AFRODAD

AFRICAN FORUM AND NETWORK
ON DEBT AND DEVELOPMENT

Concept Note

Title
Understanding the Political Economy of Artificial Intelligence and Digitalisation in Africa.

Event Details

Date & Time:	17th June 2026; 3:00pm EAT
Location:	Zoom
Participants:	Civil Society Organisations, Think Tanks, Academia, Media, Members of Parliament

Background

Looking back into the chronology of industrial revolution, the first revolution was propelled by steam, the second powered by electricity while preliminary automation and machinery engineered the third. Presently, the world is shaping for the fourth industrial revolution, and this will be attributed to cyber-physical systems or intelligent computers. From this, it is clear that the fourth industrial revolution builds up on the inventions of the third industrial revolution but brings them beyond the previous realm of possibility with four foundational types of disruptive technologies that can be applied all along the value chain[1]. The revolution involves systemic changes across many sectors and aspects of human life: the crosscutting impacts of emerging technologies are more important than the existing capabilities they represent: artificial intelligence is augmenting processes and skill in every industry: neurotechnology is making unprecedented strides in how we can use and influence the brain as the last frontier of human biology: automation is disrupting century-old transport and manufacturing paradigms and technologies such as blockchain, used in executing cryptocurrency transactions and smart materials are redefining and blurring the boundary between the digital and physical worlds[2].

This ultimately leads to societal transformation at a global scale as it affects incentives, rules, and norms of economic life, it transforms how we communicate, learn, entertain ourselves and relate to one another and how we understand ourselves as human beings. Given that the new technologies being developed and implemented at an increasingly rapid pace has an impact on human identities, communities and political structures, our responsibilities to one another, our opportunities for self-realisation and our ability to positively impact the world are intricately tied to and shaped by how we engage with the technologies of the fourth industrial revolution. We therefore have the opportunity and responsibility to give it structure and purpose.

Africa is rapidly emerging as a critical arena for power contestation in cyberspace. The continent's immense demographic potential presents significant opportunities for various actors to engage and influence both the continental and global online spaces. Its large and growing pool of potential users of digital technologies also presents significant opportunities for investment in digital infrastructure and tech startups. In addition to its human capital, Africa also hosts majority of the world's reserves of

[1] What are Industry 4.0, the fourth industrial revolution and 4IR https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/mckinsey-explainers/what-are-industry-4-0-the-fourth-industrial-revolution-and-4ir
[2] The Fourth Industrial revolution https://www.britannica.com/topic/The-Fourth-Industrial-Revolution-2119734

critical minerals that will be necessary to drive global technological development. These minerals include cobalt, lithium, and rare earth elements that are necessary for the production of batteries, electric vehicles, and other high-tech devices are in immense demand from both governments and companies in the Global North as well as rising powers in the East. Besides this, water is also a critical component especially with the establishment of data centres.

Africa's central location between the East and West has also meant it is an attractive location for digital infrastructure development and surveillance. The continent is a major transit point for submarine cables, which carry the vast majority of the world's internet traffic. This makes Africa a strategic location for countries that want to monitor and control the flow of information.

The Problem

Africa's mobile-first approach has also allowed the continent to leapfrog traditional technological development and contribute to technological innovation. For example, Kenya has become a global leader in mobile money, and Nigeria is home to a thriving tech startup scene. We have also recently seen the case of Guinea-Bissau adopting Blockchain to manage public sector salaries with an aim of combating poor governance in state finances, embezzlement and corruption. The system seeks to eliminate ghost workers, payroll fraud and other schemes that persisted due to poor traceability of public funds[3]. Digital currencies such as cryptocurrency use are gaining momentum across the continent but warrants close monitoring and evaluation to the elevated risks. On the other hand, governments through their Central Banks are developing Central Bank Digital Currencies to counter cryptocurrencies, mitigating their risks and ensure that monetary sovereignty is attained, and the illicit use of money is curbed. These developments are driving new investment pathways on the continent while also influencing the creation of innovative mobile telephony solutions.

However, Africa's contribution to technological development has been accompanied by several challenges. Weak regulatory, policy and oversight frameworks that have not kept pace with technological development have contributed to exploitation and abuse. For example, there have been reports of citizens and workers being exploited in the development of technology tools and their personal data being harvested without consent.

