in terms of productivity, competitiveness, and international impact. This placement indicates an understanding of AI as not just a technological resource but a source of structural power in the world political economy in the long term.

The creation of a comparatively well-developed and integrated AI ecosystem is at the heart of the AI leadership in the UK. The features of this ecosystem are a strong digital infrastructure, the presence of technology companies and startups, and the availability of global capital markets (Kazim et al., 2021). The UK also has invested heavily in regulatory and institutional structures meant to regulate the development and implementation of AI. The UK has attempted to create a balance between innovation and accountability through the introduction of risk-based regulatory strategies, specialised agencies, and ethical guidelines. Such governance mechanisms increase the institutional credibility and allow the UK to exercise regulatory influence outside its jurisdiction, especially through international organisation and policy consultation and participation.

The ability to engage in the international standard-setting and the discussion of ethical issues also underlies the role of the UK in developing the global AI norms (Kim & Park, 2025). The UK contributes to the debate on the safety of AI, its transparency, and responsibility, which would allow setting the boundaries of understanding and regulating AI technologies across the board. This normative power is a type of structural power since the models of regulation created in developed economies tend to be standards of other countries, despite the disparities in institutional capacities or development levels. Consequently, UK can influence not only the functioning of AI on the national level, but also the conceptualisation and operationalisation of AI on the global one.

Another characteristic of the UK AI ecosystem is its strong level of interaction between state policy, private capital, and academic research (Cath et al., 2018). Universities and research centres are instrumental in making gains in the production of AI knowledge, which is often financed by the state and collaborative relationships with the business world. Meanwhile, technology companies and venture capital participants can convert the outputs of the research into commercial products, further supporting the UK in the world value chains in AI. The state policy is a coordinating factor in this arrangement, which aligns the incentives of innovation, regulatory frameworks, and national priorities. This three-way interaction allows the UK to remain innovative and concentrate economic and normative power in the field of AI.

Collectively, the leadership of AI in the UK indicates the ability of technologically developed countries to translate institutional power, capital, and knowledge generation into international power. The case of the UK shows how AI can be used to form a power mechanism and allow states to influence markets, norms of governance, and development paths outside their territories. It is a strong contrast to the situations when these institutional and economic



foundations are weaker, which highlights the asymmetries that shape the UK-Africa development gap in the era of artificial intelligence.

Africa: AI Adoption, Marginalization, and Developmental Constraints

There is a very uneven adoption of artificial intelligence across the African contexts, as it mirrors the larger trends of infrastructural inequality, institutional abilities, and economic growth (Kuzmina et al., 2024). While some countries and cities have already started adopting AI in the areas of finance, telecommunications, health, and state management, these innovations are accompanied by numerous constraints in digital infrastructure, access to electricity, access to data, and technical expertise. Consequently, the adoption of AI on the continent is disjointed and usually limited to pilot projects or externally funded projects instead of internal, deep system changes. This disparity highlights the structural limitations informing the Africa-AI interaction in the world political economy.

The exclusion of African actors from the AI system is directly connected with the reliance on external technologies, platforms, and capital (Muldoon & Wu, 2023). Most AI systems used in African settings are built, owned, and controlled by foreign companies, and the locals are not much involved in design, regulation, or value harvesting. Such dynamism exacerbates the trends of technological dependence whereby African states and institutions can be consumers and not producers of AI technologies. African countries lack powerful domestic innovation-based ecosystems, which makes it very challenging to establish control over AI-driven developmental trends, which restrict their capacity to establish fair conditions of interaction within the global AI markets.

One of the most relevant threats in the African AI environment is data colonialism. Digital platforms, mobile technologies, and public services create vast amounts of data all over the continent (Ilo, 2025), but the data ownership and monetisation are often externalised. The information gathered on African people is usually processed and built into the global AI systems without a commensurate benefit to the locals, which is highly questionable in terms of extraction, consent and responsibility. This inequitable data connection reflects previous types of resource extraction and repositions data as a new exploitative location in the capitalistic system of modernity. Devoid of effective data governance models, African states are at the mercy of informational resources, which are central to the development of AI.

The lack of bargaining power in the international AI markets is another limitation that does not allow Africa to influence the technological directions and rules of governing (Frimpong, 2025). Small market size, regulatory fragmentation, and limited influence of the African actors in international standard-setting bodies are structural factors that lower the potential of the African actors to challenge dominant AI models. As a result, AI norms and ethics generated in high-tech economies have frequently been imported en masse, even though these do not match local developmental interests and institutional realities. This relationship supports the marginal status of African states in international AI regulation and restricts the possibility of context-specific and inclusive innovation.

These forces demonstrate that the relationships that Africa will have with artificial intelligence are not determined by the technological promise as much as structural inequalities. Inequalities in the adoption, dependency and marginalisation make AI a tool to recreate, instead of reducing, the current development limitations. Realising these issues is crucial to the evaluation of whether AI can be used to help develop the UK-Africa relationship or whether it will widen



the divide between the UK and Africa and concentrate power among the already powerful players.

Comparative Analysis: Power Asymmetries and Developmental Outcomes

Comparative analysis of the process of artificial intelligence in the context of the United Kingdom and Africa shows strong asymmetries in the capacity to govern, economic pay-offs, and social pay-offs, highlighting how AI is a tool to organise and support global inequalities. These asymmetries are not just technological but are also all institutional, economic and political formations that, on the one hand, determine the way AI is produced, implemented and regulated across territories.

