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Strategy as Governance: The Governance of AI in Africa

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Abstract

New and emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI) have captivated the attention of African policymakers in recent years. This has been reflected mainly through the adoption of a series of national and continental policy instruments. A common thread in recent policy efforts has been the considerable emphasis given to the opportunities that AI offers in ameliorating Africa's complex and longstanding socio-economic challenges. With the adoption of AI strategies at the continental and national levels, African policymakers are increasingly turning attention to the imperatives of governing AI risks. Except for a few African states, AI strategies are yet to be translated into legislation or other concrete governance measures. Against the backdrop of this development, this editorial offers a conceptual background to the special section published in the present issue of *Science and Public Policy* on the governance of AI in Africa. It examines the origins, nature and scope of AI governance initiatives in Africa. The editorial argues that unless AI strategies are followed up with robust governance arrangements, African policymakers would be settling for less compared with their counterparts in other regions.

Keywords: AI governance, AI regulation, AI strategies, AI policies, decolonial AI, AI risks, Africa

1. Introduction

Recent advances in large language models (LLMs) such as ChatGPT have put artificial intelligence (AI) in vogue. From policy and academic circles to industry as well as civil society organisations, the advent of AI has spurred widespread excitement as well as worries. Much of the attention has been drawn to the enormous ways in which AI could bring about socio-economic transformations. This has prompted considerable investments by governments, businesses and multilateral organisations (Artificial Intelligence Index Report, 2025). But attention is increasingly turning towards the adverse risks that AI poses, and imperatives of governance arrangements needed to attend to those risks.

A flurry of governance initiatives that take various legal forms have emerged at various levels in recent years. Early phrases of governance initiatives took the form of AI ethics guidelines that set out a series of principles for the responsible design, development and use of AI (UNESCO Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence, 2021; OECD AI Principles, 2019; EU Ethics Guidelines for Trustworthy AI, 2019; Toronto Declaration: Protecting the Right to Equality

in Machine Learning, 2018). More recent governance instruments are taking the shape of legislation (Artificial Intelligence Act, Regulation 2024/1689, 2024); Executive Order on Advancing United States Leadership in Artificial Intelligence Infrastructure, 2025; Canadian Artificial Intelligence and Data Bill, 2022). The Artificial Intelligence Act of the European Union (EU) and the AI Framework Convention of the Council of Europe (CoE) are good cases in point. Installing a risk-based approach to AI regulation, the EU's Act—in particular—represents the major regional instrument with global impact, to date. The fervour behind the adoption of the Act appears to have spread to other regions where the governance of AI is increasingly taking centre stage.

The hype around AI has been no less palpable in Africa with governments as well as regional organisations highlighting the potential of the AI in alleviating complex problems facing the continent and its vast populations. AI appears to animate recent discussions at all levels in Africa, including the African Union (AU). In the wake of governance initiatives in other parts of the world, the AU grudgingly set out to develop a continental framework for the governance of AI. The process started at the third ordinary session of the Specialised Technical Committee on Communication and Information Technologies (STC-CICT) of the AU, a body consisting of ministers in charge of information and communication technologies. In the Sharm El Sheikh Declaration—adopted at the conclusion of the session, STC-CICT 'requested' AU member states to 'establish a working group' on AI based on existing initiatives in collaboration with African institutions (Sharm El Sheikh Declaration, 2019: Para 19). Among the mandates of the working group included studying the 'creation of a common African stance on AI'.

After a few years of hiatus, the Working Group—chaired by the government of Egypt—held its first meeting in February 2021 (Egypt Ministry of Communications and Information Technology, 2019). It was disclosed at the time that the Working Group's mission would be to 'unify views and develop a single African AI Strategy'. Little was then heard about the Working Group until a report that the drafting of the strategy was being carried out under the auspices of the AU High-level Panel on Emerging Technologies and the AU Development Agency (AUDA-NEPAD) emerged in May 2022 (African Union Development Agency, 2022). It was not clear whether the latter was part of the process broached by the Sharm El Sheik Declaration or a disparate process (Yilma, 2023: 5-6). But the adoption of a Continental Strategy by the Executive Council of the AU in July 2024 culminated the effort to develop an AI Strategy at the regional level [hereinafter, AU AI Strategy] (Continental Artificial Intelligence Strategy, 2024). To be sure, AUDA-NEPAD released a Continental AI Road Map in February 2025 on the sidelines of the AU Summit in Addis Ababa (AUDA-NEPAD Continental AI Roadmap, 2025). Billed as a 'complementary resource' to the AU AI Strategy, the Roadmap merely provides high-level recommendations on governance.

