Artificial Intelligence Governance: Moving Away from Imported Models to Afrocentric Frameworks for Social Justice and Digital Sovereignty

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Abstract

This paper discusses how AI can be appropriately and ethically governed in Africa and the Global South. The paper observes that the widespread development and adoption of AI in Africa and the Global South is a major step in the pursuit of Sustainable Development. Despite its role in spurring development, the paper observes that the adoption of AI presents unique challenges for Africa and the Global South. The paper examines some of the key risks and challenges associated with the development and adoption of AI in Africa and the Global South. In light of these concerns, the paper posits that sound AI governance in Africa and the Global South is vital towards harnessing this transformative technology while mitigating its risks and challenges. In order to realise this ideal, the paper discusses how Africa can move away from imported AI models to Afrocentric frameworks for social justice and digital sovereignty.

1.0 Introduction

With the rapid development and adoption of Artificial Intelligence (AI) all over the world, its governance has become a matter of global concern towards harnessing the opportunities presented by this transformative technology while mitigating its risks and challenges. AI has been described as a transformative technology that can bring meaningful and positive change to people and societies and the world[1]. The positive impacts of AI are being witnessed across many sectors including education, transportation, finance, data storage, communications, healthcare, environmental governance and law enforcement providing numerous opportunities to unlock Sustainable Development[2]. However, despite its transformative potential, it has been observed that if not harnessed appropriately and ethically, AI can raise profound risks and challenges since it can embed and worsen biases, fuel socio-economic inequalities, violate human rights and undermine sustainability[3].

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[1] Artificial intelligence (AI): a simple-to-understand guide., Available at https://cloud.google.com/learn/what-is-artificial-intelligence (Accessed on 08/05/2026)

[2] Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development., 'Governing with Artificial Intelligence' Available at https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/2025/06/governing-with-artificial-intelligence_398fa287.html (Accessed on 08/05/2026)

[3] United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization., 'Ethics of Artificial Intelligence' Available at https://www.unesco.org/en/artificial-intelligence/recommendation-ethics (Accessed on 08/05/2026)

Governance of AI is therefore key towards harnessing its positive attributes while mitigating its risks and challenges. It has been observed that AI governance relies on the ability of state and non-state actors to set common universal standards on technological risks, the boundaries to be drawn, and the principles to be safeguarded when developing and adopting AI[4]. This approach aims to promote the safe development and adoption of AI that is universal, adapted to cultural diversities all over the world, free from biases and discrimination, and respectful of democratic values and fundamental rights and freedoms for every person[5]. It has been observed that AI governance covers processes, standards, rules and regulations that help to ensure that AI systems are safe, inclusive, appropriate and ethical[6]. Through appropriate AI governance, it is possible to direct AI research, development and adoption towards ensuring safety, fairness and respect for human rights[7]. AI governance therefore covers laws, policies, regulations, and ethical guidelines that oversee the development and deployment of AI in order to harness its transformative potential while addressing social implications, ensuring accountability, and promoting responsible innovation for human rights, justice and equity[8].

This paper discusses how AI can be appropriately and ethically governed in Africa and the Global South. The paper observes that the widespread development and adoption of AI in Africa and the Global South is a major step in the pursuit of Sustainable Development. Despite its role in spurring development, the paper observes that the adoption of AI presents unique challenges for Africa and the Global South. The paper examines some of the key risks and challenges associated with the development and adoption of AI in Africa and the Global South. In light of these concerns, the paper posits that sound AI governance in Africa and the Global South is vital towards harnessing this transformative technology while mitigating its risks and challenges. In order to realise this ideal, the paper discusses how Africa can move away from imported AI models to Afrocentric frameworks for social justice and digital sovereignty.

2.0 The Need for Appropriate Artificial Intelligence Governance in Africa and the Global South

The widespread adoption of AI in Africa and the Global South is associated with both positive and negative impacts. For example, it has been observed that AI is revolutionizing education, healthcare, finance, agriculture, transportation, environmental governance and logistics among other sectors in Africa with positive impacts on people and planet[9]. AI has the potential to

[4] French Institute of International Relations., 'Artificial Promises or Real Regulation? Inventing Global AI Governance' Available at https://www.ifri.org/en/studies/artificial-promises-or-real-regulation-inventing-global-ai-governance (Accessed on 08/05/2026)
[5] Ibid
[6] What is AI Governance?., Available at https://www.ibm.com/think/topics/ai-governance (Accessed on 08/05/2026)
[7] Ibid
[8] United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization., 'AI Governance' Available at https://www.unesco.org/en/tags/ai-governance-0 (Accessed on 08/05/2026)
[9] Africa's digital transformation: Building the new digital economy., Available at https://blog.ascertia.com/africas-digital-transformation-building-the-new-digital-economy (Accessed on 11/05/2026)

empower traditionally marginalized and disadvantaged groups in Africa and the Global South including women, the youth and indigenous and local communities to access economic and social opportunities towards justice, equity, human rights and fairness[10]. The United Nations points out that by revolutionizing key sectors including healthcare, education, finance and agriculture among others, AI is making these services more accessible, affordable, responsive, inclusive, efficient and appropriate towards Sustainable Development[11].

