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The GLOCEPS Policy Brief

Research Focus: Governance and Ethics

Securing the Future: Artificial Intelligence, African Youth, and the Quest for Inclusive Innovation

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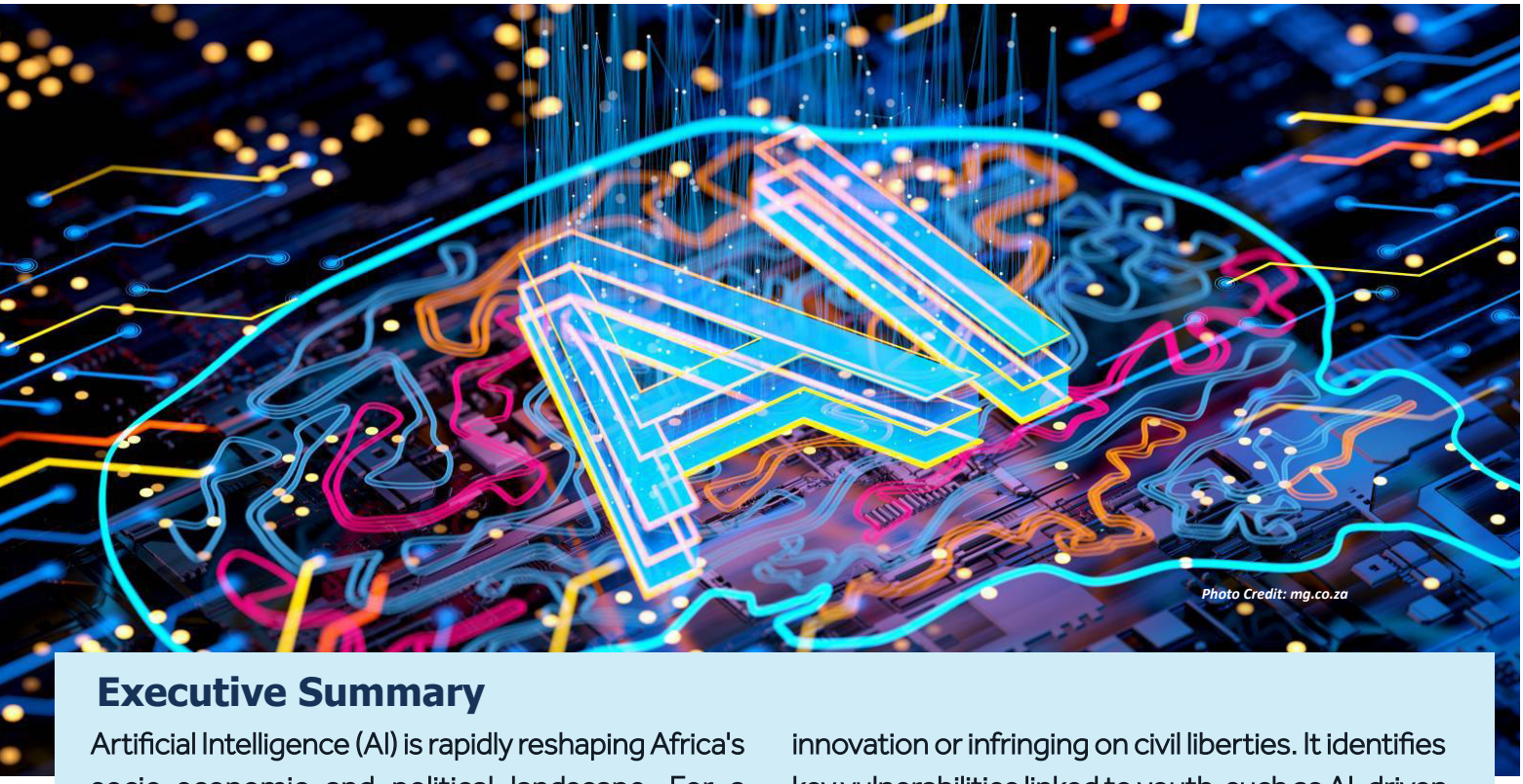

