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# Seizing the Watershed Moment: Africa's AI Strategy

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## Key Points

- The narrative of digital sovereignty in Africa took centre stage over the course of 2024–2025, falling against the backdrop of a sizeable investment gap in the African artificial intelligence (AI) economy. While demand for investment and funding is stronger than ever, the days of traditional and transactional avenues of investment are long gone, with African-led design instead taking preference.
- The expected shift of major global AI and policy gatherings from the Global South to Europe and North America in 2026 threatens to stall the momentum gained by the African continent on global AI governance and policy making. Greater coordination between country-led, regional and global efforts is needed to protect the emerging African consensus on data and AI.
- The upcoming India AI Impact Summit in February 2026 presents a milestone to bridge the African AI consensus and global AI priorities, as well as reinforce and advance South-South collaboration on AI policy.

## Executive Summary

AI is poised to transform Africa's economic and social trajectory. By 2030, it is projected to add between \$2.9 trillion and \$4.8 trillion<sup>1</sup> to Africa's GDP, resulting in an annual GDP growth rate of three percent, lifting 11 million Africans out of poverty and creating jobs for approximately 500,000 people annually (Humeau and Deshpande 2024).

Africa is rapidly defining its place in the global AI landscape to capitalize on this opportunity. The 2024–2025 period marked a unique window in the development of AI policy and governance in Africa, defined by three key moments. First, the newly established Africa AI Council, endorsed by the Africa Declaration on Artificial Intelligence in 2025, is the first multi-stakeholder regional body of its kind, designed to advance inclusive governance, mobilize resources and strengthen Africa's leadership in shaping AI for development (Smart Africa 2025b). Second, the Group of Twenty (G20) Summit was hosted by South Africa in 2025, a first for the African continent, and has provided a global platform for Africa-centric priorities to enter global AI governance and policy discourse and launch the AI

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<sup>1</sup> All amounts are in US dollars.

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## About the Author

**Priya Vithani** has more than a decade of experience working at the intersection of technology policy and global affairs. She currently serves as a senior advisor on strategy and engagement to organizations advancing global AI policy and program priorities, including the World Bank Group and Digital Impact Alliance. Previously, Priya served as a senior AI advisor at the Centre for the Fourth Industrial Revolution, Rwanda, where she supported the establishment of the Africa AI Council and facilitated the endorsement of the Africa Declaration on Artificial Intelligence. Prior to this role, she worked with the World Economic Forum to design and launch multi-stakeholder initiatives on the governance and responsible use of digital and emerging technologies, collaborating closely with its global network of technology centres and private-sector partners. A former career diplomat, Priya served as a policy officer in the US Department of State's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, focusing on the Middle East and North Africa, and represented the United States at the United Nations on a range of human rights policy issues, including engagement with the UN Human Rights Council and special procedures.

for Africa Initiative (G20 2025a). Finally, the African Union's (AU's) Continental Artificial Intelligence Strategy, released in 2024, sets an ambitious and detailed vision for regional AI development, digital sovereignty and inclusive growth (AU 2024).

These advancements hold significant promise but fragmentation between national strategies, continental bodies and global initiatives risks slowing momentum at a time when Africa's AI influence is growing most rapidly. African-led mechanisms, including the Africa AI Council and the AU's Continental AI Strategy, offer models for inclusive, regionally rooted governance that global institutions must actively engage with and not overlook. For African leaders, deeper coordination is essential to avoid parallel processes and ensure that 2026 builds on, rather than dissipates, the gains of this significant time period. In the absence of stronger coordination across country-level, regional and global efforts, this window of opportunity for AI in Africa threatens to close.

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## Lenses of AI Governance in Africa

Africa-focused AI governance efforts can be viewed through three key developments. First, country-led approaches are spurred by African AI and digital champions within the African ecosystem that have made their way to the global stage. These include the Global AI Summit on Africa in Kigali, Rwanda, in 2025; the Africa Declaration on Artificial Intelligence; and the endorsement and launch of the Africa AI Council (Centre for the Fourth Industrial Revolution, Rwanda 2025). The council, launched in 2025, is an African-led, global collaborative platform encompassing both public and private sector leaders. Its role is to provide ambitious, actionable recommendations on how to propel Africa toward a future where AI is accessible to all and deployed responsibly, while also benefiting users and enhancing the competitiveness of strategic industries (Smart Africa 2025a).

