



13th AfICTA Summit

Theme:

Accelerating Africa's Digital Future: Innovation, Inclusion & Economic Growth

Title: A Digital Governance and Sovereignty in Africa: The Prerequisite for Accelerating the Digital Agenda

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13th AfICTA Summit
 ACCELERATING AFRICA'S DIGITAL FUTURE: Innovation, Inclusion, Growth
 11-13 Nov 9:00am(UTC)

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- Dr. Kossi Amessinou
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Overview

1. African Digital Governance and Sovereignty Context & Values
2. The Progress
3. The Bottlenecks
4. Pathways to Bridging the Gaps
5. Recommendations
6. References



1. DIGITAL GOVERNANCE & SOVEREIGNTY IN THE AFRICAN CONTEXT & VALUE

Digital Governance

Digital governance uses technology to manage public affairs, enhance transparency, and improve citizen services. – United Nations, (2020).

African Context

Implementation is shaped by Africa's unique political, cultural, social, and infrastructural challenges, which require tailored solutions.

Value for Local Adaptation

Local adaptation ensures the success of digital governance by addressing specific regional needs and conditions.

Digital Sovereignty

The ability of a nation-state to determine its own digital destiny, controlling the data, infrastructure, and regulations within its jurisdiction. Pohle, J., & Thiel, T. (2020)

In the context of this presentation is about a Africa nation's ability to control its own data, infrastructure, and destiny.



Importance of Digital Sovereignty

➤ **Ownership & Control**

Digital sovereignty means a nation owns and controls its own digital infrastructure, data, and regulatory frameworks to safeguard its interests.

➤ **Protection of Local Data**

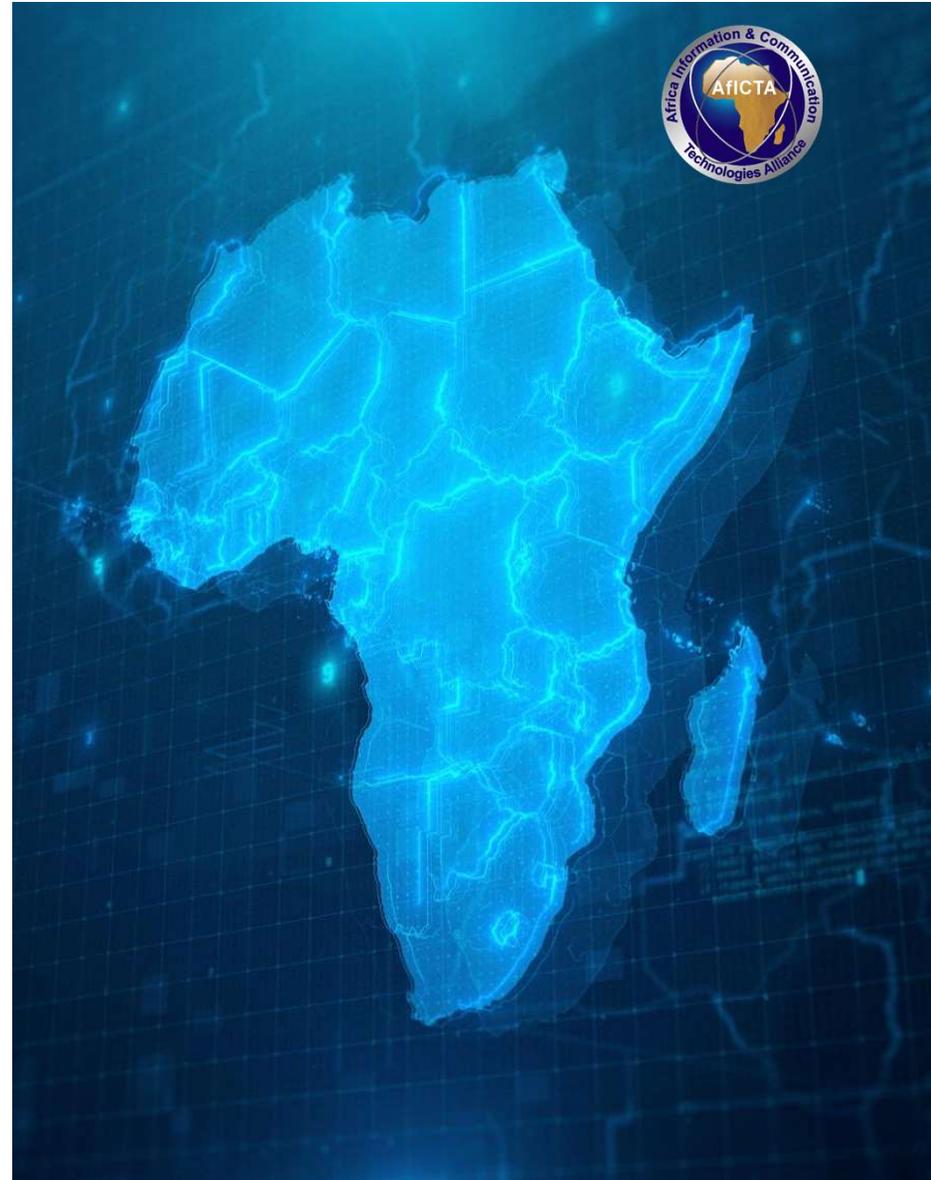
Achieving digital sovereignty helps protect local data from unauthorized external access and misuse.

