

POLICY BRIEF

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JANUARY 2024

Building trust, shaping the future: AI governance for Africa

Introduction

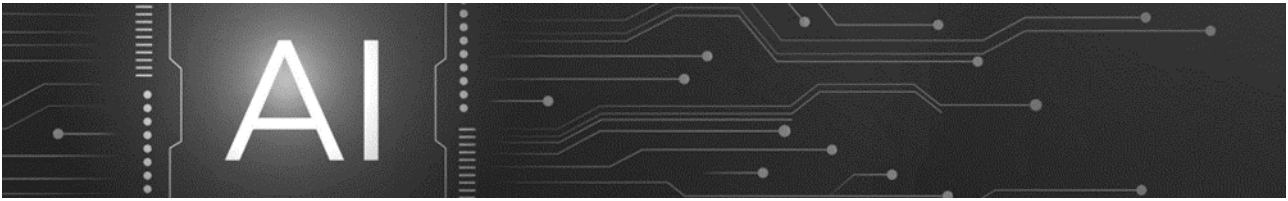


This policy brief aims to outline the key considerations for developing artificial intelligence (AI) governance frameworks that promote transparency, accountability and confidence in AI systems across the African continent.

AI is gaining some [traction](#) in African countries, as a means to drive socio-economic development. Countries are recognising the potential of AI and as a result, are investing in research, innovation, and infrastructure to foster its growth. Initiatives such as AI research centres, incubators, and training programs are being introduced to develop local talent and AI capabilities. Partnerships with international organisations and tech companies are also assisting to fast-track AI adoption across the continent.

Although AI has enormous potential for good, it also has potential for harm, whether intentional or not. Because the technology is so disruptive, it needs stringent human-led governance and laws to make sure it can be used responsibly and profitably. As AI becomes more popular in Africa, strong data policies and ethics guidelines are required to encourage responsible development and application of AI systems, and to create a foundation for user and stakeholder confidence. These rules or policies need to address issues such as bias, privacy, and transparency. The African Union's High-Level Panel on Emerging Technologies should take into consideration the following factors as it prepares to release a continental AI strategy early in 2024.

Features of trustworthy AI systems



Data privacy and security

Entails strict compliance with policies on data collection, storage, and processing, ensuring that individual rights are upheld and protected. Emphasis is placed on obtaining informed consent, anonymising personal data, and implementing robust security measures to prevent unauthorised access or misuse. Trustworthy AI systems are resilient to errors and external attacks, ensuring consistent and reliable performance.

Algorithmic transparency

Reliable AI systems are transparent in their decision-making process, providing full disclosure and clear explanations or justifications for actions and recommendations. Consequently, users and stakeholders are able to better understand how decisions are made.

Fairness

Fair AI systems are designed to treat all individuals and groups fairly, without prejudice and discrimination. In order to prevent discriminatory outcomes, mechanisms are in place to detect and mitigate algorithmic biases based on race, gender, ethnicity, or other protected characteristics. This involves taking into account potential biases in training data, utilising a variety of datasets, and regularly auditing and validating AI models to ensure fairness in outcomes.

Accountability

Organisations and developers are accountable for the actions and output of their AI systems. This may entail implementing error reporting procedures, establishing oversight bodies, and facilitating channels for public feedback and redress.

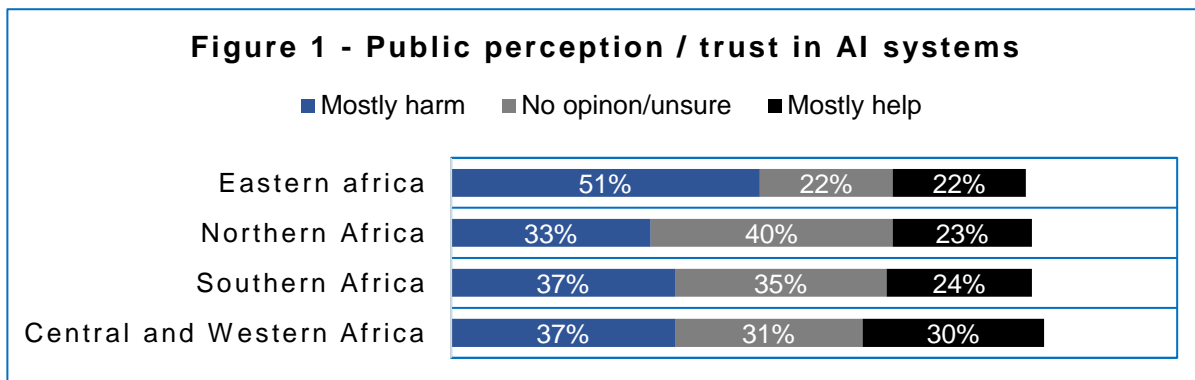
Contextual relevance and cultural sensitivity

These systems incorporate local customs, languages, and socio-economic contexts, engaging local communities and incorporating their perspectives in the system design and implementation.