The growth and deployment of AI in Africa and the Global South can therefore bring positive impacts for both people and planet in the pursuit of Sustainable Development. In particular, AI has been identified as an emerging and defining feature of Africa's digital transformation providing opportunities to foster Sustainable Development and improved quality of life for all Africans[12]. If well harnessed, AI can transform important sectors of Africa's economies including agriculture, education, healthcare, public services, mining, industry, and financial services thus fostering development[13]. Due to its transformative potential, harnessing AI can unlock socio-economic development in Africa and fast-track progress towards the goals and aspirations of the continent's development blueprint, Agenda 2063[14].

Despite the numerous benefits associated with the adoption of AI in Africa and the Global South, the deployment of imported AI models brings along several risks and challenges. Among these risks and challenges is the potential of AI to undermine social justice. The United Nations defines social justice as an underlying principle for peaceful and prosperous coexistence within and among nations[15]. According to the United Nations, social justice envisages a world in which all societies are based on the principles of equality and solidarity, understand and value human rights, and recognize the dignity of every human being[16]. In addition, it has been observed that social justice involves promoting just, fair, equal and inclusive societies by challenging injustice and valuing diversity[17].

[10] United Nations., 'Artificial Intelligence (AI)' Available at https://www.un.org/en/global-issues/artificial-intelligence (Accessed on 11/05/2026)
[11] Ibid
[12] The Centre for Intellectual Property and Information Technology Law (CIPIT)., 'The State of AI in Africa Report' Available at https://aiconference.cipit.org/documents/the-state-of-ai-in-africa-report.pdf (Accessed on 11/05/2026)
[13] AUDA-NEPAD., 'AI for Africa: Artificial Intelligence for Africa's Socio-Economic Development' Available at https://www.nepad.org/publication/ai-africa-artificial-intelligence-africas-socio-economic-development (Accessed on 11/05/2026)
[14] AUDA-NEPAD., 'AI for Africa: Artificial Intelligence for Africa's Socio-Economic Development' Op Cit
[15] United Nations., 'What is social justice and how is the UN helping make it a reality?' Available at https://social.desa.un.org/sdn/what-is-social-justice-and-how-is-the-un-helping-make-it-a-reality (Accessed on 11/05/2026)
[16] Ibid
[17] What is Social Justice? Origins and Definitions, Plus Social Injustice Examples., Available at https://insights.taylorandfrancis.com/social-justice/what-is-social-justice/ (Accessed on 11/05/2026)

Social justice therefore envisions fair, equal, just and inclusive societies. However the current framework of AI in Africa and the Global South undermines the fundamental tenets of social justice. For example, it has been observed that the digital divide that is widespread in the Global South prevents developing countries and vulnerable groups such as women, the poor, the youth, the elderly and indigenous and local communities from effectively adopting AI thus undermining social justice[18]. In addition, the use of imported AI models in Africa and the Global South fuels risks and challenges such as algorithmic biases and discrimination undermining social justice. It has been correctly noted that since most AI models are designed in the Global North, they may perpetuate bias, discrimination and prejudices in the Global South unless they are tuned to fit with local circumstances[19]. The use of imported AI models in Africa and the Global South is causing biases and discrimination including through exclusion of indigenous data sets, inadequate gender and racial considerations, racial profiling is criminal justice and law enforcement and mass surveillance[20].

The use of imported AI models in Africa and the Global South also raises the risk of digital colonialism. The phenomenon of digital colonialism occurs when the adoption of technology leads to the imposition of foreign values and systems in the Global South[21]. The adoption of AI in healthcare, education, finance, and agriculture among other sectors in Africa and the Global South fuels digital colonialism by reflecting foreign norms and models of governance while violating indigenous knowledge systems[22]. It has been observed that digital colonialism imposes values that can undermine local traditions and socio-political systems in Africa and the Global South[23]. In addition to fuelling economic exploitation of data from Africa, digital colonialism undermines indigenous values, practices and knowledge systems while also reinforcing biases and inequalities in the Global South[24].