Second are continental efforts, including those of the AU, such as its Continental AI Strategy (AU 2024) or regionally anchored entities such as Smart Africa, which spearheaded the AI Blueprint for Africa (Sedola, Pescino and Greene 2021). Continental efforts to date, while fundamental,

have been primarily limited to member states and partnerships with international agencies. These efforts thus present essential foundational governance milestones that the Africa AI Council can use to mobilize multi-stakeholder AI governance contributions for the continent.

Lastly, there is Africa's engagement and leadership in global AI governance and policy streams. While a singular, internationally recognized model of AI governance does not exist, several international organizations are facilitating dialogue and convergence by promoting shared principles such as transparency, accountability and inclusivity in AI governance. Best practices have emphasized capacity building, open-data infrastructure, and international standards for AI interoperability, risk and safety. Hosted by the Government of France in 2024, the Paris AI Action Summit resulted in the "Statement on Inclusive and Sustainable Artificial Intelligence for People and the Planet." The declaration was signed by 64 signatories, including the AU.<sup>2</sup> The AU was also invited to be a permanent member of the G20 during India's presidency and continued to remain engaged in the G20 through South Africa's presidency (Munyati 2023).

The continent has also been engaged in various global fora to advance regional ambitions in AI, including the UN Global Digital Compact, which encompassed the outcomes of the Independent International Scientific Panel on AI and the Global Dialogue on AI Governance (Elliott 2025). Other avenues include the International Telecommunication Union's (ITU's) AI for Good Summit; the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's AI Policy Observatory and AI Principles; the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO's) Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence; and other multilateral or global institutional efforts to advance frameworks and consensus on AI governance.

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## A Watershed Moment for African-Led AI Governance Efforts

Globally, more than 70 countries have published AI policies or initiatives.<sup>3</sup> For the African continent, 2024 represented a significant milestone in the evolution of AI governance. Five AI policy instruments were released at the national level by Ethiopia, Libya, Mauritania, Nigeria and Zambia. Building on this momentum, 2025 saw the publication of national AI strategies by Côte d'Ivoire, Kenya and Namibia, while countries such as Lesotho and Tanzania circulated draft strategies for consultation; in total, at least 15 African countries have now developed national AI strategies (Kallot 2025).

A central development during the 2024–2025 period was the adoption of the AU Continental AI Strategy in mid-2024, as previously mentioned. This strategy serves as the principal governance framework for AI on the continent, articulating an Africa-centred, inclusive and development-oriented vision. It emphasizes the importance of ethical and responsible AI innovation, the establishment of appropriate governance and regulatory mechanisms, and the alignment of national and regional initiatives with continental priorities (AU 2024). Smart Africa, which was initiated and previously led by former ITU secretary-general, Hamadoun Touré, is a consortium of African member states and partners that advance socio-economic development on the continent, with a focus on usage of information and communications technologies. The AU serves as a co-chair of the Smart Africa steering committee, ensuring cross-pollination between leadership and high-level strategy.<sup>4</sup>

In 2025, the Government of Rwanda convened the Global AI Summit on Africa, which concluded with the endorsement of the Africa Declaration on AI by more than 40 African nations. This milestone reinforced the collective commitment to ethical and inclusive AI development across the continent and led to the establishment of an Africa AI

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2 See <https://www.elysee.fr/en/sommet-pour-l-action-sur-lia>.

3 See <https://oecd.ai/en/dashboards/national>.

4 See <https://smartafrica.org/who-we-are/>.

Council.<sup>5</sup> In the same year as the Global AI Summit, South Africa's presidency of the G20 Summit elevated issues of digital inclusion and equitable AI adoption to the global agenda (SAnews 2025).

