CONVERGENCE

2024 Q1 AI IN AFRICA SUMMARY REPORT

March 2024

At Convergence we're dedicated to fostering the adoption of AI in Africa, mainly for economic growth and transformation through innovation, research and development, advising policies, and collaboration with key stakeholders. We aim to utilize AI as a catalyst for holistic growth and economic transformation on the continent.

This report was gathered through desk research of different initiatives across Africa from January to March 2024, the first quarter (Q1) of the year.

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Introduction

2023 witnessed a significant surge in global Artificial Intelligence (AI) discussions. Notably, "ChatGPT" and "chat gpt" emerged as the top-rising Google search queries compared to the preceding year, indicating a growing curiosity and engagement with AI technologies worldwide. This trend was evident even within the African continent, with South Africa highlighting similar search patterns according to Google's reports. As the discourse around AI intensifies, 2024 has become a pivotal year marked by extensive efforts to delve into AI regulation and governance. This report encapsulates the comprehensive overview of initiatives undertaken by various stakeholders across African nations during the first quarter (Q1) of 2024.

AI Landscape in Africa:
The burgeoning interest in AI across Africa mirrors the global trend, with governments, businesses, and civil society increasingly recognizing the transformative potential of AI technologies. The continent has witnessed a surge in AI-related research, development, and implementation initiatives across diverse sectors, ranging from healthcare and agriculture to finance and education. As AI adoption gains momentum, concerns regarding ethical implications, data privacy, and algorithmic bias have propelled discussions around the necessity for robust regulatory frameworks and effective governance mechanisms tailored to the African context.

Key Themes in Q1 2024:
1. Regulatory Frameworks Development: African governments and organizations are actively engaging in the formulation of AI-specific strategies and regulatory frameworks to address emerging challenges and ensure responsible AI deployment.
2. Public-Private Partnerships: Collaboration between government agencies, private sector entities, academia, and civil society organizations is gaining traction to foster innovation, address regulatory gaps, and promote inclusive AI ecosystems. Initiatives focusing on capacity building, knowledge transfer, and entrepreneurship support have been prominent during the first quarter of 2024, reflecting a concerted effort to harness AI for socioeconomic development.
3. Ethical AI and Responsible Innovation: The ethical dimensions of AI deployment are receiving heightened attention, with stakeholders emphasizing the importance of integrating ethical considerations into AI design, development, and deployment processes. Discussions around fairness, transparency, and accountability in AI systems have underscored the need for ethical guidelines and best practices to mitigate potential risks and ensure that AI benefits are equitably distributed across society.
4. AI Governance and International Collaboration: African countries increasingly engage in international fora and partnerships to exchange knowledge, share best practices, and harmonize regulatory approaches in AI governance. Q1 2024 has witnessed active participation in multilateral initiatives, collaborative research projects, and capacity-building programs to strengthen regional and global cooperation in navigating the complex challenges posed by AI technologies.

Acronyms

AI - Artificial Intelligence

AI4PEP - AI for Pandemic Preparedness and Response

AMCHAM - American Chamber of Commerce

APET - African Union High-Level Panel on Emerging Technologies

AUDA - African Union Development Agency

BSE - Botswana Stock Exchange

DTIC - Department of Trade, Industry, and Competition

EAII - Ethiopian Artificial Intelligence Institute

EIH - Ethiopian Investment Holdings

HPKU - Hong Kong Polytechnic University

IBM - International Business Machines Corporation

IDRC - International Development Research Centre

KURA - Kenya Urban Roads Authority

NCC - Nigerian Communications Commission

NCS - Nigeria Custom Service

NCST - National Commission for Science and Technology

NEPAD - New Partnership for Africa's Development

NITDA - National Information Technology Development Agency

Q1 - Quarter One

UAE – United Arab Emirates

UN - United Nations

UP-PUA - University of Pretoria's Pre-University Academy

UJ - University of Johannesburg

USAID - U.S. Agency for International Development

WEF – World Economic Forum

International Actors

The year commenced with an insightful interview featured in the United Nations Africa Renewal magazine. In this interview, a distinguished African AI expert raised concerns regarding digital colonization. The discussion centered around the increasing presence of foreign companies utilizing local data without adequately involving local stakeholders 1. Despite these concerns, international actors have made multiple promising developments in the AI landscape, particularly in innovation and capacity building. Two multinational powerhouses, Vodafone and Microsoft, established a $1.5 billion ten-year strategic AI partnership 2. This collaboration aims to advance cloud solutions and foster customer-centric AI services tailored to the unique needs of the African market.

