Responsible AI is a Strategic Imperative for Africa

By Mary-Jean Nleya*

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Artificial Intelligence (AI) is revolutionizing industries and economies worldwide, offering unparalleled opportunities for growth, operational efficiency and problem-solving across sectors like healthcare, finance, education, entertainment and logistics. With promises of enhanced productivity, cost efficiency and the potential to address complex societal challenges, AI is quickly shifting paradigms and becoming transformative. However, as the adoption of AI accelerates, the imperative to develop and deploy AI technologies ethically becomes clearer. And for Africa, ethical principles must influence and guide its AI governance because promoting the ethical development of AI is not only the right thing to do; it is a strategic imperative.

The ethical concerns surrounding AI are universal and apply globally – such as algorithmic bias, data privacy, transparency and accountability. But in Africa, the stakes are even higher. The continent's unique socio-economic landscape, its rapidly growing and youthful population and the diversity of its cultures and languages present both opportunities and challenges in AI governance. Africa's approach to ethical AI must consider these factors to ensure that AI innovations are not only accessible and inclusive but also aligned with the continent's developmental goals.

Ethical Considerations: Tackling Bias, Inclusivity and Privacy

The quality of AI systems depends entirely on the data they are trained with. If these systems are built using biased or incomplete datasets, they risk perpetuating existing inequalities. In a continent as diverse as Africa, where cultural and social contexts vary widely, biased AI algorithms can worsen disparities, excluding marginalized communities.

To combat this, it is important to ensure that AI datasets are diverse, inclusive and representative of the continent's wide range of cultures, languages and societal and economic contexts. This not only ensures the ethical use of AI but also fosters innovation that addresses the unique needs of diverse African populations.

Another significant ethical concern in AI is data privacy. With the rapid expansion of digital technologies, personal data is increasingly being used to fuel AI systems. In Africa, it is important to develop robust frameworks that ensure individuals' data is collected and used responsibly.

African governments must implement policies, regulations and laws that emphasize informed consent, user privacy and data ownership. Transparency around how AI systems collect, process and utilize personal information will help build trust and ensure that individuals are in control of their data, particularly as AI technologies become increasingly embedded in daily life.

Building Trust through Effective Regulation

AI governance mechanisms typically begin with jurisdictions implementing a national strategy, rather than immediately enacting legislation. And African countries are not an exception in this regard. While several African nations have introduced national strategies relevant to AI, they do not currently have specific laws regulating AI in their respective jurisdictions but rather have other laws relevant to AI on areas such as data protection and anti-cybercrimes.

For example, South Africa, Egypt and Nigeria – some of Africa's largest economies – are actively engaging with formulating AI frameworks through national strategies. In 2024, South Africa launched its National AI Policy Framework, the country's initial move toward creating a national AI policy, which will form the foundational framework for developing AI regulations and possibly an AI Act in the future. The rationale for the development of the framework, according to the policy document, is to inform the responsible and ethical development, deployment and use of AI in the country. Egypt developed the first edition (2021 – 2024) and second edition (2025-2030) of its National AI Strategy with the former focusing on four pillars: AI for government, development, capacity building and international activities. And the latter edition having identified six objectives: To ensure ethical AI use by establishing a comprehensive regulatory system, activating an ethical framework and participating in global AI efforts. Additionally, the country seeks to enhance sectoral efficiency, improve data governance, build robust AI infrastructure, support local startups and finally, strengthen the local talent pool in AI. Nigeria also took a significant step by unveiling its draft National AI Strategy in August 2024 that outlines a strategic path for establishing a strong framework to ensure the ethical and responsible use of AI and also identifies key AI risks and outlines strategies for their mitigation.

At the continental level, the African Union published its Continental AI Strategy in 2024, focusing on maximizing AI's benefits, managing risks through effective governance, enhancing infrastructure, promoting regional collaboration and encouraging public and private investment in AI at national and regional levels. The strategy aims to position Africa as a global leader in ethical and inclusive AI adoption.

All of these efforts, including the Africa Declaration on AI, launched at the inaugural Global AI Summit on Africa in April 2025, are steps in the right direction. The declaration seeks to leverage AI to drive innovation and competitiveness in Africa, establish the continent as a global leader in ethical and inclusive AI adoption and ensure the sustainable and responsible development and governance of AI technologies.