The G20 Digital Economy Working Group put a particular emphasis on AI and inequality and addressing the risks posed by deepfakes, with an eye toward establishing frameworks to address these risks. Task Force 3 on AI, data governance and innovation for sustainable development focused on addressing digital inequality, namely, ensuring that AI is “developed and deployed... by emerging and developing economies through more equitable access to data and computing power capacity development,” with a key outcome being the launch of the AI for Africa Initiative, developed as a voluntary platform for multilateral and multi-stakeholder cooperation between the G20 and the AU (G20 2025a).

While these varied efforts demonstrate a marked acceleration in African-led AI governance within a two-year period, the extent of concrete alignment across them remains unclear. As the Africa AI Council becomes more established and sets a high-level strategy, it must ensure its complementarity with the AU goes deeper than establishing synergy and linkages through the secretariat, facilitated by Smart Africa. Similarly, the G20 AI for Africa Initiative and eventual workstreams must align with the Africa AI Council's work in support of the AU Continental AI Strategy's implementation.

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## Managing Digital Sovereignty and Africa's AI Investment Gap

The narrative of “digital sovereignty” and investing in homegrown AI capabilities has been, and will continue to be, centre stage in the discourse surrounding Africa's AI journey. The Africa Declaration on AI notes that regional, global and public-private collaboration are essential in order to “prioritize and invest in domestic capabilities and infrastructure, ensuring the long-term sustainability and inclusive growth of AI technologies in Africa”

(Centre for the Fourth Industrial Revolution, Rwanda 2025, section 2.1.3). The importance of digital sovereignty is also reflected in the national strategies of several African countries, including Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa and others, which emphasize data localization, African-led innovation and talent development.<sup>6</sup> At a dinner hosted at the Cape Town Global Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI) Summit in November 2025, Kate Kallot, CEO of Amini AI, articulated what sovereignty looks like in practice, noting that AI adoption must reflect national priorities and that ensuring this is not just the job of policy makers alone but also requires a full ecosystem, including start-ups, academics, technologists and civil servants all contributing to how data, knowledge and innovation reinforce one another. Kallot also emphasized that responsibly shared data can unlock far more than monetary value by empowering local developers, preserving cultures and languages, improving services and fuelling inclusive innovation across the global majority (Africa AI Village 2025).

This narrative of strengthening digital sovereignty applies to all areas of Africa's AI environment, including policy autonomy, standards, language models, and compute and data. It also appears when there is a sizeable investment gap in the African AI economy; “although AI could add US\$2.9 trillion to Africa's economy by 2030, the continent currently captures just 2.5% of the global AI market and a tiny 0.3% of projected worldwide investment” (UNESCO 2025).

Africa's data centre market, estimated at \$3.49 billion in 2024, is projected to reach \$6.8 billion by 2030 (Moho Amer 2026). However, estimates suggest that to meet growing demands, African countries will need to more than double their data centre hosting capacity by 2030, which will require significant investment (Kallot 2025). The region still faces significant challenges, including concerns over African representation in data sets, data ownership and individual data protection. Without adequate control over data, Africa risks entering a “new age of colonialism” where African digital information is exploited abroad without oversight or accountability (Tangaza University 2025).

As noted in the Africa AI Village's outcomes at the UN General Assembly's (UNGA's) 80th session, “Compute is no longer a purely technical matter; it

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<sup>5</sup> See <https://c4ir.rw/global-ai-summit-on-africa>.

<sup>6</sup> See <https://oecd.ai/en/dashboards/national>.

is a question of digital sovereignty, inclusion, and fairness. Without it, Africa remains a consumer of other nations' innovations. With it, Africa can design, train, and deploy systems that serve its own people and priorities" (Kallot 2025). UNGA 80's Africa AI Village report also emphasized the need for Africa to design its own investment instruments, with a "broader vision" of a continental AI financing mechanism under the Africa AI Council that ensures equitable access to funding across all member states" (ibid.).

The Africa Declaration on AI addresses investment and calls for the establishment of a \$60 billion Africa AI fund "leveraging public, private, and philanthropic capital, to create a safe, inclusive, and competitive African AI economy through foundational and catalytic investment" (Centre for the Fourth Industrial Revolution, Rwanda 2025a). While the scope and management of such a fund, as well as its principal donors, have yet to be made public, the demand for investment is evident.