Another recent development after the adoption of the AU AI Strategy is the African Declaration on Artificial Intelligence. Adopted at the conclusion of the Global AI Summit on Africa, the Declaration—signed by almost every AU member state as well as the AU itself—pledges some governance initiatives, including an endorsement for the creation of an 'African AI Scientific Panel' (Africa Declaration on Artificial Intelligence, 2025). Consisting of AI experts from Africa and the diaspora, the Panel will be tasked "to advocate for contextually relevant, evidence-based research on the risks, opportunities, and socio-economic impact of AI in Africa, providing a knowledge base for policymakers, researchers, and practitioners" (Africa Declaration on Artificial

Intelligence, 2025: Art 3.1.2). There is, of course, little novelty in this proposal. As shall be noted in the next section, UN member states committed to the creation of an international AI scientific panel in the Global Digital Compact adopted at the Summit of the Future in September 2024. Signatories to the Declaration simply pledged to create a regional panel but with largely similar roles.

Creation of national AI institutions has been another manifestation of AI governance initiatives in Africa. A number of African countries have established, for instance, AI institutes; examples include the National Centre for AI and Robotics in Nigeria and Ethiopia's AI Institute. In many cases, the institutes are envisioned as research entities tasked to lead the development of AI in the respective countries. And in some cases, AI institutes are fashioned with more direct governance roles. The Ethiopian AI Institute, for instance, is mandated not only to lead research efforts but also to develop and market AI products, formulate national AI policies and legislation, assist law enforcement with respect to AI-enabled crimes and even to regulate AI research and development by the private sector (Artificial Intelligence Institute Establishment Regulation No 510/2022, 2022: Art 6). One of the most recent products of the Institute developed in line with its statutory mandate is the AI policy which has been endorsed by the Council of Ministers in 2024 (National Artificial Intelligence Policy of Ethiopia, 2024). The Institute is currently finalising a draft AI legislation (Draft AI Development and Regulation Proclamation, 2025).

AI governance is thus still in a state of flux in Africa. Against these developments in the continent, this special section of the Science and Public Policy examines the state of and underlying approaches to AI governance in Africa. Drawing upon emergent continental and national governance initiatives, it explores the ways in which the governance of AI is envisioned in Africa. Contributions in the Special Section seek to deconstruct visions for the governance of AI by going beyond the hype that animates much of the governance discussions in the continent.

This article provides an editorial introduction to the special section published in this issue of *Science and Public Policy* under the title 'Beyond the Hype: Deconstructing Visions of AI Governance in Africa'. The rest of the article moves in four sections. Section 2 discusses a key feature of AI governance in Africa. It explores the prominence of AI strategies and policies as means of governing AI at the continental and national levels in Africa. Section 3 lays out the aims of the special section as well as the different methodologies and approaches that underpin the contributions. Section 4 provides an overview of articles included in the special section. Section 5 closes the article.

2. Strategy as Governance

Adoption of strategies, alternatively referred to as 'policies' in some jurisdictions, has been the defining feature of AI governance efforts in Africa. Not only at the continental level, but also nationally where close to a dozen African countries have introduced AI strategies of some sort in the past few years (Mauritius Artificial Intelligence Strategy, 2018; de la stratégie nationale de l'intelligence artificielle Algeria, 2021; National Artificial Intelligence and Big Data Strategy of Benin, 2023; Egypt National Artificial Intelligence Strategy, 2019; Egyptian Charter for Responsible AI, 2023; Republic of Ghana National Artificial Intelligence Strategy, 2022; National AI Policy of Rwanda, 2023; Stratégie Nationale et feuille de Route du Sénégal sur l'Intelligence Artificielle, 2023; National Artificial Intelligence Policy of Ethiopia, 2024). Mauritius took the

lead in introducing the first national AI policy in 2018, but a number of other African countries have either adopted or initiated a process towards a national AI policy or strategy since. But why are strategies and policies the chosen approach to or method of AI governance in Africa? What is strategy/policy anyway? Is it equivalent to other governance instruments such as legislation? What follows seeks to address such questions in turn by a way of background to the analysis in other articles of the special section.

2.1. What is a Strategy?

In its dictionary meaning, "strategy" means a 'detailed plan' for achieving a particular set of goals (Cambridge Online Dictionary, 2025). Not only is strategy a detailed plan but also that the plan seeks to achieve long-term goals. That means strategies are forward-looking, they are about the future. But strategy is not legislation or does not ordinarily create institutions. Legislation, be of soft or hard law nature, often is foreshadowed in national policies and strategies. Legislation is, as such, a means by which the objectives of a strategy may be achieved through the instrumentality of governance institutions. In many jurisdictions, the adoption of sector-specific national policies and strategies precede the adoption of legislation or the creation of implementing agencies.

