

# AI Rising: Africa's Path

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*By Kingsley Moghalu and Stephen Ogundele*



## Introduction

Artificial intelligence (AI) is emerging as one of the most consequential technologies of the 21st century, with far reaching implications for economic structures, governance systems, and social organization. Like earlier general-purpose technologies such as electricity or computing, AI does more than improve existing processes. It reshapes how value is created, how decisions are taken, and how power is distributed within and across societies. As AI systems become embedded in finance, public administration, healthcare, security, and communication, their influence extends beyond the technology sector into the core of political and economic life.

For African countries, the accelerating diffusion of AI presents both opportunity and risk. On the one hand, AI offers the prospect of productivity gains, improved service delivery, and enhanced problem-solving across critical development sectors. On the other hand, AI adoption is unfolding within a global political economy marked by deep asymmetries in technological capability, capital, and institutional power. The most advanced AI systems are developed, owned, and governed largely outside the continent, raising the possibility that Africa may once again be integrated into a transformative technological wave primarily as a consumer rather than a producer of value.

Crucially, choices relating to data ownership, regulatory frameworks, public procurement, and institutional capacity shape who benefits from AI and who bears its costs. In contexts characterized by large informal labor markets, weak regulatory institutions, and uneven digital infrastructure, uncoordinated AI deployment risks exacerbating inequality, and reinforcing dependency.

## AI and Africa's Development Context

Artificial intelligence is being adopted across African economies within a development context defined by distinctive economic, demographic, and institutional realities. Most countries on the continent are characterized by large informal sectors, labor-intensive services, and

rapidly growing youthful populations. These features simultaneously increase the potential relevance of AI for development and heighten the risks associated with poorly governed deployment. Unlike advanced economies where AI adoption typically builds on formal labor markets and mature regulatory institutions, Africa's socio-economic structure magnifies the distributional consequences of technological change.

Africa's recent digital experience is often framed as leapfrogging, particularly in the rapid spread of internet/mobile telephony, digital payments, and platform-based services. In many cases, these technologies were adopted quickly and at scale, enabling significant gains in financial inclusion, commerce, and connectivity within a relatively short period. However, this pattern of leapfrogging has largely been driven by access rather than by the development of underlying infrastructure. Digital services have expanded in environments marked by unreliable electricity, limited broadband capacity, and weak supporting systems, constraining their efficiency, resilience, and long-term scalability.

This experience offers an important parallel for the current wave of AI adoption. As with earlier digital technologies, AI tools are becoming available and increasingly used across the continent, even as the foundational infrastructure required to develop, deploy, and sustain them such as stable power supply, high-performance computing, data infrastructure, and reliable connectivity remains uneven or insufficient. In contrast to advanced economies, where AI builds on decades of cumulative investment in digital and industrial infrastructure, Africa's engagement with AI is unfolding atop structural gaps that limit domestic innovation and deepen dependence on externally developed systems.

At the same time, Africa occupies a strategically significant position in the evolving global digital economy. Its large and fast-growing population represents both a major source of talent, and a future market for AI-enabled services. In addition, the continent holds substantial reserves of critical minerals essential to digital infrastructure and AI-related technologies. These factors underscore Africa's relevance to the global AI ecosystem, even as the capacity to capture value from these assets remains limited.

## **The Political Economy of AI Adoption in Africa**

The adoption of artificial intelligence in Africa is shaped less by technological readiness than by political and economic structures governing access to capital, data, infrastructure, and decision-making power. Globally, AI development is highly concentrated. Advanced systems rely on large scale computers, proprietary models, and vast datasets controlled by a small number of firms and countries. This has produced an asymmetrical AI ecosystem in which most countries participate primarily as users rather than producers of high-value technologies.

Within this global structure, African economies largely occupy the role of adopters and consumers. AI-enabled services deployed across the continent are typically built on externally owned platforms, cloud infrastructure, and models. As a result, much of the economic value generated through AI adoption accrues outside domestic economies, while governments and firms remain dependent on foreign providers for critical digital capabilities.

Domestic institutional capacity further shapes AI outcomes. Many African states face gaps in regulatory expertise, coordination across ministries, and technical oversight, limiting their ability to set standards, and enforce safeguards. In practice, AI adoption is often driven by narrow administrative efficiency or security objectives rather than by integrated national development strategies.

Political economic dynamics also influence how benefits and risks are distributed. Access to AI driven opportunities remains concentrated in urban centers and among skilled

elites, while informal workers and rural populations face higher risks of exclusion. Without deliberate policy intervention, AI may amplify existing inequalities rather than reduce them. At the same time, the deployment of AI in areas such as surveillance and information management raises concerns around accountability and civil liberties, particularly in contexts with weak oversight mechanisms.

AI adoption in Africa is therefore not a neutral process of technological diffusion, but a contested terrain shaped by power relations, institutional capacity, and economic incentives. Whether AI contributes to inclusive development or entrenches existing structural vulnerabilities will depend on the ability of African states and regional institutions to assert agency within an evolving and unequal global AI landscape.