Learning from Global Approaches: US vs EU

Globally, there are two contrasting approaches to AI regulation that African countries can draw valuable insights from: the United States and the European Union.

The US, home to some of the world's largest tech companies, currently does not have comprehensive federal legislation specifically for AI. Instead, regulation is sector-specific, with various federal agencies overseeing the use of AI in healthcare, finance and transportation. And several US states have enacted or proposed their own AI regulations. While this approach is arguably flexible; it is fragmented and also lacks the consistency needed for long-term, ethical AI governance.

In contrast, the EU has implemented a more structured approach with its EU AI Act, which came into force in August 2024 and will be generally applicable and effective on 2 August 2026. This risk-based

regulatory framework classifies AI applications by risk level and imposes stringent requirements for high-risk systems. The EU's emphasis on human rights, transparency and accountability positions it as a leader in ethical AI governance.

Africa can draw from both models, particularly the EU's model, but should adopt a tailored approach that considers its unique socio-economic, cultural and technological context.

Shaping an Ethical AI Framework for Africa

To realize the full benefits of AI, African nations must design governance frameworks and regulations that are ethical, inclusive and contextually relevant. Ethical principles cannot be added to an AI system as an afterthought; they must be embedded into their design from the very beginning. That means the buy-in of big tech and other technology companies is fundamental in ensuring AI systems are developed ethically and responsibly from the onset.

Some of the key ethical principles Africa must incorporate into its AI governance frameworks are the following:

(i) Fairness and Inclusivity

AI systems must treat all users equitably and operate without bias. In the African context, where there is a digital divide between urban and rural areas, part of the AI governance strategy in African countries must emphasize the need for technology accessibility to ensure that AI data is inclusive. If not, large segments of African populations who lack reliable internet, smartphones or other technological tools, will be excluded from data sets used to train AI systems. And this would create a skewed representation that could lead to AI data that inadvertently exclude or misrepresent these populations.

AI governance in Africa must thus address these disparities to avoid exacerbating existing inequalities and to promote a future where AI truly serves everyone.

(ii) Robustness and Security

AI models must be secure, resilient to errors and capable of resisting malicious attacks. Ensuring cybersecurity and reliability will protect users and maintain trust in AI systems.

(iii) Transparency, Accountability and Explainability

Clear guidelines on how AI data is collected, processed and used are crucial. AI systems should also be transparent in their decision-making processes and understandable to the public. There should also be structures in place to ensure accountability, particularly in sensitive sectors like finance and healthcare.

(iv) Privacy

As part of AI governance, there must be strong data controls and privacy regulations to ensure the protection of personal and sensitive information in the collection, development and use of AI technologies by using techniques like model anonymization and differential privacy during model training and data minimization.

(v) Monitoring and Auditing

Ensuring ethical AI is continuous. Post-deployment audits of AI systems is important and necessary to ensure that they continue to operate ethically, effectively, safely and that they adapt to changing environments over time.

The Road Ahead: Seizing the Opportunity

Developing a governance framework for ethical AI in Africa presents both a strategic opportunity and a necessary step toward harnessing socio-economic development and sustainable innovation in the continent. To ensure the responsible and ethical adoption of AI across the continent, regulations must promote fairness, safety and security, transparency, accountability, data privacy and auditing, while enabling inclusive access to AI technologies and the development of local talent in the field.

With the commitment to establish robust national AI policies and governance frameworks alongside the ambitious US$ 60 billion Africa AI Fund proposed in the Africa Declaration on AI, Africa should play an active role in shaping the ethical frameworks that will guide global AI development.

In a world increasingly shaped by intelligent systems, Africa is a noteworthy and growing market, and its success in adopting AI strategically should go beyond declarations and into implementation to be part of a forward-thinking, ethical and transformative AI landscape. A proactive approach by African governments to collaborate with global and local private sector players (including big tech), civil society, academia and traditional authorities in shaping the necessary national AI policies and ultimately laws to empower African nations and their citizens to lead their own AI governance futures is imperative.

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