Strategies are best understood as aspirational documents where governments or intergovernmental bodies set forth areas of regulatory focus for the years ahead as well as the attendant implementation mechanisms. It is against this background that AI strategies should be conceptualised, and their role in governance be understood. AI strategies are thus detailed and long-term plans set out by states individually or through intergovernmental organisations on how to effectively harness the benefits of AI while at the same time addressing the attendant risks. Once adopted, achieving the objectives of the strategy might require the enactment of an omnibus or multiple sectoral legislation addressing AI in particular contexts and sectors. That best captures the normative nature of AI policies vis-a-vis legislation.

Charting the governance of AI with the adoption of strategies is not new, however. The EU's widely lauded AI Act was, for example, preceded by an AI strategy or a series of strategies. The European Commission first articulated the EU's AI strategy in April 2018 with the launch of a Communication titled 'AI for Europe' in which it proposed the preparation of an AI ethics guidelines (Artificial Intelligence for Europe, 2018: 3, 14-15). The guidelines were later developed by the independent expert group set up by the Commission (High-Level Expert Group on Artificial Intelligence, 2019). The so-called 'EU AI Strategy' was later introduced by the Commission in December 2018, where a coordinated plan on AI has been laid out (Coordinated Plan on Artificial Intelligence, 2018).[1] In the Strategy, the Commission hinted at the need to start a legislative process that may address gaps in existing EU safety and liability regulatory regimes (Coordinated Plan on Artificial Intelligence, 2018: 7-8). The origins of the EU AI Act lies here.

An interesting parallel with the approach in Africa is that a handful of EU member states had introduced national AI strategies before the EU introduced continental strategies on AI (Coordinated Plan on Artificial Intelligence, 2018: Footnote 9). Before the AU launched the continental AI strategy in July 2024, a number of African countries—as alluded to above—had introduced national AI strategies. But one does not see a transition from strategy to legislation in Africa. Except for the proposed AI bills in Morocco—which, of course, was not even preceded by

AI strategy—and Ethiopia, no country has yet adopted or publicly announced a legislative process on AI (Tech Review Africa, 2025; Draft AI Development and Regulation Proclamation, 2025). Among other themes, the proposed legislation in Morocco would install a regulatory agency. Morocco's bill is however yet to receive legislative imprimatur. Ethiopia's AI bill is largely similar in approach to the EU's AI Act. For instance, it lays out a risk-based approach to governance by which certain AI systems are prohibited (Draft AI Development and Regulation Proclamation, 2025: Arts 5-8). The bill further defines the regulatory powers of the Ethiopian AI Institute and sets out a series of criminal sanctions for violation of the law ((Draft AI Development and Regulation Proclamation, 2025: Arts 11, 14).

2.2. Why a Strategy?

But why is it that AI strategies have been the chosen governance instruments across the continent? The reason behind the choice of strategy as a governance instrument is not straightforward. The text of the AU AI Strategy does not, for example, clearly state the underlying reason for the choice of 'strategy' as continental governance instrument. If one were to apply the definition of strategy provided above—and the experience in Europe, the adoption of the AI strategies at the national and regional levels in Africa could be taken as a start of a long process of building governance structures. This would include adoption of legislation along the lines of the EU AI Act and creation of implementing agencies. So, what is it that underlines the use of strategies in Africa? There is unlikely to be a clear answer in the absence of a clearly stated position by policymakers. But a closer look at the process leading up to the adoption of continental instruments may get us closer to the answer.

The AU AI Strategy is currently the principal AI governance instrument in Africa. But the Strategy was adopted alongside another less noticed continental instrument called the African Digital Compact (African Digital Compact, 2024). AI governance does not find much attention in the Compact. One of the ten 'pillars' of the African Digital Compact is the 'development and adoption of AI' (African Digital Compact, 2024: 34). Under this pillar, developing and implementing 'robust AI governance, regulations, standards, codes of conduct and best practices to manage AI risks and promote its growth' is one of the stated objectives (African Digital Compact, 2024: 35). This is reiterated as one of the areas requiring policy intervention. Perhaps the most direct reference to AI governance—and a hint as to the underlying objective of the AU Strategy, the Compact encourages AU member states to 'develop and harmonize AI policies and regulations that reflect the principles outlined in the AU Strategy on AI' (African Digital Compact, 2024: 36).

The origins and indeed objective of the African Digital Compact is closely tied to the United Nations' (UN) Global Digital Compact. Alongside the AU AI Strategy, the African Digital Compact was conceived as a document that sets forth Africa's position during the negotiations on the then draft UN Global Digital Compact. In the months leading up to the adoption of the AU AI Strategy and the African Digital Compact, the UN was negotiating the adoption of a Global Digital Compact. The zero draft of the Global Digital Compact was released in April 2024. After months of negotiation and consultations, UN member states adopted the Compact at the Summit of the Future in September 2024 (Global Digital Compact, 2024). The Global Digital Compact is currently the major global AI governance instrument where member states commit to create a set

of global AI institutions, including an international scientific panel on AI and a global dialogue on AI governance (Yilma, 2025: Ch 4).

