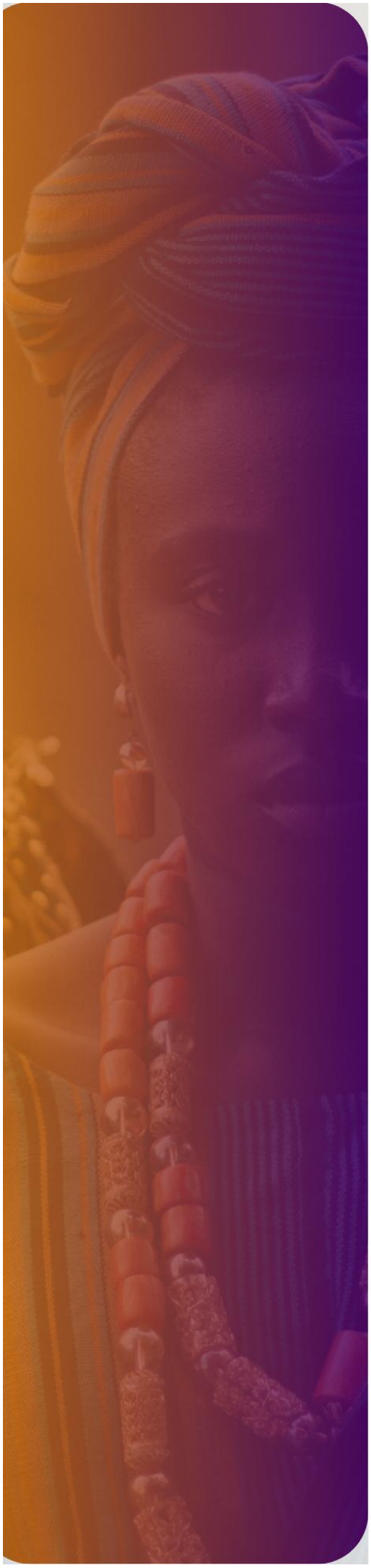
SAYDi
SAVING AFRICAN YOUTHS DREAM INITIATIVE

DATA INEQUALITY AND DIGITAL INCLUSION

A Youth-Centered Framework for AI Governance in Nigeria

POLICY BRIEF



About Us

Saving African Youths Dream Initiative (SAYDi) is a youth-led nonprofit organization that promotes inclusive development through research, education, democratic governance, digital inclusion, gender equity, and social justice. SAYDi works to strengthen the interface between citizens and institutions while advancing evidence-based solutions for sustainable development.