The Mozilla Foundation has also strongly advocated promoting AI research in Africa through the Mradi Research Grant. Seven grantees, including individuals and organizations focusing on the intersection of AI, human rights, and gender justice, were awarded 3. These initiatives demonstrate international actors' contributions to fostering AI adoption in Africa. Furthermore, IBM is actively engaged with universities and nonprofit organizations involved in upskilling young people and developing workforce programs across Africa. IBM South Africa's technical community leader emphasized the growing demand for automation in various sectors, underscoring the urgent need to address the skills gap and equip the local workforce with the requisite capabilities 4.

The first quarter of 2024 also witnessed a significant and much-anticipated effort from the African Union Development Agency (AUDA-NEPAD) and the African Union High-Level Panel on Emerging Technologies (APET) on the White Paper: Regulation and Responsible Adoption of AI for Africa Towards Achievement of AU Agenda 2063, and the AI Roadmap for Africa, a strategic blueprint leading to the development of the African Union Continental AI Strategy. The first draft with a focus on six pillars — developing human capital for AI, using infrastructure and data as foundations for strengthening AI systems, creating an enabling environment for AI development and deployment, establishing a conducive economic climate for AI, building sustainable partnerships, and fostering capacity for monitoring and evaluation of AI strategies in African countries — has paved way for the open invitation and call for inputs from stakeholders and experts to contribute to the finalization of the AU-AI Continental Strategy 5.

Furthermore, UN member states submit a draft resolution on AI use to the UN General Assembly. Cabo Verde, Côte d'Ivoire, Djibouti, Kenya, Liberia, and Morocco, among 35 other member states led by the US, introduced a resolution that would ensure AI benefits "extend across the globe to countries at all levels of development." 6

South Africa

South Africa has emerged as a leader in the African AI ecosystem, experiencing a significant surge in interest. Over the past year, interest in AI in the country has increased by 370%; over the last five years, it has spiked by 650% [7]. This remarkable growth has prompted experts to advocate for governmental action on AI regulation, anticipating 2024 as a pivotal year for the technology [8]. Amidst this landscape, Google notably impacted South Africa by launching the Johannesburg cloud region. This initiative aims to accelerate the African tech ecosystem, providing organizations with the necessary resources to scale, innovate, and compete globally [9]. Additionally, Microsoft has demonstrated its commitment to South Africa by announcing plans to establish a data center in Centurion, located in the Gauteng province north of Johannesburg [10]. With a three-decade presence in the country, Microsoft has consistently worked towards accelerating technology transformation and digital enablement in South Africa. The company endeavors to benefit all South Africans through strategic investments in infrastructure, innovation, skills development, and enterprise support.

Local stakeholders, partners, and organizations have also been actively contributing to bolstering the country's AI ecosystem through research and development. Researchers have produced a technological innovation that monitors air quality, providing a tool to help address a broad range of public health issues [11]. This IDRC-supported team, part of the Global South AI for Pandemic Preparedness and Response (AI4PEP) Network under the auspices of iThemba Labs of South Africa's National Research Foundation and the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, as well as the leadership of Bruce Mellado, a full professor at the university, has recently successfully tested the air-quality monitoring system, called "AI_r." The air monitoring system is poised to reduce manufacturing costs, enhance access and efficiency, and enable partners to procure and deploy the technology in large numbers, thus strengthening their early-warning system technology.

Furthermore, major mining companies such as the Kilken Platinum located in Sandton are interested in AI's potential to analyze and draw accurate conclusions from large data sets, which would otherwise require an immense number of person-hours and vast amounts of funding. This can empower management's decision-making abilities by, for example, predicting equipment failures, optimizing production, improving quality control, and reducing energy consumption [12]. To bridge the digital divide in rural South Africa, the University of Limpopo launched the Digital Innovation Lab with the rise of AI in partnership with the Department of Women, Youth and Persons with Disabilities, Samsung Electronics South Africa, and the Department of Trade, Industry, and Competition (the DTIC) [13]. The Lab has the potential to be an equalizer, ensuring that the University of Limpopo is at the forefront of nurturing talent and providing accessible training opportunities that equip learners and educators alike with the skills crucial for navigating the complexities of the 21st century.

South Africa & Egypt

With the AI market expected to reach a staggering R55 billion in 2024, signifying its growing importance and impact on the GDP 14, there has been a paradoxical trend: a surge in demand for AI specialists and professionals. AI roles such as data scientists (29%), data analysts (24%), and data engineers (16%) have seen substantial growth over the past year. Other in-demand AI roles in South Africa are software developer (11%), machine learning specialist (9%), business analyst (4%), sales professional (4%) and IT architect (3%) 15.