Neither the African Digital Compact nor the AU AI Strategy come, as alluded to above, close to taking significant governance measures. But considering the thinking behind the adoption of these policy instruments offers useful insights as to the purpose that they were meant to fulfil. In his speech at the 45th ordinary session of the AU Executive Council where the AU AI Strategy and the African Digital Compact were 'endorsed', the former Commissioner of the AU, Moussa Faki Mahamat, offered useful insights as to the rationale behind the preparation of the Strategy. In his own words (Moussa Faki Mahamat, 2024):

> [The United Nations Summit of the Future's] major theme, "governing Artificial Intelligence for the benefit of humanity", implicitly underscores the ambivalence of Artificial Intelligence, the uses of which can also contradict commonly accepted ethical principles. You know as much as I do, if not more, how sensitive this dimension is, with regard to our own *cultures, beliefs and values. In a spirit of critical vigilance, the African Union has worked out two important documents, namely the African Digital Compact and the Continental Strategy for Artificial Intelligence*. After consideration and adoption by your Council*, these texts will serve as advocacy instruments in favour of the African Common Position in the negotiations leading to the final development of the Global Digital Compact*. [Emphasis added]

As this speech readily states, the primary goal has been to articulate a unified African position during the negotiation on the UN-mediated Global Digital Compact. This was reinforced in the forewords to the African Digital Compact authored by the former Chairman of the AU Commission and the Commissioner for Infrastructure and Energy (African Digital Compact, 2024: 3-4). After endorsing the AI Strategy, the Executive Council 'requested' AU member states to carry out three things: support the implementation of the African Digital Compact and the Continental AI Strategy, request their Diplomatic Missions at the United Nations to advocate for the key recommendations and actions in the African Digital Compact during the negotiations of the Global Digital Compact and deliberations at the Summit of the Future, and participate actively and effectively in global discussions and negotiations on AI governance and promote the Continental AI Strategy (Decision on the Reports of the Specialised Technical Committees, 2024: Para 29).

What the foregoing then illustrates is that in adopting the AI Strategy, the aim was not to roll out a continental governance instrument. Or at least this has not been the primary goal. The overarching aim has been to use the AI Strategy as an 'advocacy' tool to reflect the African position on global AI governance. Put differently, instead of laying down a regional governance framework, the aim was to add an African input to the process of building a global framework of AI governance. This offers some clarity on the nature of the AI Strategy as a governance instrument. It is not meant to be a permanent continental policy document but one that is meant to inform policy discussions at the UN. For that reason, it can hardly be taken as an AI governance instrument. But if the AI Strategy is not a governance instrument per se, can it be seen as a starting point for further legislative and policy steps at the continental and national levels in Africa?

The AU AI Strategy does not quite offer a coherent answer to the above. On the one hand, providing a framework on the basis of which member states may introduce national AI strategies and policies appears to be the primary goal. The Strategy states that AU member states have the

'ultimate and critical responsibility in domesticating this Continental AI Strategy by developing and implementing their national AI strategies' (Continental Artificial Intelligence Strategy, 2024: 60). Highlighting the virtue of national AI strategies and policies as 'starting points for governing AI', the AU AI Strategy calls upon member states to develop such strategies and policies in line with the Continental AI Strategy (Continental Artificial Intelligence Strategy, 2024: 7, 33-34). That would reduce the role of the AI strategy as a framework document for tailored national AI Strategies.

This was also hinted at by Amani Abou-Zeid, former AU Commissioner for Infrastructure and Energy, who oversaw the development of the AI Strategy as well as the African Digital Compact. In her foreword to the AU AI Strategy, the Commissioner called upon member states to 'accelerate the domestication of the strategy' (Continental Artificial Intelligence Strategy, 2024: 1). Ordinarily, domesticating regional governance instruments such as treaties or soft law would involve taking legislative measures at the domestic level, including putting in place the requisite institutional and regulatory structure, to give effect to rights, principles or norms set out in the overarching regional framework rules. Taken that way, domesticating the AI Strategy would involve enacting or amending domestic legislation by member states, and where applicable, create appropriate governance institutions or empower existing entities with new roles pertinent with respect to the governance of AI. But introducing legislation does not seem to be part of the domesticating the AI Strategy. This line of interpretation would considerably limit the underlying objective of the AU AI Strategy.

