

# Pragmatic Pluralism

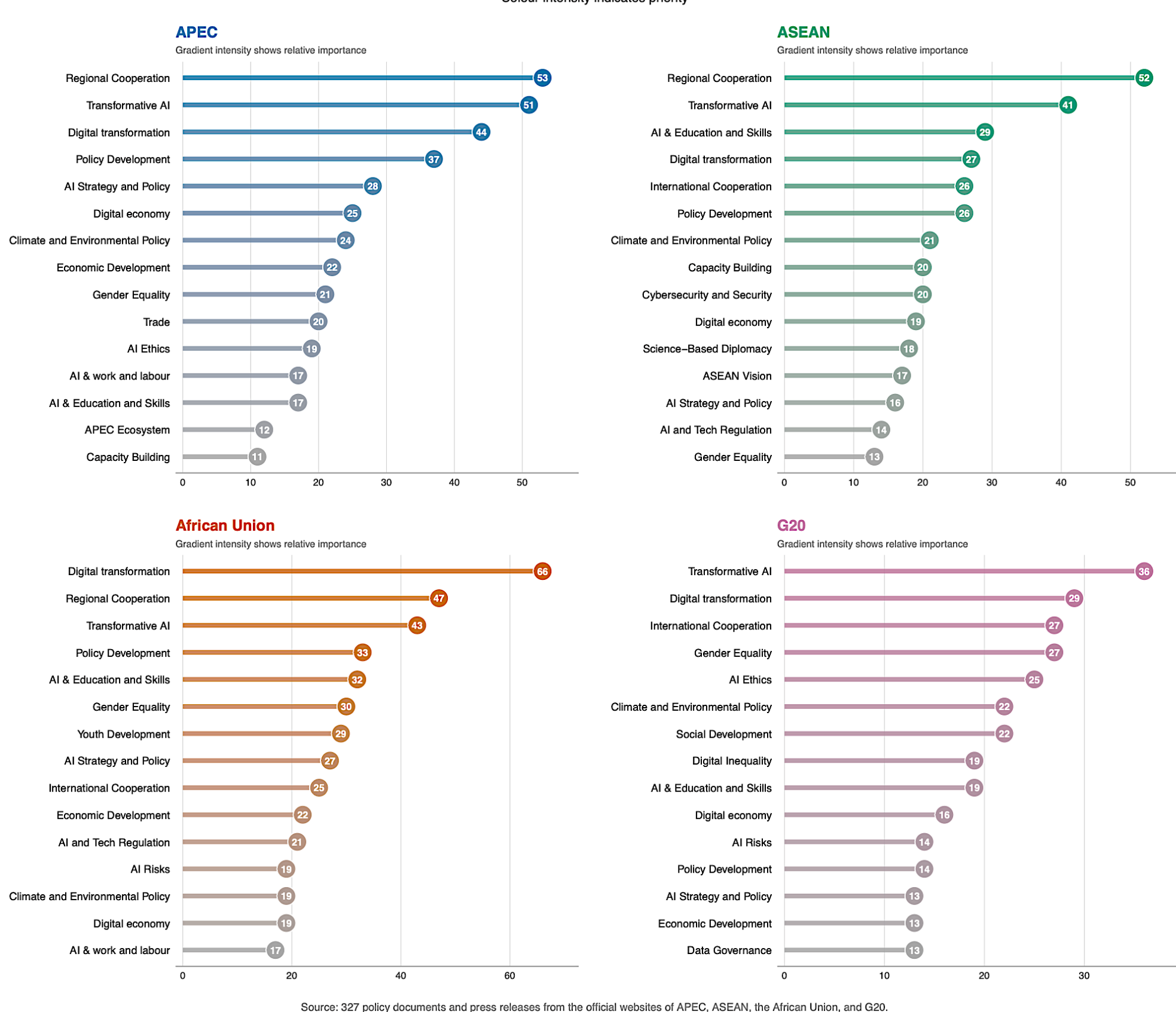
## How the Global Majority Is Building AI Governance

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### The hidden architecture of global AI governance

The mainstream narrative of international artificial intelligence (AI) governance represents a **zero-sum race** for leadership between the United States (US) and China, or a struggle for regulatory dominance by the European Union (EU). This framing misrepresents the reality of international AI policy: our analysis of 327 official policy documents from the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the African Union (AU), and the Group of 20 (G20) (2015–2024) reveals that the global majority are rejecting the binary choice, **forging a third path – pragmatic pluralism**. They are constructing **governance systems designed to address concrete economic and political challenges**, from agricultural resilience to the integration of informal labour.

'Non-Western' international forums policy themes: priorities



### The mechanism: function over form

Our central finding is that **effective governance does not require laws or regulations to be identical everywhere**. The binary framing of AI governance risks fragmenting the global digital economy and excluding billions from AI's benefits. We identify a phenomenon of **functional equivalence**, where different institutional approaches can achieve similar outcomes. While the African Union proclaims data sovereignty to prevent 'digital colonialism' and APEC promotes cross-border flows to fuel trade, both are rational responses to their specific economic realities. Similarly, while the EU relies on legal compliance to mitigate bias, ASEAN employs agile mechanisms like voluntary standards and user notifications. The evidence shows that **governance functions (what the rules do) matter more than form (what the rules look like)**.

### Solving problems, not principles

Governance in these regions works because it is **problem-oriented**, going beyond abstract principles. Our analysis tracks a rapid **evolution of cooperation on shared operational challenges**. We identify climate adaptation and education as universal domains of convergence, offering immediate opportunities for cooperation, with additional domains in cybersecurity (ASEAN lead), agriculture AI (the AU focus), and healthcare data (APEC priority).

Crucially, these forums address realities that the debate in the West often ignores. For example, ASEAN's innovations for its 117 million informal economy workers show that rules designed for formal corporations fail the majority of the world's workforce. Here, **capacity-building is the enforcement mechanism** itself, ensuring compliance through peer support rather than punitive sanctions.

### AI policy themes network

Themes gravitate towards the international forums that mention them. Colour indicates connectivity: darker nodes are shared by more forums.