The University of Pretoria's Pre-University Academy (UP-PUA) collaborated with the Hong Kong Polytechnic University (HKPU) to present an AI pose recognition workshop to 99 learners from Mamelodi, Pretoria. This was the fifth project that the HKPU presented with the UP-PUA and learners from Mamelodi, but it was the first in-person event. The previous four projects were conducted virtually 16. Additionally, the University of Johannesburg (UJ) has been awarded an over R8.1 million ($417,435.49) grant from the European Union to help drive digital transformation in South Africa's Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) colleges. The initiative aims to grapple with the opportunities and challenges that have emerged due to the advent of artificial intelligence tools like ChatGPT in education and communication 17.

Egypt

At the year's onset, the Egyptian government initiated proactive measures to harness AI for economic growth, emphasizing research and development and establishing robust AI governance frameworks to keep pace with technological advancements 18. While specific AI legislation remains nascent, laws such as the Telecommunication Regulation Law (Law No. 10 of 2003) indirectly regulate AI-related aspects. Additionally, pre-existing laws like the Data Protection and Intellectual Property Protection Law are directly or indirectly relevant to AI operations 19.

According to the Minister for Communications and Information Technology, the country's National AI Strategy phase two is underway, with plans to commence in Q2 of 2024. Concurrently, Egypt introduced its inaugural chatbot, "KMT," within the Egyptian civil service. In February 2024, the USAID-funded AI Chatbot "KMT" (pronounced Kemet) was launched, a collaborative effort involving USAID Egypt Mission Director Sean Jones, Minister of Planning Hala El Said, and Saleh ElSheikh, Head of the Central Agency for Organization and Administration 20. Multiple initiatives are underway to integrate AI across various government sectors. Earlier in the year, the assistant prime minister announced plans to develop an AI-based system for predicting crises in the local market, particularly concerning commodity price hikes. This early warning system will operate in two stages, initially providing composite indicators for monitoring, followed by employing predictive AI techniques 21.

Furthermore, the ICT Minister's involvement in the Microsoft AI Summit culminated in signing a memorandum of understanding (MoU) between MCIT and Microsoft. The MoU encompasses several areas of collaboration, including AI governance and disseminating awareness regarding the responsible utilization of AI technologies across society 22.

Kenya

Kenyan marketers are increasingly embracing generative AI, with private and government agencies rapidly adopting AI-generated advertisements to promote their products and services while cutting costs. Notably, Safaricom, Kenya's mobile operator, has successfully utilized AI to develop both printed and motion advertisements, capturing the attention of Kenyan consumers. The Kenya Urban Roads Authority (KURA) recently debuted an AI-generated advertisement showcasing road construction progress across the country's towns and cities [23].

Recognizing the extensive use of AI, the Kenyan government passed the Robotics and Artificial Intelligence Society Bill to regulate the burgeoning sectors of AI and robotics. However, professionals in Information Technology (IT) and experts from the American Chamber of Commerce (AMCHAM) have voiced significant objections, recommending that Parliament dismiss the proposed regulation. Concerns regarding the bill's concentration on the robotics industry and neglect of critical AI aspects have prompted calls for its retraction and further dialogue with industry stakeholders [24].

Furthermore, labeling data for international AI companies has become a widespread opportunity for young Kenyans, inspiring aspirations to design AI systems rather than merely provide input data [25]. International actors like IBM contribute to Kenya's development by utilizing AI models to aid reforestation efforts. The AI-driven data helps quantify the impact of reforestation initiatives, such as the goal of planting 15 billion trees by 2032 and achieving 30% tree cover by 2050, triple the previous target [26].

The President of Kenya also oversaw the signing of an MOU to develop a green-powered mega data center in collaboration with the UAE. This initiative lays the foundation for a comprehensive ecosystem that includes cloud services and artificial intelligence, catering to Kenya's vibrant and youthful population [27].

Addressing health concerns, the Kenya Medical Research Institute is researching to develop a mobile phone application that utilizes AI to diagnose tuberculosis and other respiratory diseases accurately. The goal is to create software capable of distinguishing between various diseases and accurately recognizing symptoms, particularly cough patterns associated with tuberculosis and other serious illnesses [28].

Nigeria

The recently appointed Nigeria's Minister of Communications, Innovation, and Digital Economy, alongside the National Information Technology Development Agency, is working immensely on full-scale AI adoption in the country. Earlier this year, the minister mentioned at the World Economic Forum that the focus is on reimagining the country's Artificial Intelligence strategy and harnessing tech talents to leapfrog growth 29.