On the other hand, the Strategy proposes the creation of regional governance mechanisms such as a regional AI ethics board, AI advisory board and even AI ethics guidelines (Continental Artificial Intelligence Strategy, 2024: 35). It highlights the need to enact or amend legislation dealing with various themes such as data protection, intellectual property and cybersecurity to effectively govern AI (Continental Artificial Intelligence Strategy, 2024: 32). This may be taken to mean that AU member states would have to translate the Strategy into concrete regulatory instruments and institutions. Going beyond adopting national AI strategies, member states would then be expected to introduce domestic legislation and install AI institutions at the national and regional levels. This stands in stark contrast with the aim of the Strategy flagged above, i.e. providing the framework by which member states may develop comparable national AI policies and strategies.

Strategy as a starting point for further governance processes is reflected much more clearly in national AI policies. Ethiopia's AI Policy, for instance, defines itself as a 'foundational document' that would be followed by further legislation or pieces of legislation that translates the Policy's aspirations into concrete measures (National Artificial Intelligence Policy of Ethiopia, 2024: Secs 3.1, 7.2). The ongoing work at the Ethiopian AI Institute to draft an AI legislation, as alluded to above, is an attempt at realising one or more of the policy aspirations. One does not however find a clear pathway towards legislative processes, be it in the form of a continental AI treaty or soft law of some form, envisioned in the AU AI Strategy. What the latter casually acknowledges, rather, is that national AI strategies are important starting points for governing AI (Continental Artificial Intelligence Strategy, 2024: 1).

2.3. An African Vision?

If one were to accept the aim of the AU AI Strategy as a framework instrument that is based on a common African position or vision, the question of whether this is indeed reflected in the content of the Strategy remains. As some of the contributions in the special section show, national and continental governance initiatives in Africa do not properly articulate a clear and contextualised vision on the governance of AI. Nor do they embrace ethical, knowledge and value systems that are indigenous to the continent generally and in specific African countries. Much of the text in such documents, including the AU AI Strategy, seems to follow concepts and principles laid out in policy instruments of western intergovernmental organisations.

Reinforcing this point are interactions between the AU and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in the lead up to the adoption of the AU AI Strategy. In March 2024, a few months before the adoption of the AU AI Strategy, the OECD hosted the African Union/OECD AI Dialogue (Perset et al, 2024). From the African side, participants included officers from the AU Commission as well as drafters of the AU AI Strategy. Curiously, one of the reported takeaways from the Dialogue has been the 'opportunity' that the platform offered for 'timely sharing of information and best practices to inform the development of the AU's Continental AI Strategy for Africa and other AI initiatives (Perset et al, 2024).

While drawing upon best practices is desirable, the extent to which the Strategy fulfilled the stated aim of articulating a common African position is in doubt. Importantly, whether and the extent to which the stated goal of the AU AI strategy informing the UN Global Digital Compact in a manner that accounts for African "cultures, beliefs and values"—to use the former AU Commissioner's words—materialised remains unclear. AI governance is just one among a host of themes covered in the Global Digital Compact. Importantly, the creation of two entities—alluded to above—are the major AI governance outcomes of the Compact. And as such, there was hardly any room for neither African "cultures, beliefs and values" nor a vaguely framed "common African position" to form part of the Global Digital Compact.

In the absence of a common and clear vision on AI governance articulated at the continental level, AU member states are left to their own means in defining their vision. The easiest way forward in such cases would be searching for 'best practices' elsewhere. Going down this path however comes with the risk of regurgitating governance experiments elsewhere which might not be a good fit to the particular contexts of the African continent. Just like in other fields such as cybercrime, data protection and e-commerce governance, AU member states are likely to fashion national AI governance regimes along approaches pursued in Europe and elsewhere in the Global North. The AU adopted the Malabo Convention, formally called the AU Convention on Cybersecurity and Personal Data Protection, in 2014 covering these three domains in an exceedingly abbreviated manner (AU Convention on Cybersecurity and Personal Data Protection, 2014). These are electronic transactions (chapter I), personal data protection, (chapter II) and cybercrime (chapter III).

Not only did AU member states avoid ratifying the Convention for ten years but also that resorted to enact domestic legislation inspired directly by instruments adopted in the EU and the CoE. By failing to offer a coherent vision of AI governance, the AU AI Strategy similarly provides the incentive for member states to look for benchmarks elsewhere. In fact, the less concisely organised

section on 'AI governance and regulation' in the AU AI Strategy appears to encourage this. It partly reads (Continental Artificial Intelligence Strategy, 2024: 32):

> African AI governance will consider emerging best practices both within the region and globally on AI policy and regulation (e.g., EU AI Act, Canadian AI and Data Act, UK Artificial Intelligence Regulation, etc.).