[18] United Nations University., 'Examining the Causes and Consequences of the Digital Divide(s)' Available at https://unu.edu/merit/blog-post/examining-causes-and-consequences-digital-divides (Accessed on 11/05/2026)
[19] Orero. L.O., & Kaaniru. J., 'Automated Decision-Making Policies in Africa' Available at https://cipit.strathmore.edu/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Policy-Brief-Design-Automated-Decision-Making.pdf (Accessed on 11/05/2026)
[20] Olurunju. N., 'African algorithmic governance: Benefit of a community-based approach' Available at https://researchictafrica.net/2022/04/03/african-algorithmic-governance-benefit-of-a-community-based-approach/ (Accessed on 11/05/2026)
[21] How to Break Digital Colonialism in African Software Development., Available at https://www.ictworks.org/digital-colonialism-african-software-development/#:~:text=Defining%20Digital%20Colonialism%20in%20Software,serve%20its%20communities'%20best%20interests. (Accessed on 11/05/2026)
[22] United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization., 'Addressing digital colonialism: A path to equitable data governance' Available at https://community.unesco.org/inclusivepolicylab/s/thinkpiece/addressing-digital-colonialism-a-path-to-equitable-data-governance-MCILJ2OCE56JB5ZCY2ZY4M7AZUYE (Accessed on 11/05/2026)
[23] How to Break Digital Colonialism in African Software Development., Op Cit
[24] Ibid

In addition, the use of imported AI models in Africa and the Global South undermines digital sovereignty. For instance, it has been observed that AI tools have often been used to extract data from indigenous peoples and local communities in Africa and the Global usually without their Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) undermining indigenous data sovereignty[25]. Extraction and commodification of indigenous data in the Global South without the meaningful involvement of indigenous peoples and local communities undermines data sovereignty while also perpetuating social injustices and human right violations[26]. It has been pointed out that the extraction and commodification of data from the Global South mirrors classic patterns of resource extraction where local knowledge becomes proprietary algorithms controlled by foreign entities[27].

In light of the foregoing concerns, it is imperative to move away from imported AI models to Afrocentric frameworks for social justice and digital sovereignty.

3.0 Harnessing Afrocentric Artificial Intelligence Frameworks for Social Justice and Digital Sovereignty

The rapid growth of AI in Africa and Global South brings immense opportunities to spur growth and development. With the right policies, AI can transform key sectors including agriculture, education, healthcare, public services, extractives, industry, transportation, environmental governance, law enforcement and financial services thus driving Sustainable Development in Africa and the Global South[28]. However, the heavy reliance of imported AI models is also perpetuating challenges such as digital colonialism, algorithmic biases and discrimination, socio-economic inequalities and breach of data sovereignty therefore violating social justice and sovereignty[29].

In light of its positive attributes alongside its risks and challenges, it is imperative to move away from imported models to Afrocentric frameworks in order to effectively, appropriately and ethically harness AI in Africa for social justice and digital sovereignty. It has been observed that imported AI models including health informatics systems, educational software, and agriculture and financial platforms frequently used in Africa reflect foreign norms and models of governance[30]. Therefore, when these platforms are applied in Africa without necessary modifications to align them with local circumstances, they can perpetuate biases, raise social injustices, undermine

[25] How AI can adapt to Indigenous knowledge., Available at https://medium.com/blog/how-ai-can-adapt-to-indigenous-knowledge-2ae3cd442096 (Accessed on 11/05/2026)
[26] Perera. M et al., 'Indigenous peoples and artificial intelligence: A systematic review and future directions' Available at https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/20539517251349170#:~:text=Abstract,discuss%20literature%20under%20each%20category (Accessed on 11/05/2026)
[27] How Digital Colonialism Threatens Kenya's Silicon Savannah., Available at https://www.techpolicy.press/how-digital-colonialism-threatens-kenyas-silicon-savannah/ (Accessed on 11/05/2026)
[28] AUDA-NEPAD., 'AI for Africa: Artificial Intelligence for Africa's Socio-Economic Development' Op Cit
[29] How to Break Digital Colonialism in African Software Development., Op Cit
[30] United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization., 'Addressing digital colonialism: A path to equitable data governance' Op Cit

indigenous knowledge systems and undermine innovation at the local scale[31]. Moving away from imported models to Afrocentric frameworks is therefore the only way to ensure that the development and adoption of AI in Africa is safe, transparent, responsive, ethical, upholds human rights, respects different cultural contexts and mitigates risks such as algorithmic biases and discrimination[32].