The Leaders' Declaration of the G20 South African Summit also discussed sovereignty and the need for long-term partnerships and investment, encouraging "the promotion of access to computing power in African countries, as well as AI talent and training, high quality and representative datasets, and infrastructure, as key building blocks for AI development and adoption in Africa...[and] the development of the African AI ecosystem through voluntary contributions of technical and financial resources, and the development of Africa-centric sovereign AI capabilities, based on long-term partnerships with a focus on investment models that generate sustainable value on the continent" (G20 Information Centre 2025, para. 47).

To address the investment gap, there has been a gradual increase in African-led partnerships to bolster national and regional AI economies. A growing part of this effort involves investing in locally controlled data centre infrastructure and expanding access to high-performance computing.

One prominent example is from March 2025, when Cassava Technologies, a pan-African firm founded by Zimbabwean entrepreneur Strive Masiyiwa, announced a plan to put as much as \$720 million toward creating what it described as the continent's first dedicated "AI factory," developed in collaboration with Nvidia. By mid-2025, the partnership had already delivered roughly 3,000 Nvidia graphics processing units

(GPUs) to a site in South Africa, with a multi-year goal of deploying an additional ~12,000 GPUs in facilities across Egypt, Kenya, Morocco and Nigeria (Thomas 2025). In addition, in September 2025, Qhala, Angani and Amini AI jointly opened Qubit Hub in Nairobi, Kenya. The initiative offers complimentary compute, on-continent data storage as well as curated machine-learning data sets. Its aim is to help close Africa's substantial compute deficit; the continent currently accounts for well under one percent of the world's available GPU power (Kallot 2025).

Major technology companies are also making significant commitments. Google has pledged \$1 billion to support digital transformation in Africa, including landing a subsea cable to the continent and providing low-interest loans for small businesses, equity investments for African start-ups and skills training. In Nigeria, Google awarded \$1.8 million to Data Science Nigeria to upskill 20,000 young Nigerians with technical knowledge in data science and AI (Reuters 2021). In Kenya, Microsoft announced a \$1 billion partnership with G42, which includes the establishment of green data centres and skills development initiatives. Separately, Microsoft committed to training one million Kenyans in AI and cybersecurity through its AI National Skills Initiative (Kallot 2025). Such commitments are a welcome boost to the African digital economy, although they must be simultaneously viewed with caution given their potential to exacerbate existing inequalities and replicate pre-existing power dynamics (Birhane 2020).

Key international donors and funders are also prioritizing the region for investment. Chief among these is the Gates Foundation (2025), which has committed to spending most of its funding on the African region and has also prioritized AI. At the Global AI Summit on Africa, the Gates Foundation announced a \$17.5 million investment to scale innovation hubs in health, agriculture and education, with Rwanda as a first pilot (iAfrica 2025). The Gates Foundation also has an Africa director serving on the Africa AI Council (Smart Africa 2025b).

The G20 AI for Africa Conference was funded by the AU, UK Aid Direct and Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC), and was hosted by the South African government (UNESCO 2025). The United Kingdom's Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office announced



a partnership with IDRC and Community Jameel, a major philanthropic science funder, to launch the AI Evidence Alliance for Social Impact, a new £2.75 million UK project to advance the evidence-informed deployment of AI for social good in Africa in support of the G20 AI for Africa Initiative (GOV.UK 2025). The AI for Development Funders Collaborative brought together a consortium of international donors to jointly invest in the Masakhane African Languages Hub, which aims to incorporate African languages into AI models. This initiative is particularly salient, as most AI models are primarily trained only in English and Mandarin, excluding anyone unfamiliar with those languages (Cheney 2025).

As investments in the region ramp up to meet demand, donors and the private sector will need to consider the shift toward African-led, sovereign approaches, particularly as they look to the India AI Impact Summit 2026 as an opportunity to announce new commitments.