The ongoing AI legislative experiment in Ethiopia already signals an approach towards drawing examples from elsewhere. As alluded to above, the draft AI legislation in Ethiopia by and large emulates EU AI Act's risk-based approach. Other countries are likely to follow suit. To be sure, Canada's legislative initiative is still yet to be enacted. Whereas the UK has not formally introduced an AI Regulation. But the point is that the AU AI Strategy does not quite envision a role for itself as a regional framework instrument but nudges member states to look for best practices across the ocean.

As a diverse continent of fifty-five nations, defining a common vision on AI governance would—if ever possible—ideally require a rather participatory and meticulous process. As flagged in the first section, it seems that the AU AI strategy was produced in a rushed and opaque process. Although the idea of a continental strategy emerged in 2019, it was in the lead up to the UN Summit of the Future and the Global Digital Compact that the development of the AU AI Strategy was undertaken in earnest. That makes the current text of the Strategy largely a product of a few months of expedited work between April and July 2024.

Add to that the pressure to catch up to fast-moving legislative developments, particularly in Europe. The focus might have been more, as a result, on form than substance; a rushed step to fill a perceived governance void or lack of continental leadership. That undermined the possibility of crafting a governance structure that best captures priorities, needs and risks in Africa. What follows from this, then, is a governance landscape that is fragmented with incoherent and ambiguous visions of AI governance in the continent.

Overall, strategies and policies appear to be the principal way in which African policymakers are approaching AI governance thus far. But the underlying objective or the endgame of AI strategies adopted so far remain vague. Further legislative processes that translate the strategies into concrete governance arrangements are yet to emerge. As the number of national and regional AI strategies continues to grow, it is high time to study and deconstruct the visions that underlie these governance instruments in Africa. That is the aim of the special section, as the next section lays out.

3. Deconstructing the Vision—Aims of the Special Section

Despite considerable governance efforts taking place in Africa, the governance of AI is yet to attract meaningful attention in the relevant literature. While papers that consider specific topics have been published, much is left wanting. The stated and unstated visions, assumptions, influences, and approaches of these AI governance initiatives have not been a subject of closer and systematic scholarly examination. Much of the focus has been governance efforts taking place under the auspices of intergovernmental organisations in Europe. That is the void in literature that this special section of *Science and Public Policy* seeks to lessen. By bringing together a team of

scholars drawn mainly from Africa but also other regions, the special section explores and deconstructs the visions of AI governance from an interdisciplinary perspective.

Contributions in this special section examine the nature, dynamics and complexities of ongoing developments in the AI governance domain in Africa alluded to in the preceding section. On the one hand, policymakers are taken up by the AI hype and are betting on its wide-ranging developmental potential. That is understandable given the monumental challenges in the continent. On the other hand, a number of governance initiatives in the form of AI strategies are emerging at the national and continental levels. But as shown above, the underlying objective and role of the AI strategies in the governance of AI has not been straightforward. Articles in the special section seek to critically examine this maze of developments from different perspectives. In particular, the contributions seek to address questions of the following sort:

- What are the defining features and underlying assumptions of AI governance in Africa?
- To what extent are existing governance arrangements in Africa such as the regional human rights system fit for purpose to the AI context?
- What insights do empirical studies offer on the nature and scope of ongoing AI governance efforts at various levels in the continent?
- What common threads exist in the AI governance initiatives taken in particular regions such as in North Africa?
- What insights does examination of recent AI governance initiatives through the lens of certain conceptual frames such as the Third World Approaches to International Law (TWAIL) offer?
- What tensions exist between aspirations for development by leveraging AI systems and the realities of structural dependency—including the soft influence of donors, international partners, and technology companies in shaping policy priorities and regulatory architectures?
- What role do African legal traditions, philosophies (onto-epistemologies), and institutional legacies play?

To answer these questions, the articles published in the special section employ different methods, approaches and tools. AI governance is demonstrably an emerging but multidisciplinary field. While governance is the preserve of political science and international relations, scholarly works in the past few years draw from different disciplines. From specialist areas of law such as law and technology and international law to social scientists of all stripes and technologists, the governance of AI is evolving into a truly multidisciplinary field. In keeping with this phenomenon, articles published in this special section employ different research methods and approaches in examining AI governance in Africa.

On top of common methods such as doctrinal and empirical research methodologies, articles in the special section employ diverse methods, approaches and conceptual frames such as decolonial feminism, TWAIL, regulatory entrepreneurship and an ecosystem approach. Also running through almost all contributions are comparisons between governance initiatives in Africa and other comparable jurisdictions such as those in Europe. That further reinforces the multi and interdisciplinary nature of contributions included in the special section. Through methods such as thematic document analysis, doctrinal and critical legal inquiries, computational and empirical

inquiry, contributors unpack how AI governance strategies in the continent sometimes replicate colonial logics and other forms of inequalities—for instance, by uncritically adopting governance norms from the Global North without sufficient adaptation to local socio-economic and cultural realities and political priorities.