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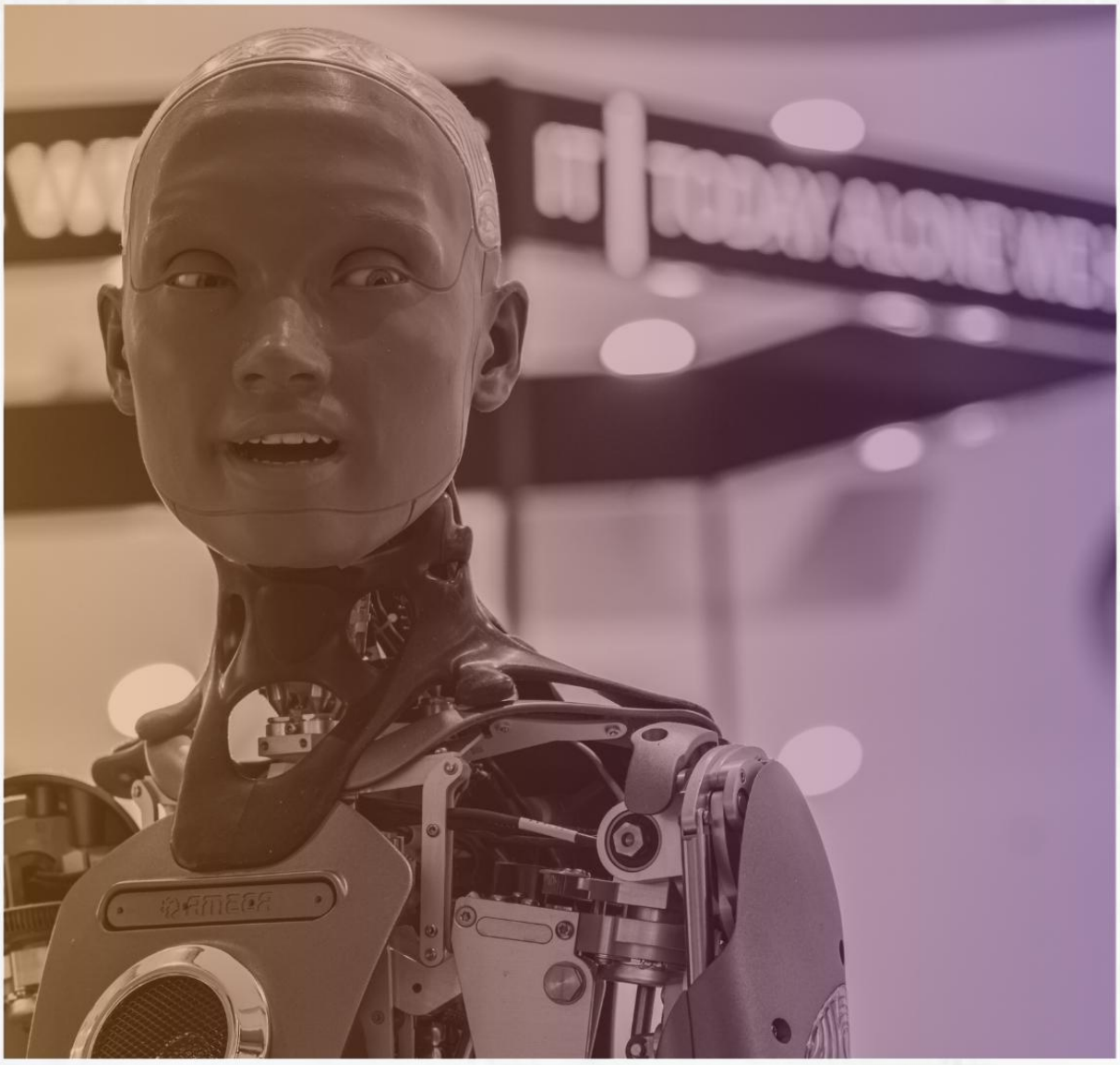
Executive Summary

As Nigeria moves towards a digital-first economy, the relationship between technology, education, and community life is rapidly changing. While artificial intelligence (AI) and digital tools present significant opportunities for economic change, a major issue remains in our national strategy: the ongoing exclusion of rural and underserved youth from digital platforms and data representation.

Recent statistics highlight the complexity of this situation. The International Labour Organisation (ILO, 2023) notes that Nigeria's youth unemployment rate has reached 53%. This figure is stark compared to pre-2022 estimates, where youth unemployment was around 42.5% in 2020. These numbers reveal serious structural problems in Nigeria's labor market (Nwonye et al., 2023; Chege & Wang, 2020). Although many experts acknowledge that Nigeria has potential in the digital economy, there is still a critical gap in connecting digital skill development to youth employment. Many studies focus on structural issues and general discussions, failing to provide detailed insights into how specific digital training can lead to actual jobs. Despite alarming reports indicating that over 85% of Nigerian graduates lack relevant digital skills (GreenCape Survey, 2023), effective policy designs to bridge this gap are missing or poorly implemented in Nigeria. Currently, the dialogue is mostly anecdotal and lacks solid, data-driven insights into the skills gap, sector needs, and policy changes needed to help youth gain employable digital skills.

Without targeted interventions, the rise of AI may worsen existing inequalities. Based on the community-validated methods from SAYDi's Rural Education Needs Assessment Project (RENAP), this brief urges a collaborative, evidence-based approach to digital inclusion, AI governance, and youth civic engagement, all grounded in African communal values.