## **Social Dynamics and Distributional Impacts**

The social effects of artificial intelligence adoption in Africa are emerging unevenly and incrementally, shaped more by development priorities and institutional capacity than by large-scale technological disruption. At present, AI deployment across the continent is concentrated in sectors such as agriculture, health, financial services, logistics, and public administration. In agriculture, AI has begun to influence livelihoods primarily by improving information access and decision-making for smallholder farmers. In countries such as Kenya and Malawi, AI powered tools and chatbots provide real-time advice on pest control, soil health, and climate adaptation, often delivered through basic mobile platforms. These systems improve productivity, income stability, and risk management where traditional extension services are limited.

In Nigeria, Rwanda, and Côte d'Ivoire, AI enabled telemedicine platforms and diagnostic support tools have been used to extend basic healthcare access in underserved areas. These systems assist with symptom triage, patient routing, and clinical decision support. The social impact lies in expanded access to care and earlier intervention. Fintech platforms in countries like Kenya, South Africa, and Egypt use machine learning for fraud detection, transaction monitoring, biometric authentication, and customer support. These improvements carry indirect social benefits for informal traders, micro-entrepreneurs, and households reliant on digital payments and remittances.

AI has also begun to influence public sector operations and infrastructure management. In South Africa, AI enabled logistics and port management systems have been deployed to reduce congestion and improve cargo handling efficiency, lowering trade costs across supply chains. Also, In Guinea-Bissau, governments have experimented with advanced digital tools such as blockchain based systems for public sector payments and administrative monitoring. These initiatives aim to improve fiscal transparency, eliminate “ghost workers,” and enable secure, real-time tracking of salaries and pensions.

However, there are some sectors lagging that could also benefit greatly from AI. Sectors such as energy and power grid management, legal and judicial administration, and advanced technical education in AI

## **Governance and Institutional Landscape**

The governance of artificial intelligence in Africa is taking shape through a mix of continental frameworks and national policy initiatives but remains fragmented and uneven in practice. While interest in AI has grown rapidly, governance arrangements across most countries are still evolving and have yet to crystallize into coherent, enforceable systems.

At the continental level, the African Union adopted a Continental Artificial Intelligence Strategy

in 2024, positioning AI within Africa's broader digital transformation and development agenda. The strategy outlines shared principles on ethical use, inclusion, data governance, and regional cooperation, and signals a collective ambition to shape AI outcomes on the continent. However, the AU's role is primarily normative and coordinative. It provides strategic direction but lacks binding authority or implementation mechanisms, leaving responsibility for execution largely with national governments.

At the national level, several countries including Kenya, Rwanda, Egypt, Senegal, Zambia, and Mauritius have developed or are developing AI strategies. These documents show areas of convergence, particularly around skills development, innovation, and responsible AI use. In many cases, however, AI strategies function as standalone vision statements, weakly connected to budgeting processes, sectoral policies, or regulatory mandates, and implementation pathways remain underdeveloped.

There are notable exceptions. Kenya's National AI Strategy places strong emphasis on governance and data ecosystems and is reinforced by an existing Data Protection Act (2019), providing a clearer institutional basis for oversight. Rwanda has embedded AI within a broader digital transformation framework, supported by centralized coordination and early engagement with governance and ethics questions. Egypt's AI strategy, adopted earlier than most, is closely linked to public sector modernization and institutional capacity-building efforts.

Across the continent, regulatory capacity remains a central constraint. Few countries have AI-specific legislation, and oversight typically relies on existing ICT, data protection, or sectoral regulators whose mandates were not designed for algorithmic systems. Responsibilities for data governance are often dispersed across institutions, limiting coordination and constraining both effective public-sector deployment and domestic innovation.

## Conclusion

Artificial intelligence will not transform Africa simply because it is adopted. Its effects will depend on how African states, institutions, and markets choose to engage with it. AI is entering African economies through existing development pathways, shaped by global concentration of technological power, domestic institutional capacity, and sector-specific needs. This reality calls for clarity of purpose, not imitation.

Across the continent, AI is already being applied in practical ways to improve service delivery, reduce inefficiencies, and support decision-making in areas such as agriculture, health, finance, and public administration. These applications reflect Africa's priorities and constraints. They also underscore that the continent's AI trajectory will differ from that of advanced economies, not due to a lack of capability, but because of different development objectives and institutional conditions.

The central challenge is therefore not technological access, but institutional readiness. Without coherent governance, clear mandates, and coordinated policy action, AI adoption will remain fragmented and its benefits uneven. Strategy without execution will change little. What is required is deliberate action: strengthening institutions, building supporting infrastructure, improving coordination, and asserting policy control over how AI is deployed in pursuit of Africa's development goals.

- *Kingsley Moghalu is the President of IGET Academy and a former Deputy Governor of the Central Bank of Nigeria*
- *Stephen Ogundele is a Technology Founder and Research Associate at IGET Academy. He graduated with a B.A. in International Relations from Voronezh University and studied for an*

*M.A. in Information Technology Entrepreneurship at Innopolis University, both in Russia.*