Articles in this special section contribute to academic, policy and civil society discourse on the governance of AI, particularly in Africa. The interdisciplinary nature of the contributions position them as valuable resources for scholars from various disciplinary backgrounds—legal scholars, data science, political science, philosophy, and sociology, to mention but a few—by offering not only analysis of the AI governance landscape in Africa but also by identifying current and future research agendas. Through its recommendations and forward-looking agenda-setting, the special section will also provide important input for policymakers and civil society organisations.

4. Papers in the Special Section—An Overview

This special section of Science and Public Policy brings together a team of interdisciplinary scholars and practitioners. The contributors to this special section are handpicked by the editors on account of their extensive experience in researching digital governance more broadly in Africa. The team of authors include legal academics, social scientists, computer scientists and philosophers with research expertise in the governance of new and emerging technologies.

All articles included in the special section have been presented at a workshop held at ETH Zurich between 26 and 27 June 2025. In addition to the rigorous review process of the *Science and Public Policy*, the articles have benefited from thorough discussions at the workshop. Convened jointly by the ETH Zurich and the University of Leeds—and funded graciously by the Swiss National Science Foundation and ETH Zurich's WIDE Working Group, the workshop provided a platform to discuss the first draft of the articles. The special section includes six research articles. What follows provides a brief overview of each article, outlining the key arguments and findings.

The first contribution by Jake Effoduh undertakes a critical inquiry into AI governance by African nations and regional bodies through TWAIL and decolonial approaches. Effoduh problematises the increasing epistemic subordination in the AI governance landscape of the continent that is taking place through what he calls "normative mimicry", institutional dependency and restricted policy autonomy. The author argues that AI governance is not only a site for the reproduction of power but also a potential arena for resisting and reshaping power relations. This contribution, as also underscored by other contributors, calls for a decolonial governance agenda grounded in epistemic pluralism and participatory legitimacy, while also acknowledging the ongoing challenges posed by both technological and normative dependencies and in doing so reassert African agency through fundamental epistemic shift grounded in the continent's diverse legal traditions, historical experiences and political priorities.

George Ogoh, Damien Eke, and Bernd Stahl examine, in the second contribution, the current state of AI governance in North Africa using the case of Egypt, Morocco, Mauritania, Algeria, Libya and Tunisia through thematic analysis of policy documents and an ecosystem approach. While giving a descriptive overview of the AI governance progress in each country, their similarity and differences, the contribution also makes a critical conceptual assessment of governance

approaches. The authors employ a systems thinking lens to reveal the constructed nature of AI governance structures and to advocate for fine-grained, context-sensitive approaches. The framing of AI governance as ecosystemic also raises deeper legal, ethical and governance questions: what constitutes a system, its boundaries, and purpose?

Using this, the contribution shows the increasing alignment of AI governance in Africa with that of Europe and North America triggering further questions as to why this is the case and how it happened. This raises the question of whether processes like mimetic isomorphism – where organisations model themselves after others they perceive as legitimate – are at play, a challenge also pointed out by Effoduh as a "normative mimicry". This contribution also shows the misalignment between the approach taken by the policy documents examined and the Africa-centric approach seemingly taken by the AU AI Strategy. This relates to Nyabola (see below) and Effoduh's reminder of the need for critical and reflexive attentiveness and doing so in a manner that reflects/reasserts African agency instead of merely reinforcing existing hierarchies.

The third contribution by Nanjala Nyabola, in a similar vein, explores the ethical and philosophical foundations of African approaches to AI governance. Drawing from decolonial African feminist thoughts, the author critiques the reductive and superficial application of indigenous African epistemologies such as Ubuntu and argues for a deeper engagement with African philosophies of personhood, relationality, and environmental interdependence. Nyabola problematises the practice of research on AI in the continent that tends to challenge neoliberal agenda while still relying on and reflecting western onto-epistemology to address ethical and normative challenges. The author argues that this ethical vision calls for an epistemic shift—not merely reforming existing frameworks, but fundamentally rethinking the values, norms, and worldviews that underpin AI governance more broadly.

African philosophy with ethical commitment to completing decolonial projects as a "process of gathering oneself" and source of regulatory framework would be attentive to intersecting inequalities also within the continent particularly to the experience of groups such as African women who often bear the burden of violent neoliberal institutions. In a hopeful note, the author points out that the AU AI strategy is in the right direction in at least its ethical demand. This suggests that if there is to be a distinct African approach to AI governance, it must be in the onto-epistemology in which a person alongside other people, nature, culture co-exist.