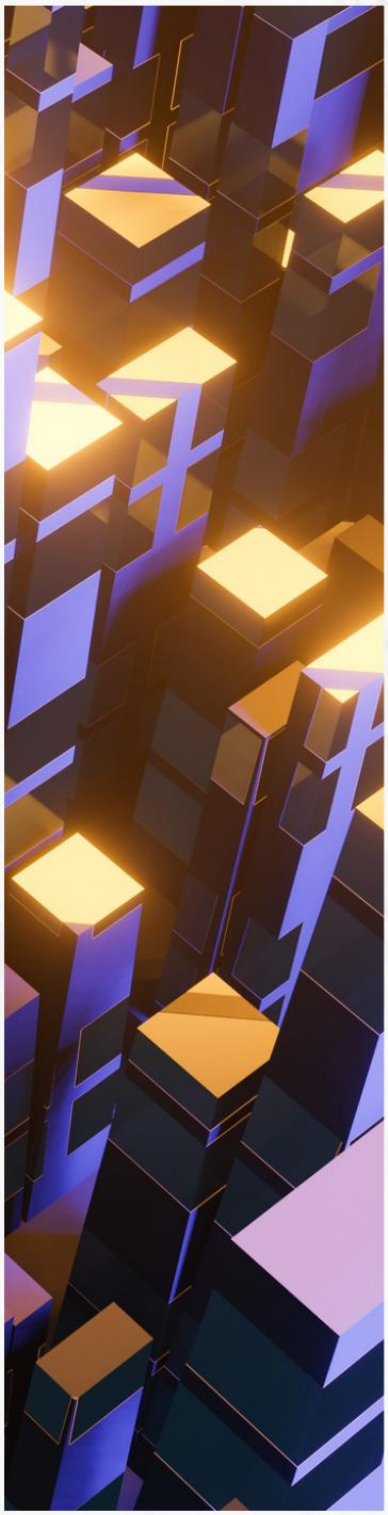
The Threat of Data Inequality: Who AI Leaves Behind



Discussions around artificial intelligence often ignore the experiences of the Global South. In Nigeria, the digital divide is not just about access to technology; it involves a deeper crisis of representation, ethics, and economic survival.

Algorithmic Bias and Data Scarcity

AI systems rely on extensive datasets to function fairly. However, deploying AI in developed nations without considering local contexts may result in digital colonialism in Africa (Muldoon & Wu, 2023). Many African countries use AI created in the West, where solutions are imposed without regard for local cultures and needs. The persistent control of digital spaces by developed nations reflects historical colonial trends (Obi, 2024). This control often involves data exploitation and management of digital infrastructure, such as internet cables and data centers.



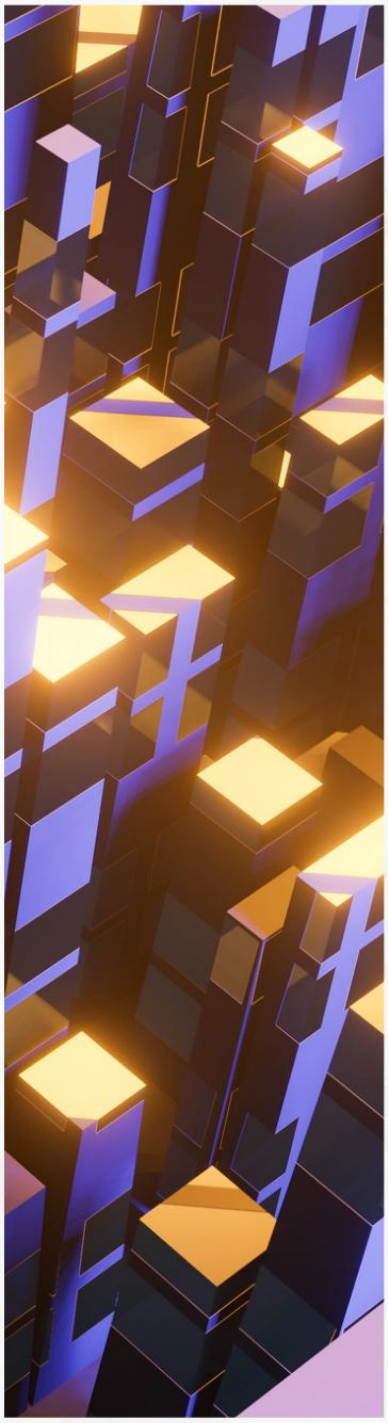
Additionally, as companies from the Global North seek user data on a global scale, they collect vast amounts of information from African users, often without their full awareness or consent (United Nations, 2024). These large technology firms argue they are helping; however, they gather valuable data from Africa at a time when the continent has weak data protection laws (Coleman, 2019). This situation allows for the misappropriation of user data for analytics and profit by these companies (Gwagwa et al., 2020). Furthermore, data movement from Africa to Western countries promotes knowledge acquisition in the West, deepening the imbalance in information sharing (Akpudo et al., 2024).