This commitment was underscored by the award of a N225 million grant to 45 AI startups in Q4 2023, aimed at bolstering the Nigerian AI ecosystem 30. However, this rapid succession of initiatives has prompted experts to question Nigeria's AI aspirations, debating whether they constitute a premature leap or a strategic maneuver 31.

The government introduced design thinking, coding, robotics, and AI (DTCRA) programs in smart schools nationwide to foster grassroots capacity building 32. The Executive Secretary of the Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC) highlighted the government's resolve to equip learners in smart schools with the essential skills necessary to drive Nigeria's technological advancement. Also, The Nigerian National Assembly passed a Bill to establish an AI Institute in Benue State. The bill aims to address the country's pressing need for structured knowledge in AI technology 33.

Moreover, AI has gained traction across various sectors in Nigeria. The Nigeria Customs Service (NCS) announced plans to leverage advanced technologies, including data analytics and AI, to bolster intelligence gathering and enforcement against smuggling in 2024. Strategic priorities include enhanced collaboration with other law enforcement agencies, neighboring commands, and international partners and investing in continuous in-house training and personnel skill development 34.

Additionally, the director-general of NITDA advocates for a collaborative integration of AI into Nigeria's security sector, emphasizing potential synergies between the security industry and the startup ecosystem to enhance efficiency and effectiveness in the nation's security infrastructure 35. The Nigerian Communications Commission (NCC) also advocates responsible use of AI to protect consumer rights and guarantee trust in an increasingly complex telecoms market 36.

The U.S.-Nigeria Business Council has unveiled a collaboration with Nigerian Software and AI Engineers to Launch "MyAI," an innovative transactional Artificial Intelligence software. A vital feature of the software is the "MYai Sales Agent," a user-trained sales AI revolutionizing website engagement 37. In another notable development, MTN Nigeria, a leading telecom provider, in partnership with Microsoft and Chatbot service delivery provider Superbo, has launched the MTN Zigi Chatbot, powered by ChatGPT version 3.5, catering to customer needs in real-time 38.

Rwanda & Ghana

Rwanda has strategically positioned itself in the AI race, achieving significant progress by rising to the third position in the Government Readiness Index for AI in Africa in 2023, a notable advancement from its tenth position in 2021. This reflects the country's deliberate investments and commitment to harnessing AI for socio-economic development 39. Rwanda has also played a pivotal role in AI governance, evidenced by its participation in the upcoming high-level AI summit in Africa, organized by the Centre for the Fourth Industrial Revolution in collaboration with the World Economic Forum (WEF) at the end of 2024. This summit aims to ensure that Rwanda and the continent actively shape the future of AI 40.

In line with other African nations, Rwanda has embraced Generative AI, sparking discussions on whether AI tools are transformative or raise concerns 41. This has prompted various initiatives focused on capacity building. For instance, the University of Rwanda conducted sessions to enhance lecturers' understanding of emerging technologies like AI. The training encompassed Introduction to Artificial Intelligence (AI), Practical Application of AI in Teaching and Learning, Fundamentals of Internet of Things (IoT), and Integrating IoT in Research 42. Additionally, the World Privacy Forum director has been invited as a lead instructor for a digital identity ecosystem course at Carnegie Mellon University, underscoring Rwanda's commitment to advancing expertise in relevant fields. Rwandan journalists have unleashed the power of informed storytelling through AI. They have been equipped with the necessary skills to report effectively on AI and educate the general public on its opportunities and challenges 43.

Ghana

In January, the Ghanaian government announced that the Ministry of Communications and Digitalisation (MoCD) is crafting a comprehensive policy document to regulate the use of AI within the country. The Minister of Communications and Digitalisation revealed that the draft is prepared and awaiting presentation to the Cabinet for deliberation and input 44. Like other African nations, AI has sparked nationwide discourse, with experts emphasizing Ghana's need to cultivate its own 'data garden.' Recognized as AI's fuel, quality data is deemed crucial, and experts argue that while readily available international datasets may appear appealing, Ghana's path to genuine AI empowerment lies closer to home 45.

AI is reshaping various sectors in Ghana, including education, healthcare, telecommunications, and finance. The University of Ghana has updated its plagiarism policy to incorporate AI, underscoring its commitment to upholding integrity and ethics in academic pursuits. The not-yet-published revised document, titled 'Policy on Plagiarism and Other Academic Misconduct,' underscores that any use of AI or associated technologies compromising the authenticity of academic output will be deemed unacceptable, aligning with the overarching ethos of academic integrity 46.

