18 June 2025

10:00 a.m. – 12:30 p.m. (EAT)

Virtual, Addis Ababa & Geneva

TECHNOLOGY & INNOVATION REPORT 2025

Webinar on Harnessing Inclusive Artificial Intelligence for Development in Africa

Background

From artificial intelligence (AI) to green hydrogen and nanotechnology, frontier technologies are rapidly evolving and have the potential to significantly impact economic development, sustainability, and governance. Among these, as a general-purpose technology, AI holds a transformative capacity to reshape industries, create new markets, and enable effective human-machine interaction. In principle, AI presents significant opportunities to accelerate progress toward the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), from powering smart agriculture and energy grids, optimizing production and supply chains, to improving water and city planning.

However, in the absence of equitable distribution and strong ethical oversight and transparency, AI diffusion risks exacerbating existing inequalities within and across countries. Especially, developing countries, including many in Africa, face significant constraints in three critical leverage points that have underpinned rapid progress of AI in recent decades: infrastructure, data, and skills. These gaps, including limited access to reliable electricity and high-speed internet, the scarcity of relevant data, and low levels of digital literacy, significantly undermine the capacity to adopt and tailor AI systems to suit local needs. Within this context, developing countries, including Africa, urgently need to strategically position themselves to harness the benefits of this new technological era, while addressing the potential risks and promoting equitable and inclusive AI development. Such effort requires concerted action at both the national and international levels. At the national level, countries need to take a whole-of-government approach, aligning and coordinating actions across ministries, and establishing policies and governance to orient the direction of technological change. At the international level, inclusive, multi-stakeholder cooperation is essential to ensure that AI serves as a global public good, fostering inclusive innovation to address global challenges.

Review of Technology and Report 2025

The UNCTAD Technology and Innovation Report 2025 emphasizes the transformative potential of frontier technologies, especially artificial intelligence (AI) in supporting sustainable and inclusive development. The report underscores that while AI offers significant opportunities for businesses and countries to advance economic growth and accelerate progress toward the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), it also presents various risks and ethical concerns. In this context, informed leadership is key to harnessing AI for sustainable and inclusive development.

The rapid advancement of AI has been largely driven by three key leverage points: infrastructure, data, and skills. The report highlights that developing countries, including Africa, can accelerate AI adoption by redesigning AI Systems to fit existing infrastructure constraints, leveraging new and diverse sources of data, lowering skill barriers through user-friendly interfaces, and building strategic partnerships.

According to the UNCTAD frontier technologies readiness index, most African countries are classified as lower-middle or low in terms of technology readiness, with the exception of South Africa, Morocco, and Egypt. However, there are also encouraging signs, with Nigeria, Ghana, and Kenya becoming the fastest-growing economies in terms of the number of developers, indicating the strong potential for future progress in the region.

The report also highlights the importance of national policies and International cooperation to harness AI for inclusive and sustainable development. At the national level, the report stresses that AI policies are not only essential for achieving structural transformation and productivity growth, but also for addressing other societal, ethical, and environmental challenges arising from the diffusion of the Technology. Such policies must be tailored to country-specific contexts and implemented through a whole-of-government approach, ensuring alignment across sectors and guided by effective regulation and governance. At the International level, inclusive, multi-stakeholder cooperation is necessary to ensure that AI serves as a global public good-providing equitable access, transparency, and shared benefits. For developing countries, meaningful participation in the global AI governance is critical to reflect their significant roles in the usage of AI and ensure effectiveness of global AI governance.

Objective

This webinar will bring together key stakeholders from Africa, with an interest in frontier technologies, especially Artificial Intelligence (AI) for development, to discuss and reflect how it can be harnessed for inclusive and sustainable development across the continent. The webinar aims to:

1. Present key findings and insights from the Technology and Innovation report 2025

2. Facilitate dialogue on how African countries can strategically position themselves to adopt and tailor AI technologies for local context, addressing key challenges and unlocking opportunities for inclusive and sustainable development

3. Promote knowledge-sharing by showcasing successful cases and local innovations from across the continent

4. Discuss policy priorities and governance needs, including the formulation of national strategies and global cooperation, to ensure AI is developed and deployed in an ethical, inclusive, and equitable manner

5. Foster engagement and collaboration among governments, private sector actors, civil society, and international partners

Target participants

The webinar will target stakeholders from across Africa with an interest in frontier technologies, especially AI, for sustainable development. Target participants include policy makers and government representatives, International organizations, development partners, academia, private sector leaders, civil society, among others.

Modalities

The webinar will be hosted virtually on zoom.

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Draft Programme

10:00 – 10:10 a.m. Opening Remarks
      Director Division for Trade and Logistics – UNCTAD
      Director Technology, Innovation, Connectivity & Infrastructure Division – ECA

10:10 – 10:30 a.m. Presentation of the UNCTAD Technology and Innovation Report 2025
      Mr. Antonio Vezzani, Economic Affairs Officer – UNCTAD

10:30 – 11:15 a.m. Panel Discussion
      Government Representative
      Private Sector Representative
      Academia Representative
      Civil Society Representative
      AUC Representative
      Youth Representative

11:15 – 11:50 a.m. Discussions from the floor

11:50 – 12:00 p.m. Closing Remarks
      Ms. Diane Sayinzoga, Chief, Regional Office for Africa – UNCTAD
      Mr. Mactar Seck, Head, Innovation & Technology Section – ECA