Algorithm bias inadvertently favour certain groups due to design or training process, resulting in inequalities (Pulvarithy & Whing 2020). Incorrect or unauthorized data can lead to biased AI results that affect certain groups unfairly, while user interactions with AI may also introduce biases that reduce the effectiveness of educational tools.

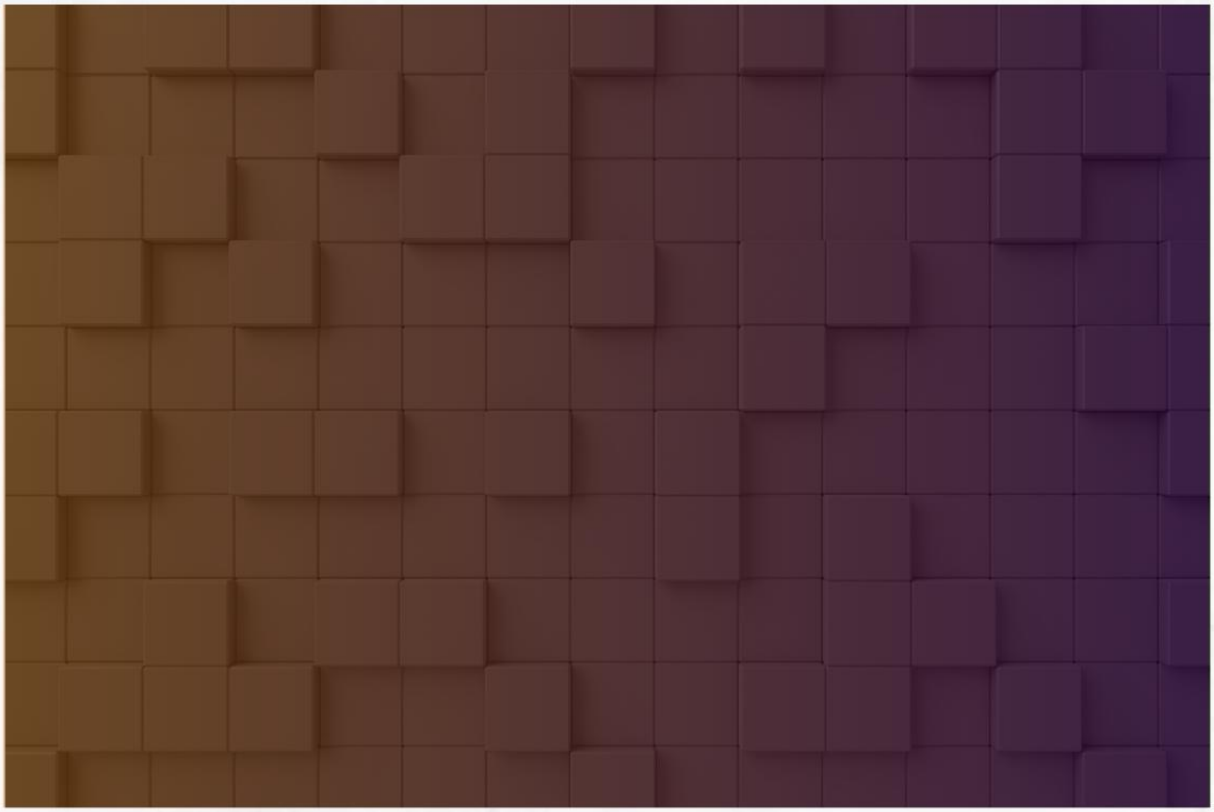
Wordu (2026) agrees, noting that if AI training data is primarily sourced from English-speaking countries without support for diverse languages or cultures, the results may provide irrelevant suggestions and unfair judgments, excluding people from opportunities. This is a serious issue, as bias can create harmful stereotypes, uneven learning experiences, and erode trust in educational systems. Maphosa (2024) points out that AI often reflects and reinforces existing societal biases, resulting in discrimination against marginalized groups.