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## Global AI Governance Efforts

The juxtaposition of regional-first efforts against the international AI governance landscape is worth highlighting. Following the endorsement of the UN Global Digital Compact, the UN Office for Digital and Emerging Technologies led efforts to establish its two key AI-related outcomes, namely, the creation of an Independent International on AI, the recruitment for which is underway, and a Global Dialogue on AI Governance, which was launched alongside UNGA 80 in September 2025 (Elliott 2025).

Regional efforts are modelling themselves after these international steps while applying a sovereign lens, with the Africa AI Council's terms of reference and recruitment following those of the UN High-level Advisory Body on Artificial Intelligence (2024). The Africa Declaration on AI has also endorsed an African AI Scientific Panel. Both entities will adopt a multi-stakeholder approach, similar to that of the United Nations, recognizing that AI governance must extend beyond government. While the United Nations is in the process of selecting members for the scientific panel, it remains to be seen what African representation will look like (if there is to be any) and how the

panel will engage with its African counterparts. It is also worth paying close attention to the ITU's increasingly global presence in AI governance discourse, with Doreen Bogdan-Martin, the ITU's secretary-general, having been prominently engaged in the African AI discourse as a co-chair of the Smart Africa board. ITU's AI for Good Global Summit in July 2026 will likely be another forum where regional and global AI governance will converge. The World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS+20) and the Internet Governance Forum also have implications for global AI governance. A select number of African countries, including Ghana, South Africa and Zambia, have been actively engaged in these processes; however, there has not been a regional approach to WSIS to date (Centre for Communications Governance at the National Law University et al. 2025).

While regional models are adapting international AI governance practices, what remains unclear is whether global efforts are engaging and integrating lessons from regional counterparts. While the Africa AI Council takes a similar multi-stakeholder approach to the UN High-level Advisory Body on AI, its mandate and scope of activities extend beyond just one report. How the Africa AI Council catalyzes the AU's regional AI strategy and advances overall global governance ambition remains to be seen but is not something to be ignored. A failure of the global AI governance community to take note of regional developments and work alongside them threatens to maintain the status quo of parallel tracks, with African governments following but largely absent from the forefront of international AI governance discourse, save for a few regional champions that continue to surface in these arenas.

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## India's Key Role in Securing AI Momentum for the Global South and Africa

For the first time in many years, consecutive G20 presidencies were held in the Global South, with Indonesia having hosted in 2022, India in 2023, Brazil in 2024 and South Africa in 2025. This sequencing has presented a unique opportunity for

South-South collaboration and the advancement and elevation of key digital agenda priorities, especially digital inclusion and closing the digital divide with respect to AI (World Economic Forum 2023). South Africa leveraged its presidency and hosted the recent AI for Africa Conference, where the AI for Africa Initiative was launched as a voluntary platform for multilateral and multi-stakeholder cooperation between the G20 and the AU. The exact scope of the initiative remains unclear, with South Africa noting that it will serve to “accelerate the extension and implementation of the AU Data Policy Framework and Continental Artificial Intelligence Strategy” (G20 2025b). The upcoming summit in India presents an opportunity and test case for Africa to make key coordinated announcements concerning its advancement alongside other regional developments.

The events of 2024–2025 have honed Africa’s position as a leading voice in the AI governance arena. Despite advancements in investment and partnerships, the post-2026 period will present a shift away from Africa and back toward the West. With the transition in the G20 presidency from South Africa to the United States (Johansen 2025), the ability of the priority areas outlined by Africa, for Africa — namely, sovereignty, diversity and equity in AI — to survive or take the same shape is unlikely without a concerted effort to preserve the momentum gained. This is evidenced by the absence of the United States at the Johannesburg G20 Summit and at the AI Summit in Cape Town, South Africa, as well as open discontent toward the African approach to AI at the Africa AI Conference (ibid.).