Executive Summary

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is rapidly reshaping Africa's socio-economic and political landscape. For a continent where over 60% of the population is under 25, AI represents a double-edged sword. It holds immense potential to drive inclusive growth, improve governance, stimulate the creative economy, and enhance learning outcomes. However, its unchecked spread and unethical use present grave threats. These include mis-information, radicalization, cybercrime, political destabilization, and the marginalization of African identities through biased datasets. This policy brief draws on the Copenhagen School's securitization theory to argue for a balanced approach that mitigates AI-related threats without stifling innovation or infringing on civil liberties. It identifies key vulnerabilities linked to youth, such as AI-driven criminality and militarization, while also emphasizing opportunities in AI-powered education, democratic governance, and digital entrepreneurship. The brief calls for investment in ethical AI infra-structure, regulatory safeguards, localized datasets, youth participation in policymaking, and expanded AI literacy.

Context

AI is both a technological opportunity and a security challenge in Africa's digitization narrative. Projections suggest AI could add up to $2.9 trillion to Africa's GDP by 2030. With a youthful population increasingly connected via smartphones and

digital platforms, AI adoption is inevitable and accelerating. However, this rapid adoption is occurring amidst weak regulation, limited local capacity, and growing political instability. The Copenhagen School's securitization theory explains how emerging technologies like AI are framed as existential threats. This framing drives governments to adopt heavy-handed security responses such as mass surveillance and digital censorship. While such measures may reduce AI misuse, they also risk undermining democratic institutions and civil rights.

A 2024 African Youth Survey showed that 71% of African youth are concerned about AI-driven misinformation. Similarly, the 2025 Kigali Global AI Summit warned of AI threats to electoral integrity and government infrastructure. Yet, African youth are also using AI for activism, transparency, and entrepreneurship. Bridging this divide requires safeguarding freedoms while promoting ethical innovation. Eastern Africa's youth, for example, are leveraging generative AI to track public spending and expose corruption. However, regulatory gaps and algorithmic biases from non-African datasets marginalize local identities and values. Strategic investments in AI education and localized tools, as supported by the World Bank's $1.4 billion tech initiatives in Kenya, are urgently needed to enable sustainable, inclusive AI ecosystems.

Key Issues

The following issues highlight the critical areas of focus that, if effectively harnessed, can help secure the future of Africa's youth through increased and ethical adoption of AI tools.

AI Global Power Dynamics

AI has emerged as a powerful tool of geopolitical and geo-economic influence, enabling states to shape global narratives, control strategic technologies, and bolster defense capabilities. Countries like the United States (US), China, and members of the European Union (EU) are investing heavily in AI infrastructure. For instance, the 2024 Stanford AI Index shows that in 2024, the US attracted $109.1 billion in private AI investments, almost 12 times more than China's $9.3 billion and 24 times more than the United Kingdom's $4.5 billion. Similarly, in 2025, China created an AI investment fund worth $8.2 billion amid tightened US trade controls over the export of advanced semiconductors.

Africa, on the other hand, receives less than 1% of global AI investment. This imbalance risks reinforcing digital colonialism, where African states become consumers of foreign AI tools rather than creators of indigenous technology. Many widely used platforms, including ChatGPT and DeepSeek, are designed outside Africa and reflect external cultural and linguistic frameworks. These tools often fail to serve African youth equitably and may even reinforce harmful stereotypes. Projections highlight that effective harnessing of AI and emerging technologies could contribute about $ 2.9 trillion to Africa's GDP by 2030.

Without locally developed datasets or ethical frameworks that reflect African values, AI adoption

in Africa will entrench foreign dominance. Regional bodies such as the African Union and initiatives such as the Africa AI Council should coordinate investment, build technical capacity, and promote collective bargaining on the global stage. Localized, inclusive AI development can reduce dependency, empower youth, and shape a digital future grounded in African identities and strategic interests.