Sule (2026) further suggests that linguistic diversity poses a significant ethical challenge. Linguistic diversity presents significant ethical challenges for AI in Africa, where more than 2000 languages are spoken, many of which are underrepresented in current AI datasets (Bedu, 2024). The prevalence of prominent languages like English, French, and Chinese in AI training data leaves millions of African language speakers without access to AI services or digital engagement (Maduma, 2025).

Many African languages are primarily spoken, lack written forms, and have complex dialects, making it difficult to develop effective natural language processing tools (Bedu, 2024). This lack of representation in AI deepens digital inequalities, threatens cultural identities, and limits Africans' ability to shape AI technologies that reflect their realities.



The Ethical Vacuum



The current use of AI-driven systems in education and institutional settings in Nigeria lacks regulation. Wordu (2026) highlights that many AI systems operate as 'black boxes', meaning their decision-making is not transparent or easily understandable. He also points out that handing over educational authority to AI blurs accountability, shifting responsibility away from teachers and learners and raising questions about autonomy and auditing decisions. Sule (2026) warns that imported technologies frequently ignore local languages, traditions, and social contexts, leading to the erosion of indigenous knowledge systems and cultural identities (Malik & Farooq, 2025). African experts caution that relying too heavily on foreign-developed AI can result in algorithmic colonialism, where data and AI models prioritize global North interests over African needs (Coleman, 2019).

Economic Exclusion

Access to digital tools is essential for overcoming poverty. Anowor et al. (2025) observe that inadequate digital infrastructure, high costs, low literacy rates, and poor policy execution hinder youth employment and economic development. Additionally, dependence on AI could weaken critical thinking and problem-solving abilities. Pandya & Rajinkant (2025) note that AI technologies may worsen educational access inequalities, especially for marginalized groups, as urban students report greater reliance on AI and increased ethical concerns surrounding its use. Over-dependence on AI can reduce the importance of human interaction and critical skills as students might become overly reliant on AI for solutions.

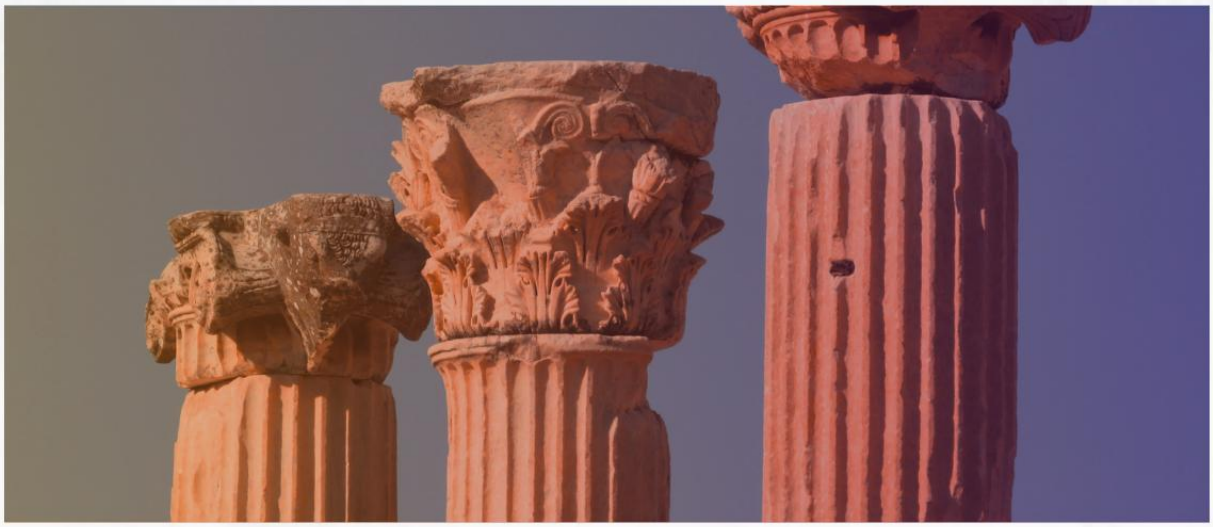
Insights from the Field: The RENAP Perspective