In February 2026, India will host the AI Impact Summit,<sup>7</sup> a follow-up to the France AI Action Summit and a major first event of the year for the AI governance and policy community. This summit may be the last major Global South-led, agenda-setting moment for the next few years. A leaders’ declaration is an expected outcome of the India summit, and it presents a strategic opportunity for South-South collaboration and for recognizing regional governance models such as those in Africa. One nexus point that is already surfacing is the intersection between DPI, or shared digital systems that enable service delivery (a policy priority of India’s G20 presidency), and AI,

which was also a focus area of South Africa’s G20 presidency. Research investment in these areas, as well as identifying local solutions where AI is already enhancing DPI, are other venues through which Africa and India can and have already found strong alignment. African leaders at the summit will also have the opportunity to further emphasize and secure commitments for language equity, particularly for AI and African data sets. A working group of the India summit on democratizing AI resources has been established, with a specific focus on the uneven concentration of AI inputs (compute infrastructure, high-quality data sets, advanced models and specialized AI talent).<sup>8</sup>

India also presents an opportunity for the broader donor community to showcase investment in Global South AI priorities. Commitments emerging from the summit should include continued support for local AI solutions that can be scaled, supporting the growth of African language databases to inform large language models, Africa-hosted data centres and South-South partnerships, as well as efforts to build regional AI governance consensus such as the Africa AI Council and advance regional strategies such as those of the AU.

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## Conclusion

Africa’s rapid progress in AI governance in 2024–2025 has created an unprecedented window for influence — one that may narrow as global attention shifts elsewhere in 2026. Sustaining momentum will require African leaders, institutions and partners to act collectively, intentionally and with a shared vision for sovereign and inclusive AI development. Several opportunities emerge for African leaders and the global AI governance community, as detailed below:

- **Leverage the India AI Impact Summit to project unified African leadership:** The summit in early 2026 is a pivotal moment to elevate African AI priorities on the global stage. To maximize impact, African leaders should present a coordinated position across the AU, the Africa AI Council, the South Africa G20 outcomes and national champions. Success depends on ensuring African-led priorities, such as

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7 See <https://impact.indiaai.gov.in>.

8 Ibid.

compute access, sovereign data infrastructure, African languages and DPI-AI integration, are explicitly reflected in the summit's outcomes and in any leaders' declaration.

→ **Build structured linkages between African and global AI governance bodies:**

The emergence of global and regional scientific panels on AI, alongside multi-stakeholder advisory bodies, presents a strategic opportunity. African leaders should advocate for formal channels of engagement between the Africa AI Council, the AU-endorsed African AI Scientific Panel and the UN Independent International Scientific Panel on AI. Cross-membership, joint workstreams and shared research agendas would reduce duplication, strengthen Africa's influence on global norms and ensure global processes reflect regional expertise.

→ **Strengthen internal alignment across national, regional and continental strategies:**

Africa's AI governance architecture will only succeed if its components reinforce, rather than compete with, one another. Deeper alignment between the AU's Continental AI Strategy, the Africa AI Council's work plan, national AI strategies and the AI for Africa Initiative is essential. This aim can be operationalized through reciprocal representation at the technical level and shared priority setting and joint monitoring of progress. Such alignment can help establish a coherent regional narrative that global actors must respond to.

→ **Embed sovereignty and sustainability**

**into all external partnerships:** Given rising concerns about data extraction, compute dependency and unequal investment terms, African leaders should require that partnerships with global technology companies, donors and multilateral organizations reflect Africa's sovereignty principles. This objective includes investment models that prioritize local ownership of data centres, capacity building for African talent, transparent governance of data sets and equitable access to compute with an eye toward long-term sustainability.

→ **Use 2026 as a transition year to institutionalize**

**Africa-led governance:** While Africa will not hold the G20 presidency or host major global convenings in 2026, it can leverage the year as a period to consolidate gains. This includes finalizing the Africa AI Council's governance

architecture; securing sustainable financing mechanisms (for example, a continental AI fund); operationalizing national strategies; and expanding Africa's presence in global regulatory and standards-setting bodies.

Taken together, these actions can ensure that Africa's rising leadership in AI governance becomes durable rather than episodic. By aligning regional institutions, speaking with a unified voice and grounding partnerships in sovereignty and sustainability, African leaders can position the continent not merely as a participant in global AI policy but also as a co-designer of its future.



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