From the aspects of the governance capacity, the UK enjoys relatively well-established regulatory bodies and aligned policy frameworks and has the opportunity to actively participate in the international processes of AI governance. These capabilities allow the UK to address risks, direct innovation and shape international norms in a manner that supports the interests of the nation. Comparatively, most African states are engaged in a disjointed regulatory space, typified by a lack of technical capacity, ineffective enforcement systems and reliance on foreign-created models of governance. This gap limits the capacity of Africa to become proactive in the governance of AI and strengthen the position of reactive response where policies are taken instead of being written.

The extent of these power imbalances is further explained by the economic returns of AI deployment. In the UK, AI is helping to stimulate productivity and capital and the growth of high-value industries, which reinforces the country's role in global AI value chains. The UK is likely to gain disproportionate economic gains out of the AI innovation due to the concentration of the private capital, research institutions, and skilled labour. Economic benefits of AI, however, in the African contexts are indirect and unevenly distributed. In the fields of AI implementation, the process of value extraction is often carried out via foreign-based platforms and companies, which restrain local accumulation and strengthen dependence on external forces.

Social effects of AI are also very varied in the two contexts. The adoption of AI by the UK government in the area of public service, labour markets and security systems is followed by accountability, public discussion and institutional supervision mechanisms, although not perfectly. These mechanisms reduce part of the social risks that semi-automation, surveillance, and algorithmic bias might create. On the contrary, African societies tend to bear the social impacts of AI-like exclusion, exploitation of data, and labour displacement with greater likelihood but without the same protections or the means of participation in governance. Such a disproportion only increases weaknesses and increases the likelihood of AI-based systems making current social disparities more permanent.

These parallel forces indicate that in its current form, artificial intelligence is more of a driver of reproducing inequality around the world rather than a means of redressing it. Although AI has a theoretical potential of aiding development and leapfrogging, its current implementation is mostly pre-conditioned by power asymmetries in favour of technologically developed states. Unless there are conscious efforts to fill gaps in governance, redistribute gains, and enhance local capacity, AI is bound to increase the development gap between the UK and Africa, rather than bridging it. This conclusion supports the central aim of the paper, which is that AI is not



to be perceived and regulated as a technological innovation only but as a political and economic one that is embedded in unequal global systems.

Position and Policy Implications

This article pushes the argument that artificial intelligence should be conceptualised as a strategic asset that defines and supports the modern world-power relations. Not only is its implementation, regulation, and administration not a neutral technical issue, but it also mirrors and reproduces structural asymmetries between technologically superior states and resource-constrained regions. The case of AI leadership in the UK shows that it is through concentrated ability, institutional structures, and epistemic influence that economic, political, and social power can be concentrated, and it is also how African countries are being limited in holding on to the chance of using AI to develop themselves and to contribute their voices to the global decision-making process.

In that sense, AI governance necessitates intentional interaction with equity, capacity, and developmental relevance issues. African states should be equipped to engage meaningfully in AI standard-setting, regulating and producing knowledge, which will decrease the dependency and delineate the risks of structural exclusion. In the case of the UK, ethical and productive engagement entails the development of inclusive partnerships that focus on capacity building, creation of technologies and acknowledgements of the specific governance and developmental challenges that African settings experience.

Moreover, the UK-Africa lens of comparison demonstrates that the asymmetry of technological capability, regulatory systems, and institutional power has significant consequences in development performances. The solutions to these asymmetries are to invest in Africa strategically in terms of infrastructure and skills and institutional capacity and to provide systems of shared governance, knowledge exchange, and joint innovation. It is only through the combination of these considerations that AI can be used as a means of fair development and not as a mechanism of repeating historical trends of inequality.

Overall, the stance proposed in this paper is that the regulation and implementation of AI should openly interact with structural issues of power and equity. An intentional emphasis on capacity building, co-production, and inclusive governance offers a way of changing the UK-Africa AI relationship into one that facilitates sustainable and fair developmental outcomes and makes AI a driver to transform, but not to strengthen, existing global inequalities.

CONCLUSION

The paper has explored the concept of artificial intelligence as a strategic resource that defines modern relations of power across the globe and discussed how the historical patterns of inequality are being replicated or reshaped with the adoption of AI and its governance. Comparative evaluation of the cases of the United Kingdom and the African ones indicates that there are considerable asymmetries in terms of technological capability, regulation, and institutional power, which have far-reaching consequences on developmental outcomes.

The discussion reveals that the well-organised AI ecosystem in the UK concentrates structural power by means of coordinated policy, research and innovation policies and that the African



states are faced with systemic constraints which restrict them in the use of AI in endogenous development. Such asymmetries are threatening to recreate the current inequalities unless there is a conscious effort to empower the African states in setting the standards, participating in regulation and also co-producing technology.

When developing a normative stance, this paper asserts that equitable AI governance requires the redistribution of structural power, dedicated capacity building, and inclusive mechanisms for the co-production and exchange of knowledge. Through these dimensions, AI will be in a better position to leave its status as an instrument of structural dominance to become a resource that enables sustainable, just, and contextually relevant development outcomes.

Altogether, the UK-Africa comparative lens highlights not only the difficulties but also the opportunities concerning global AI governance as well. Policies and practices that view AI as a place of power, equity, and development are critical in influencing policy changes towards minimising and not strengthening global inequalities that technology can bring about.

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