In order to effectively move away from imported models to Afrocentric frameworks, it is imperative to bolster AI innovation in Africa. It has been observed that there is need to bolster AI capacity at national and regional levels in Africa including through investing in infrastructure, human and institutional capacities[33]. By bolstering national and regional AI capacities in Africa, it is possible to reduce dependency on foreign developers towards fostering social justice, strengthening data sovereignty and addressing digital colonialism[34]. In particular, it has been suggested that building and empowering national institutions such as data protection authorities and supporting locally developed AI models is vital towards effectively governing AI in Africa through Afrocentric datasets that reduce bias and external dependence[35].

Further, there is need to harness indigenous data sets in AI frameworks in Africa in order to adequately promote social justice and digital sovereignty. Africa is home to rich and diverse indigenous knowledge systems in key sectors such as healthcare, education, agriculture and environmental conservation[36]. It has been observed that indigenous knowledge systems have enabled communities in Africa to live sustainably for many centuries by emphasizing harmony with nature[37]. Consequently, designing and implementing AI models that rely on indigenous data is necessary towards the development of Afrocentric frameworks that can support Sustainable Development in key areas such as food security, public health, biodiversity conservation and climate action[38].

Appropriate regulation and governance of AI in Africa is also key towards harnessing Afrocentric frameworks for social justice and digital sovereignty. Through effective regulation, it is possible

[31] How to Break Digital Colonialism in African Software Development., Op Cit
[32] How Africa and Europe could create global AI governance rules., Available at https://ecdpm.org/work/how-africa-and-europe-could-create-global-ai-governance-rules (Accessed on 11/05/2026)
[33] United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization., 'Addressing digital colonialism: A path to equitable data governance' Op Cit
[34] Ibid
[35] How Africa and Europe could create global AI governance rules., Op Cit
[36] Naamwintome. B.A., & Millar. D., 'Indigenous Knowledge and the African Way Forward: Challenges and Opportunities' Available at https://www.scirp.org/journal/paperinformation?paperid=68164#:~:text=Some%20aspects%20of%20indigenous%20knowledge,the%20limitations%20and%20negative%20aspects (Accessed on 11/05/2026)
[37] Ibid
[38] United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization., 'Exploring the impact of Artificial Intelligence and Intangible Cultural Heritage' Available at https://ich.unesco.org/en/news/exploring-the-impact-of-artificial-intelligence-and-intangible-cultural-heritage-13536 (Accessed on 11/05/2026)

to recognise and address context-specific risks such as algorithmic-biases, language diversity, data privacy and security and socio-economic impacts which are usually overlooked by AI developers in the Global North[39]. It has been argued that since most AI models are designed in the Global North, effective regulation is necessary to ensure that AI suits to the underlying needs and circumstances in Africa and the Global South[40]. It is therefore imperative to effectively regulate AI in Africa including through national laws and policies and continental frameworks that emphasize on ethics in AI, collaboration with local stakeholders, compliance with national values and principles including respect for human rights, diversity, gender equality, inclusion and non-discrimination in order to ensure that the development of AI in Africa fits well within local needs and circumstances for development[41].

Through the foregoing, it is possible to promote Afrocentric AI frameworks for social justice and digital sovereignty.

4.0 Conclusion

With Africa witnessing a digital transformation characterised by the widespread development and adoption of AI, it is imperative to move away from imported models to Afrocentric frameworks in order to ensure safe, ethical and appropriate use of this powerful technology. Achieving this goal involves bolstering AI innovation in Africa, strengthening human and institutional capacities on AI, harnessing indigenous data sets in AI frameworks and ensuring appropriate regulation and governance of AI in Africa through national laws and policies and continental frameworks[42]. Moving away from imported models to Afrocentric frameworks is an achievable dream towards appropriate AI governance in Africa for social justice and digital sovereignty.

[39] Png. M-T., 'The Critical Roles of Global South Stakeholders in AI Governance' Available at https://academic.oup.com/edited-volume/41989/chapter-abstract/377785114?redirectedFrom=fulltext (Accessed on 11/05/2026)

[40] African Union., 'Continental Artificial Intelligence Strategy' Available at https://au.int/sites/default/files/documents/44004-doc-EN-_Continental_AI_Strategy_July_2024.pdf (Accessed on 11/05/2026)

[41] Ibid

[42] African Union., 'Continental Artificial Intelligence Strategy' Op Cit

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Naamwintome. B.A., & Millar. D., 'Indigenous Knowledge and the African Way Forward: Challenges and Opportunities' Available at https://www.scirp.org/journal/paperinformation?paperid=68164#:~:text=Some%20aspects%20of%20indigenous%20knowledge,the%20limitations%20and%20negative%20aspects

Olurunju. N., 'African algorithmic governance: Benefit of a community-based approach' Available at https://researchictafrica.net/2022/04/03/african-algorithmic-governance-benefit-of-a-community-based-approach/

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