Findings

1. Public trust in AI is low

Figure 1 depicts the public's perception of AI systems. The majority of Africans are either wary of the harm that AI can cause, or unsure of its impact due to a lack of understanding of how this technology works.



Source: World Risk Poll: Perceptions of risk from AI and misuse of personal data

Where AI systems cannot be trusted, widespread adoption of AI would be hampered, and the potentially enormous societal and economic benefits would not be fully realised.

2. AI governance landscape in Africa is evolving slowly

The AI governance landscape in Africa is still nascent, since the continent is in the early stages of developing comprehensive frameworks and policies. Only one-tenth of the countries in the region have a well defined national vision/strategy on AI, although it is slowly becoming a priority area. For instance, [Rwanda](#) and [Benin](#) both approved their national AI strategies in 2023, joining nations like [Egypt](#) and [Mauritius](#) that have well-established AI visions. Nigeria, Ethiopia, and Tunisia also have draft strategies in the works.

A few global AI governance frameworks have emerged, providing high-level guidance and recommendations for trustworthy AI development. Examples are

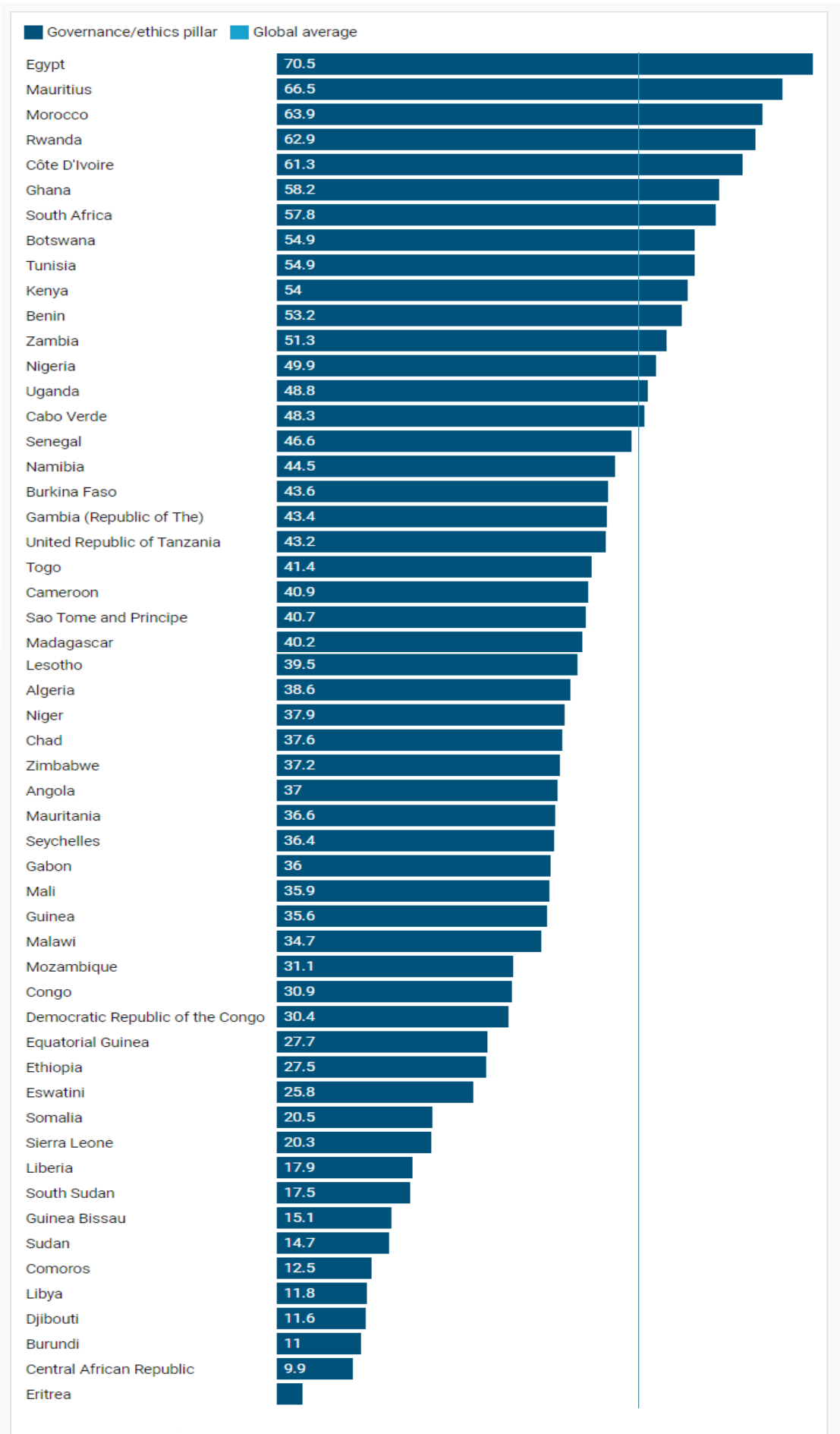
the [OECD's "Principles on Artificial Intelligence"](#), and [UNESCO's Recommendation on the Ethics of AI](#) (adopted by all 193 UN member states).