Additionally, the Ghanaian Minister of Education emphasizes the pivotal role of AI and ICT in education transformation, advocating for personalized learning experiences tailored to individual student needs 47.

Ghana & Ethiopia

AI is profoundly transforming Ghana's hospitals in the healthcare sector, offering innovative solutions and promising enhancements in patient care, operational efficiency, and healthcare access. AI algorithms are increasingly utilized to analyze medical images such as X-rays and MRIs with remarkable accuracy and speed. Mobile health applications with AI capabilities provide essential medical advice, diagnose conditions, recommend treatment plans, and facilitate continuous patient monitoring 48. Furthermore, through a remarkable partnership between industry and traditional leadership, Newmont and the Otumfuo Osei Tutu II Foundation have commissioned an AI Smart Lab in Wioso, Ghana 49.

Similarly, AI presents numerous opportunities to enhance service delivery, operational efficiency, and customer satisfaction in telecommunications 50. In finance, AI is hailed as a significant game-changer in Ghana's Fintech landscape. These AI applications are poised to propel economic growth while raising pertinent questions about regulating and governing AI within the country 51.

Ethiopia

The Ethiopian Artificial Intelligence Institute (EAII) is at the forefront of the nation's race towards AI adoption, actively spearheading projects across various domains such as healthcare, agriculture, language, and finance. Notably, the institute is developing an early breast cancer detection technology, a vital resource within Ethiopia's healthcare system focused on disease prevention, benefiting women, and promoting gender equality 52.

Moreover, the EAII, in collaboration with several government institutions, has entered into a memorandum of understanding aimed at bolstering the effectiveness of Ethiopia's capital market and modernizing it through advanced technology. The primary objective of this partnership is to enhance the infrastructure and communication networks of the Ethiopian Capital Market Authority by leveraging various artificial intelligence technologies 53. Concurrently, the country actively tries to regulate and govern AI through multi-stakeholder initiatives and consultations. A forum organized by the Institute of Foreign Affairs emphasized establishing an international AI management system, with participants from the Ministry of Innovation and Technology and Addis Ababa University highlighting Ethiopia's progress in this global context 54.

Further initiatives include Ethiopia's strategic investment arm, Ethiopian Investment Holdings (EHI), which inked a preliminary agreement with a Hong Kong-based West Data Group subsidiary to develop infrastructure for data mining and AI training operations 55. The Federal Supreme Court of Ethiopia also unveiled an AI-powered "Smart Court System" in collaboration with EAII, aiming to revolutionize the country's judicial system. This smart information desk system, accessible via mobile phones from any location, enables users to track cases, appointments, adjournments, etc. Moreover, parties involved in court proceedings can conveniently register customer service complaints through an intelligent chatbot, facilitating efficient handling of grievances within the Supreme Court's departments 56.

Initiatives in other African Countries

According to the 2023 Oxford Government AI Readiness Index, Mauritius maintains its position as the top-ranking nation in Sub-Saharan Africa. Strengths include robust AI governance and ethics, digital capacity, and adaptability 57. In line with its commitment to technological advancement, the Mauritius Emerging Technologies Council will organize an AI Summit in Q2 2024, followed by the Mauritius Emerging Technology Exhibition 58.

Zimbabwe, also in the index's top 10, demonstrates its commitment to AI advancement through parliamentary study visits to European countries, which aim to deepen members' understanding and knowledge of AI 59.

Tanzania, meanwhile, is actively exploring AI integration within its e-government platforms to enhance efficiency and transparency. This initiative aligns with the country's broader push towards digital solutions across various sectors to combat corruption and streamline government processes 60. Additionally, students at the University of Dodoma in Tanzania have developed an AI business assistant tailored for traders. This innovative platform offers SMEs a comprehensive solution for tasks such as bookkeeping, calculations, balance reconciliation, and report generation 61.

The Botswana Stock Exchange (BSE) is leveraging AI to facilitate the adoption of sustainable business practices among local companies. Central to this initiative is the integration of Risk Insights' (RI) AI-powered platforms, including ESG GPS and A-Cubed. These platforms enable companies to assess environmental, social, and governance (ESG) factors and make informed decisions to enhance sustainability 62.

Similarly, in January, Malawi's National Commission for Science and Technology (NCST) organized an AI demo day. This event aimed to showcase local AI products and foster policy discussions, positioning the Southern African country at the forefront of embracing emerging technologies 63. Furthermore, Southern Africa has considerable potential to benefit from AI. Namibia's Minister of Higher Education, Training, and Innovation noted that the region's significant potential needs further refining, refocusing, and reinforcement to bolster the full-scale benefits of AI solutions 64.

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