The fourth contribution by Grace Mutung'u, Aaron Martin and Magdalena Brewczynska highlights the unique regulatory and implementation challenges posed by corporate strategies aimed at circumventing regulatory scrutiny. Using the case of Worldcoin's (now World Network) operations in Kenya, the authors apply the concept of regulatory entrepreneurship to examine the AI governance implications of biometric-based digital identification systems. The authors examine the strategies and conditions that enable regulatory entrepreneurship and show how these were leveraged by Worldcoin in Kenya, resulting in several breaches of Kenya's 2019 Data Protection Act. The authors further situate these issues within the discourse of digital sovereignty and draw a connection between individual digital sovereignty—understood as the rights of data subjects—and states' duty, pointing us towards an emerging consideration that national digital sovereignty derives regulatory authority from the responsibility to protect individual digital rights. This

contribution concludes by highlighting challenges in institutional enforcement, particularly in relation to data processing and deletion.

Felicity Mulford, Nuhu Ibrahim and Riza Batista-Navarro's fifth contribution in the special section, features a uniquely transdisciplinary contribution, an empirical and computational work on the use of AI for detecting and generating hate speech in Ethiopia. The team of authors, consisting of civil society practitioners and academics, reveal the limitations of LLMs in under-resourced languages and explores how AI policies and content moderation practises intersect in contexts marked by political and ethnic tensions. Through empirical analysis and close scrutiny of Ethiopia's landmark AI Policy, the paper reveals policy gaps that leave Ethiopian AI and social media users at risk of online harms. It offers a critical warning to AI policy makers, developers, social media companies, and their content moderation teams, and provides recommendation to revise Ethiopia's AI policy using the ASPIRE framework: Adapting policy to the digital sphere; Strengthening linguistic inclusivity; Preventing AI misuse; Improving infrastructure; Resourcing media literacy and training; and Emphasising overlaps with hate speech governance.

The final contribution by Mujib Jimoh offers a critical examination of fairness and human rights rooted in the African Human Rights systems in the context of AI governance. As a response to the critique that AI governance policies and scholarship in the continent fail to pay sufficient attention to the impact of AI on human rights, particularly non-discrimination, the author interrogates the ways in which African legal instruments—such as the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights—might offer a foundation for 'fair AI' that ensures equality, non-discrimination, and inclusion. This approach identifies doctrinal affordances and institutional gaps, calling attention to enforcement challenges. Jimoh outlines ways to overcome this challenge by ensuring States' rights obligations to respect, protect and fulfill, enhancing the role of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights to fulfil its mandate under Art. 45 of the Charter, and centring African values such as Ubuntu in the governance structure.

Taken together, contributions included in this special section seek to move the conversation beyond surface-level AI governance analysis towards a richer, more grounded understanding of what AI governance means in Africa, and its driving forces—stated or otherwise. They offer not just critiques but also a (de)constructive approach, grounded in African intellectual traditions, socio-legal realities, and normative commitments. The contributions collectively call for AI governance that is pluralistic, context-sensitive, and ethically grounded—and that meaningfully reflects the voices, values, and aspirations of African peoples.

5. Final Remarks

AI governance efforts in Africa are still in a state of flux. Whether the AU would take further steps beyond the adoption of the AI Strategy or that it marks the culmination of continental level governance measures is not clear. Except for a dozen countries, the majority of countries in the continent are yet to take any steps, including in the form of national AI policies. Recent policy measures in the continent however appear to be prompted by the fear of missing out in the wake of major governance efforts taking place in other counterpart intergovernmental organisations such as the EU. African policymakers sought to catch up with the global hype through the adoption of the AI strategies—and in some cases, through creation of AI institutions.

Clouded further by the AI hype, it is safe to state that the approach to AI governance in Africa thus far has been impromptu. With more governance measures likely to continue to emerge in the coming years, it is vital to put to closer scrutiny the underlying assumptions, objectives and approaches of ongoing AI governance efforts. This special section seeks to contribute towards this goal of interrogating the governance of AI in Africa. Through contributions from scholars drawn from different disciplines, the special section explores the current state of and normative direction of ongoing AI governance processes in Africa.

Doubtless, this objective cannot be achieved with the publication of a handful of articles. The special section should rather be seen as a beginning to further scholarly examination of AI governance in Africa. We call upon fellow scholars to build on contributions in this edition and continue the conversation on AI governance in Africa. Beyond knowledge production, this could provide helpful insight to policymakers in the continent in fashioning their long-term approach to AI governance. We are hopeful that the contributions provide the reason to rethink the path already taken, and pursue a more focused, contextual and robust governance arrangement in the years ahead. Beyond academia and policy circles, the analysis and insights of articles in the special section could also provide useful resources in advocating for robust, appropriately contextual and human and peoples' rights compliant governance arrangements for AI in Africa. We wish you a pleasant read.

Notes

[1] For more on the EU's approach to AI governance, see <https://shorturl.at/rh8aZ>. Last accessed 20 November 2025.

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