Photo Credit: theaustralian.com.au

AI-Enabled Youth Criminality

Africa's tech-savvy but economically marginalized youth are increasingly vulnerable to AI-enabled crime. Criminal syndicates are using AI tools to lure unemployed and educated youth into cybercrime, fraud, and identity theft. Social media and the dark web offer tutorials and platforms for impersonation, phishing, deepfake scams, and sextortion. For instance, INTERPOL's 2024 Operation Serengeti in Kenya uncovered a youth-led cybercrime ring responsible for over $8 million in fraudulent credit card activities. Similarly, in South Africa, AI-enhanced identity theft crimes rose by 264% between 2021 and 2022.

A critical gap in current AI policy frameworks is inadequate recognition that Africa's youth are not only targets but also victims of AI-enabled organized crime. African migrants, especially in Asia, are coerced into AI-powered scams and return home with advanced technical knowledge but limited reintegration support. Countries such as Myanmar and Thailand have been identified as destinations where Africans are forced into digital criminal enterprises. Kenya recently repatriated 156 nationals caught in such operations. Without appropriate rehabilitation, these youth risk becoming domestic cybercriminals. Many African governments focus on punitive approaches rather than preventive or restorative justice. This undermines long-term stability.

While unethical use of AI can pose national security threats, it can also enhance the capabilities of security agencies through predictive analytics, enabling the disruption of trafficking, fraud networks, and other TOCs. However, to ensure that AI disables rather than enables such criminal activities, ethical governance and youth-centered digital literacy programs are crucial. Despite its potential, many African states lag in developing robust legal and regulatory frameworks that can keep pace with the rapid evolution of AI technologies. Therefore, ethical AI literacy, targeted rehabilitation, youth employment programs, and law enforcement training are essential to curb AI-enabled criminality. Holistic strategies should address both the pull and push factors behind youth involvement in AI-related crimes.

Photo Credit: brookings.edu

AI Youth Militarization

AI tools are increasingly being weaponized by non-state actors across Africa. Terrorist organizations are using generative AI and machine learning to recruit, radicalize, and deploy young people. AI-powered chatbots can simulate human interaction to influence susceptible youth, while extremist content is spread through manipulated algorithms. In August 2023, a pro-Islamic State

(IS) tech group published guidelines on using AI generators securely. Terror groups have begun integrating AI into Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) for surveillance and attacks, posing a serious threat in conflict-prone regions like the Sahel and Horn of Africa.

The UN Security Council recognizes AI-enhanced Unmanned Aerial Systems (UAS) as a major security threat under Resolution 2370 (2017). These technologies allow armed groups to strike with precision while avoiding detection, exacerbating insecurity. Conversely, AI also presents an opportunity to modernize Africa's defense. Predictive policing, crime mapping, threat analysis, and AI-driven simulations can improve national security. AI-based recruitment platforms can attract skilled youth into the security sector. To balance risks and opportunities, African states should enhance intelligence-sharing, monitor extremist AI use, and develop policies that promote ethical use of AI in security settings. Early warning systems and regional coordination are key to reducing militarization risks while promoting constructive engagement.

Photo Credit: teachwire.net

Inclusive AI-Enabled Teaching and Learning

Education systems across Africa are under strain. Four out of five children struggle with basic literacy by age 10. AI-powered educational tools offer a lifeline, enabling personalized learning, teacher support, and curriculum innovation. For instance, the African e-learning market, valued at $3.4 billion in 2024, is projected to grow to $19.7 billion by 2034. Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa are leading investments in AI-driven education platforms. However, AI securitization in schools risks over-monitoring and privacy violations. Tools such as facial recognition and behavior tracking may discourage creativity and violate rights, as seen with Kenya's controversial Huduma Namba program.