Through the Rural Education Needs Assessment Project (RENAP), in collaboration with the HEDA Resource Centre, SAYDi employed a community-validated research approach to examine the conditions of youth in Kwara North. Our findings consistently challenge centralized policy assumptions:

- **Infrastructure Does Not Equal Inclusion** Just as empty classrooms need qualified teachers, simply providing broadband does not ensure inclusion. Access remains unequal, with urban youth far more likely than those in rural areas to have stable internet, functional devices, and consistent electricity (National Bureau of Statistics, 2022). Costs further widen the gap, as the high prices for broadband services, mobile data, and devices like smartphones, laptops, and tablets continue to limit low-income households' ability to participate in the digital economy. Wordu (2026) adds that public universities in Nigeria lack enough computers and reliable internet access, which hampers training and large-scale experiments. These problems arise from structural deficiencies, limited connectivity, and insufficient funding that prevent effective integration of AI technologies into education (Oyeleye, Fagbola, & Daramola, 2014).

- **The "Accountability Void"**
  Our Town Hall Meetings revealed a significant disconnect between remote policy decisions and the needs of rural communities. To bridge this gap, Batya Friedman and Peter Khana developed Value Sensitive Design (VSD) at the University of Washington from the 1980s to the 1990s. In 2019, Friedman and David Henry published "Value Sensitive Design: Shaping Moral Imagination." This theory focuses on integrating ethical values into technology use. It is relevant because it emphasizes the importance of considering human values in technology design. VSD aims to create more human-centered AI systems (Sedek, 2024). The theory is specifically designed to ensure technology alignment with human values. It provides a solid methodology for identifying, integrating, and upholding ethical dimensions like privacy, fairness, accountability, and human welfare. Sule (2026) also argues that incorporating the African philosophy of Ubuntu, which stresses community, relationships, and collective well-being, into AI ethics can address the shortcomings of Western-centric frameworks.

Strategic Pillars for Action



To create a prosperous, democratic, and inclusive future, Nigeria needs to shift from reactive infrastructure projects to proactive, human-centered digital governance. We suggest the following actionable pillars:

- **Establish Evidence-Backed AI Policies for Youth**
  The government should develop inclusive AI frameworks that focus on ethical use, cultural sensitivity, and data localization. The National Universities Commission must create national guidelines for ethical AI in education to make sure that innovation fits with societal values. Africa needs to establish context-specific ethical frameworks that reflect African values. This will help to ensure transparency, reduce bias, protect privacy, and maintain digital sovereignty. We recommend forming a national "AI and Youth Advisory Council" to help develop these standards.
- **Accelerate Comprehensive Digital Inclusion**
  Bridging the digital divide means addressing issues like high costs, inadequate infrastructure, and low literacy rates. Nigeria's education system needs urgent curriculum reforms to include digital literacy, coding, data analytics, and entrepreneurship at all learning levels. We encourage investing in ICT infrastructure and training educators through "Train-the-Trainer" programs. University managers should prioritize data, invest in digital infrastructure, and ensure equitable access to maximize the benefits of AI for everyone.

- Foster Hubs for Creativity and Innovation
  Economic transformation will depend on localized innovation. Due to limited resources, public-private partnerships are vital for expanding digital training, and policy should focus on specific actions such as subsidized training and mentorship for women in tech. We can use the existing structure of School-Based Management Committees to create decentralized innovation hubs in semi-urban and rural areas. These collaborative efforts can link Nigerian universities with tech companies and government agencies to co-develop AI projects and programs.

- Amplify Civic Participation via Digital Citizenship
  Technology should be used as a tool for inclusive governance. Sule highlights the need to raise awareness about AI, its risks, and benefits to encourage responsible use. Communities can demand transparency and resist digital authoritarianism through teaching youth digital advocacy skills. Recognizing youth-led data collection as a way to measure government tech initiatives ensures that AI technologies serve the public good, respect local identities, and promote sustainable social and economic change without relying on foreign values.

Conclusion

Nigeria can only realize its demographic dividend if young people are prepared to navigate and lead in the digital future. We can ensure that technology acts as an equalizer instead of worsening inequality by prioritizing digital inclusion, supporting grassroots innovation, and integrating the Ubuntu philosophy into our AI governance.

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