Common themes covered by these frameworks include promoting:

- ✓ Non-discrimination, social justice and human rights
- ✓ Inclusive growth, sustainable development and well-being
- ✓ Safety and security
- ✓ Data privacy and protection
- ✓ Transparency and explainability
- ✓ Public awareness and literacy

The national AI strategies on the continent incorporate an ethical component in keeping with some of the above value-based principles by UNESCO and OECD. However, even in countries with more mature AI usage, putting these concepts into practice can be difficult. According to the [Government AI Readiness Index](#), the majority of the continent is operating far below best practices in terms of AI governance and ethics.

Figure 2: Governance and ethics pillar scores



More encouragingly, [fourteen](#) countries have established expert commissions, task forces, or similar entities to guide the country's adoption of AI and address the ethical, legal, and social implications of AI. To effectively shape Africa's AI governance, there is still [need](#) for further

cooperation and concentrated efforts amongst governments, organisations, and other relevant stakeholders. Continued investments and initiatives are required to enable responsible and inclusive development and deployment of AI technologies in the region.

Recommendations

The following crucial steps must be taken in order to operationalise ethical AI concepts in Africa:

1. Collaboration and partnerships

Engage a wide range of stakeholders, including government agencies, industry experts, academic institutions, civil society organisations and representatives of vulnerable groups, to contribute to the development and implementation of AI policies and ethics guidelines. This ensures that different perspectives are taken into consideration.

2. Legal and regulatory frameworks

Develop comprehensive legal and regulatory frameworks that govern data collection, storage, and usage in AI systems, and guide the overarching vision for adoption and governance of AI. These frameworks should address issues such as data privacy, security, and transparency. Also enact strong enforcement mechanisms and remedial actions to ensure that any harm caused by AI systems are investigated and redressed. It is critical to have a dedicated body/working group leading the implementation of the AI strategy.

3. Data protection and privacy

Establish strong regulations and standards to protect the privacy and personal data of individuals. This includes ensuring that consent is obtained for data collection and that appropriate security measures are in place.

4. Data quality and integrity

Put controls and safeguards in place to guarantee the accuracy and reliability of the data used in AI systems. This may involve routine audits of data sources, data validation processes, data cleaning techniques, and data governance strategies to ensure that the quality of processes used to train data for AI systems is constantly examined.

5. Capacity building

Invest in capacity building programs to train policy makers and regulators with the necessary skills and knowledge to govern AI effectively. This can involve training in areas such as AI ethics, legal frameworks, and data management.

Furthermore;

- ✓ Conduct human rights impact assessment on a regular basis

- ✓ Establish an oversight body to monitor and audit algorithm use
- ✓ Integrate AI policies with data access and sharing policies
- ✓ Budgetary allocations should be included in national AI policy to implement its suggestions e.g. a dedicated AI research and development fund
- ✓ Consolidate AI research networks and collaborative platforms, in addition to creating national AI research institutes
- ✓ Facilitate a smooth transition from research and development phase, to the commercial application of AI technologies, by offering controlled test environments such as regulatory sandbox.