Disparities in digital infrastructure, weak data laws, and language exclusions hinder equitable adoption. South Africa boasts a 70% digital literacy rate, while Ethiopia lags at 20%. Without harmonized infrastructure and capacity-building, AI adoption may deepen educational inequality. Integrating AI ethics into early curricula, promoting teacher training, and supporting indigenous language development can boost inclusivity. Programs like Kenya's Kodris Africa coding syllabus exemplify this shift. A balanced approach combining AI innovation with strong safeguards can bridge Africa's education gap and empower the next generation.

AI and the Creative Economy

Africa's creative economy is flourishing, with youth driving innovation in music, film, gaming, and digital content creation. AI tools help creators develop multilingual, interactive, and visually compelling content. Yet, algorithmic bias and a lack of data protection expose them to exploitation. Digital content creators on TikTok, YouTube, and PlantVillage benefit from AI but also risk Internet Protocol (IP) theft and marginalization. Most AI training datasets exclude African dialects, limiting reach and visibility. Nearly 68% of Gen Z Africans fear AI will suppress creativity.

Restrictive data policies, such as Nigeria's data localization laws, may unintentionally stifle innovation. Meanwhile, only 36 of 54 African countries have reliable data protection laws. Harmonizing regulations under the African Union's 2024 AI Strategy can safeguard digital creators. Success stories from Ghana's AI labs and Rwanda's skills programs show what's possible with public-private collaboration. Regulatory sandboxes, anti-

deepfake campaigns, and local content funding can boost cultural representation and economic empowerment. Africa needs to protect its youth creators from exploitative algorithms while promoting ethical AI to unlock the creative sector's full potential.

AI and Democratic Governance

AI's impact on governance is double-edged. On one hand, it empowers youth activism, promotes transparency, and enhances citizen engagement. On the other hand, it enables deepfakes, misinformation, and foreign interference in electoral processes. In Nigeria's 2023 elections, deepfake audio falsely depicted opposition leaders, eroding trust in democratic institutions. AI-powered bots have also been used to manipulate voter sentiment in Kenya and Ethiopia.

Conversely, AI offers tools that enhance governance transparency and accountability if appropriately utilized. Platforms such as Shot Spotter in South Africa reduce urban violence, while others support voter education and corruption tracking. With proper safeguards, AI can enhance civic participation and democratic integrity. However, unchecked AI proliferation risks amplifying extremist narratives due to political polarization, especially in politically unstable regions, through AI content-fueled tensions. Therefore, digital literacy and responsible AI use should be prioritized to prevent democratic erosion. Empowering youth as informed stakeholders is key to leveraging AI for democratic resilience.

Conclusion

AI presents both transformative opportunities and serious threats for Africa. Youth can drive innovation, economic diversification, and democratic reform if empowered with ethical tools and inclusive policies. However, failure to regulate AI use, protect vulnerable groups, and build institutional capacity could lead to exploitation, militarization, and societal instability. Africa should chart its own AI path, rooted in local values, data sovereignty, and youth empowerment. Equally, securitization should be balanced with rights-based, innovation-friendly frameworks that promote resilience rather than repression.

Recommendations

1. African governments should;

a) update cybercrime and child protection laws to address AI-related threats, ensuring safeguards against misuse targeting youth;

b) increase funding for locally driven AI research, startups, and education to build homegrown solutions tailored to African needs;

c) ensure meaningful youth participation in AI policy design and implementation to reflect their experiences and aspirations;

d) equip cybercrime units with AI forensics capabilities and promote restorative justice approaches for rehabilitating AI crime victims;

e) leverage public-private partnerships to mobilize resources for AI infrastructure and digital inclusion;

f) embed AI ethics, local languages, and cultural values into curricula, alongside digital literacy and coding;

g) conduct grassroots campaigns to educate families, educators, and youth on ethical AI use and early warning signs of misuse;

h) use verified influencers and media literacy programs to counter AI-driven disinformation and manipulation;

i) establish school-based AI clubs, innovation hubs, and entrepreneurship courses to channel youth creativity into legal, productive paths; and

j) develop AI threat detection systems, moderation platforms, fast-track extradition protocols, and confidential reporting channels to respond to AI-related exploitation and trans-national crime.

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