



Custom Built / *Feito Sob Medida*:

Reforming Tech & Democracy Programs for the Global Majority

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Acknowledgements

This study would not have been possible without the support of Luminate, the Carnegie Corporation of New York, and Open Society Foundations. The authors would also like to thank the participants of Global Majority Knowledge Exchange workshops hosted by the Pontifical Catholic University de Rio de Janeiro in November 2023 and by UMass Amherst in April 2023 and April 2024.

Conversations with Dinita Putri, Melanie Hui, Meetali Jain, Nicole Curato, and Thales Lelo helped inform our analysis and recommendations. We would also like to thank colleagues for helpful feedback on a draft presented at the Social Science Research Council’s workshop on “Platforms, Politics, and Elections” in August 2024. We are grateful to our GloTech colleagues for reviewing this report.

Report design is by Yeni Kim.

GloTech Lab’s visual identity is by Kaye Aranzanso.

Portuguese and Filipino translations are forthcoming.

CITATION

Ong, J.C., Lanuza, J.M., Jackson, D., Alves, M., Grohmann, R., Recuero, R., and C. Tavares (2024). Custom Built / *Feito Sob Medida*: Reforming Tech & Democracy Programs for the Global Majority. Global Technology for Social Justice Lab at UMass Amherst. Available URL: <https://glotechlab.net>.

Executive Summary

Despite the proliferation of international coalitions and “expert panels” committing to safeguard the information environment and strengthen democracy, Global Majority civil society leaders remain peripheral in influencing global agenda and determining national programs. The global aid industrial complex reinforces patterns of “knowledge extractivism” ([Lehuede, 2024](#)) by often enlisting local civil society to replicate Global North program priorities and participate in unjust collaborative arrangements.

While Global Majority civil society leaders generally welcome donor support for tech accountability and disinformation debunking, they express frustration about how Global North funders and collaborators often constrain bottom-up knowledge and creative production, deepen inter-organizational competition, and fail to consider the legal, ethical, and security risks faced by frontline workers.

Drawing from a yearlong Global Majority Knowledge Exchange project consisting of workshops and interviews with 107 tech accountability advocates, journalists, and researchers representing 13 countries and several international nongovernmental organizations, this study discusses the roots and consequences of **“the illusion of inclusion” in the tech and democracy space**. While Global Majority civil society has implemented a high quantity of tech and democracy interventions in recent years, the qualities of these interventions are often top-down, tools-and-tech-first, and seasonal, while also disconnected from the needs of minoritized communities in these countries.

This study argues that designing a tech justice program agenda that would truly center the Global Majority should begin with the critique and reform of unjust spaces of global governance and collaborative practice. This report offers a strategy blueprint for advocates, researchers, and donors to design more just and empowering spaces for collaboration and more custom built, or, in Portuguese, *feito sob medida*, programs that can benefit the Global Majority.

TABLE 1.
An Illusion of Inclusion in the Tech and Democracy Space

SPACES	Global North-Centric: Current State of Affairs	Global Majority-Centric: Reforming Spaces and Programs
Power Relationships	Top-down. Advocacy frames and program agenda designed in the Global North to be implemented by aid beneficiaries around the world.	Bottom-up. Global Majority countries as sites of democratic innovation and knowledge production.
Knowledge Production	Global North-to-Global Majority policy flows. Little room for Global Majority innovation and priorities.	Support for Global Majority knowledge exchange and contra-flows of ideas and programs from Global Majority-to-Global North.
Coalition Representation	Tools- and tech-first coalitions flatten out programmatic diversity and local cultural expertise.	Coalitions supported to fight “battles across multiple fronts” responding to diverse forms of digital harms and addressing needs of diverse constituencies across class, race, caste, generation, and gender differences.
Timeframe	Short-term and project-based funding responding to crisis events or elections of authoritarian leaders.	Long-term support for democratic institution-building and grassroots community empowerment.

PROGRAMS		
<p>Disinformation Mitigation</p>	<p>Disinformation mitigation focused on content takedowns, rumor-busting, and fact-checking of viral misinformation.</p>	<p>Equally focused on “disinformation from the top” and investigative work exposing the industrial production of disinformation via disinformation-for-hire firms, influencer marketing, and ad tech monetization.</p>
<p>Tech Accountability</p>	<p>Tech accountability focused on securing standard tools for Big Tech’s partners across the Global North and Global Majority.</p>	<p>Expansive agenda includes 1) tech worker justice and support for their legal protections, security, and mental health; 2) engaged research of small platforms; and 3) strategic tech policy that anticipates risks of governments’ securitized / militarized agenda.</p>
<p>Voter Literacy</p>	<p>Generic voter literacy programs overemphasize acquisition of technical skills of discerning “fake” social media content.</p>	<p>Targeted voter literacy programs address roots of communities’ social and historical grievances. Avoids platform determinist frames that talk down on communities’ “addictions” / “brainwashing” of the so-called vulnerable poor voters or gullible youth.</p>

Five Key Lessons

1

Global North philanthropies contributed over US\$1 billion in media, information, and technology to aid recipient countries between 2017 and 2021 ([Ordoñez, 2024](#)). This is not even counting the foreign aid extended by Global North governments to “advance technology for democracy” around the world. The outcome of this investment is a high quantity of top-down, tools-and-tech-first, and short-term projects that do not always support the diverse skill sets, cultural expertise, and movement-building goals of in-country civil society organizations.

2

The Global Majority is often represented as a “digital dystopia” in global media storytelling and the advocacy of Global North tech accountability spokespersons. While this popular frame triggers public indignation and mobilizes political action, it often reinforces inequalities of voice between Global North field leaders and Global Majority implementors of standardized programs or case study authors. For Global Majority civil society veterans, this power imbalance fosters activist burnout and disillusionment with tech and democracy programs as a mere “donor fad.”

3

Global Majority civil society leaders seek a localization agenda in the tech and democracy space where research questions and program design could become more bottom-up and long-term, and coalitions could become more inclusive, just, and supportive of the younger and precarious frontline tech workers of civil society organizations (CSOs).

4

Global Majority civil society leaders report several underfunded programs and space-building opportunities, such as efforts to organize and protect the rights of tech workers, targeted voter literacy initiatives that facilitate community healing and deliberative agency, strategic litigation opportunities against local top-level disinformers, and collaborative spaces between researchers and practitioners within the Global Majority and across the Global North and Global Majority.

5

Global North donors and collaborators must be mindful that extractive modes of research and advocacy impose real setbacks to the goals of local coalitions. Respondents identified how “parachute” tech and democracy programs that only convene for elections or crisis events may disrupt long-term policy goals, divert organizational missions, flatten out methodological diversity, and even alienate local audiences and voters.