The African Union plays a key and critical role in coordinating AI governance in Africa through a Continental AI Strategy that aims to establish ethical and equitable AI frameworks. The main aim of AI governance in Africa is on robust data protection laws and regulations, as the access to and control over data is crucial for responsible AI development. Many African countries are already developing their own national AI strategies that outline how they plan to leverage AI for socioeconomic development while mitigating potential harms. Countries such as Benin, Egypt, Nigeria, Mauritius, Rwanda, Senegal and Algeria have made notable efforts in releasing their national AI strategies. It is worth noting that Rwanda is the only country with a national policy while other countries such as Ethiopia, Ghana, Morocco, Kenya, south Africa, Tanzania, and Mauritania are making significant steps towards defining their AI strategies. It is intriguing to note that a number of African countries with existing AI strategies appear to have considered some of the foundational principles in the AU strategy despite some of the efforts predating its adoption.

[3] Guinea-Bissau is Using Blockchain to Boost Fiscal Transparency: https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2024/10/02/cf-guinea-bissau-is-using-blockchain-to-boost-fiscal-transparency#:~:text=What%20is%20Guinea%2DBissau's%20new,and%20salary%20and%20pensions%20disbursements.

This demonstrates some convergence in AI governance across the continent which is pegged on emphasis on: Adopting global best practices, as seen in Rwanda's national AI policy; Acquiring high-quality and diverse data sets for AI development, as seen in Rwanda, Benin, and Nigeria; Stimulating adoption of AI in similar industries, as in Mauritius; Adopting AI in public and private sectors; and Adopting and implementing ethical principles for AI that respect human rights. On the other hand, some notable differences relate to the flagship sectors under consideration in the various national AI strategies. While the AU's regional AI Strategy marks the agricultural, healthcare, public service delivery, climate change, peace, and security sectors as those that stand to benefit from AI solutions, Rwanda includes these and others such as construction, banking, digital payments, and e-commerce. On AI governance, while the AU proposes a multi-tiered approach as explained above, countries such as Benin view their path to AI governance as mostly consisting of updating existing institutional and regulatory frameworks for AI[4].

The recent artificial intelligence (AI) inflection point presents an opportunity for Africa to address some of its most pressing challenges, such as poverty, disease, and climate change. AI has the potential to be used to improve healthcare, education, public service provision, agriculture, and other sectors. For example, AI can be used to support smart agriculture, support climate adaptation measures, personalize learning, and to optimize service delivery. However, there are also concerns that Africa will merely be a casual observer in the next transformative wave of human development as the vast majority of AI research and development is happening in the Global North.

Besides this, AI is evolving at an exponential pace and cuts across a broad spectrum of economic, trade, financial, political, and ethical dimensions. AI research at AFRODAD emphasises the connection with the "real economy" and how this affects Africa's Transformation Agenda via trade, employment, taxation, and investment. In addition, we look at AI from the broader digitalisation agenda of global commerce and finance, and specifically look at the area of crypto currency, blockchain, and datamining. These areas have a direct link to debt, tax, and IFFs. We aim at fomenting a deeper understanding of Africa's position in the global AI landscape and its potential to shape and benefit technological dependencies as well as ensuring inclusive and sustainable development in Africa.

Objectives

Given the exponential growth of AI and Digitalisation in Africa and its potential impact, AFRODAD will be convening a validation webinar for our foundational paper on AI and Digitalisation in Africa. The main objectives will include:

1. Critically review how the paper addresses AI and Digitalisation in relation to the ongoing development discussions in Africa.
2. To examine how the paper addresses the current and potential role that Africa plays in AI development and its implications for Africa's and global technological advancement.
3. To Address ethical concerns and potential abuses related to AI use in Africa in the context of technological dependence and data exploitation.

[4] The African Union's Continental AI Strategy: Data Protection and Governance Laws set to Play a Key Role in AI Regulation https://fpf.org/blog/global/the-african-unions-continental-ai-strategy-data-protection-and-governance-laws-set-to-play-a-key-role-in-ai-regulation/

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Expected Outcomes

A key outcome from the webinar is to make a case for what this new moment means for Africa, how it fits into the ongoing development discussions and how the continent positions itself within the AI and Digitalisation landscape. The paper, once finalized, will inform the trajectory of our work in research, advocacy and policy influence in the AI and Digitalisation space.

Panellists

Proposed Panellists:

Moderator: John Oduk, Policy Officer, Executive Director's Office- AFRODAD

1. Jake Okechukwu, Assistant Professor, Lincoln Alexander School of Law
2. Pendo Manjele, Co-Founder, Ubuntu AI Community.
3. Timothy Laku, Global AI Speaker
4. Dr Lyla Latif, Co-Founder, Committee of Fiscal Studies

Format

The validation webinar will span 90 minutes where the first 45 minutes will be dedicated to presentation of the paper and reaction from the panellists followed by a Q&A session with the participants.

Contact Persons

In case of any questions or clarifications, please reach out to the persons listed below.

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