➤ **Preventing External Control**

Digital sovereignty prevents foreign entities from controlling or influencing national digital assets and policies.

➤ **Prioritising National Interests**

Ensures that digital policies align with and prioritise the nation's economic and social goals in the digital era.



Opportunities for Fulfilling the Digital Africa Agenda

- **The Urgency of the Divide, the AfICTA Mandate and the Vision for 2030:**
- Africa's digital economy is projected to contribute over \$180 billion to the continent's GDP by 2025, representing 5.2% of the continent's GDP - IFC, 2020,.
- AfICTA championed digital technologies to promote integration, generate inclusive economic growth, and ensure Africa's ownership of modern digital management tools.
- Aligned with the AU Digital Transformation Strategy (DTS) 2020-2030, which aims to break the digital divide and eradicate poverty.
- Both intersect at the foundational pillars, including **establishing an *enabling policy and regulatory environment, digital infrastructure, digital literacy, and comprehensive cybersecurity frameworks***



2. THE PROGRESS...

- ✓ Infrastructure & Connectivity
- ✓ Digital Governance & Policy
- ✓ Innovation & Ecosystem Growth
- ✓ Digital Identity & e-Government
- ✓ Digital Governance and Policy Maturation
- ✓ Innovation and Ecosystem Growth
- ✓ Digital Identity and e-Government Services

Progress

Key Milestones and Achievements

Infrastructure & Connectivity

- ✓ **Mobile Broadband Expansion:** Rapid rollout of 4G and commencement of 5G services in major markets.
- ✓ **Fiber Investment:** Continuous funding and deployment of submarine and terrestrial fiber optic cables (e.g., Equiano, 2Africa) to lower bandwidth costs.
- ✓ **Local Traffic Management:** Increased adoption of **Internet Exchange Points (IXPs)** across multiple countries, improving quality and affordability of local internet traffic.

Digital Governance & Policy

- ✓ **Data Protection Legislation:** Over **30 countries** have enacted **comprehensive data protection and privacy laws** (e.g., NDPR/NDPA, POPIA).
- ✓ **Cyber Resilience:** Establishment of national **Cybersecurity Strategies** and dedicated Computer Security Incident Response Teams (CSIRTs).
- ✓ **Policy Harmonization:** Efforts by AU and regional bodies (ECOWAS, SADC) to align digital policies to facilitate cross-border data flow.

Innovation & Ecosystem Growth

- ✓ **Fintech Leadership:** Africa is a global leader in **mobile money and fintech innovation**, attracting significant venture capital and driving financial inclusion.
- ✓ **Entrepreneurial Support:** **Tech hubs and incubators** are rapidly proliferating in urban centers, fostering local tech talent and startup creation.
- ✓ **VC Funding Growth:** Sustained year-on-year growth in **venture capital funding** targeting the African tech sector.

Digital Identity & e-Government

- ✓ **National Digital ID Programs:** Implementation of large-scale digital identity systems (e.g., **Nigeria's NIN, Kenya's Huduma Namba**) to create a verifiable foundation for services.
- ✓ **Service Digitization:** Significant shift toward **e-Government services** (tax, licensing, permits) in several nations, improving transparency and efficiency (e.g., Rwanda).

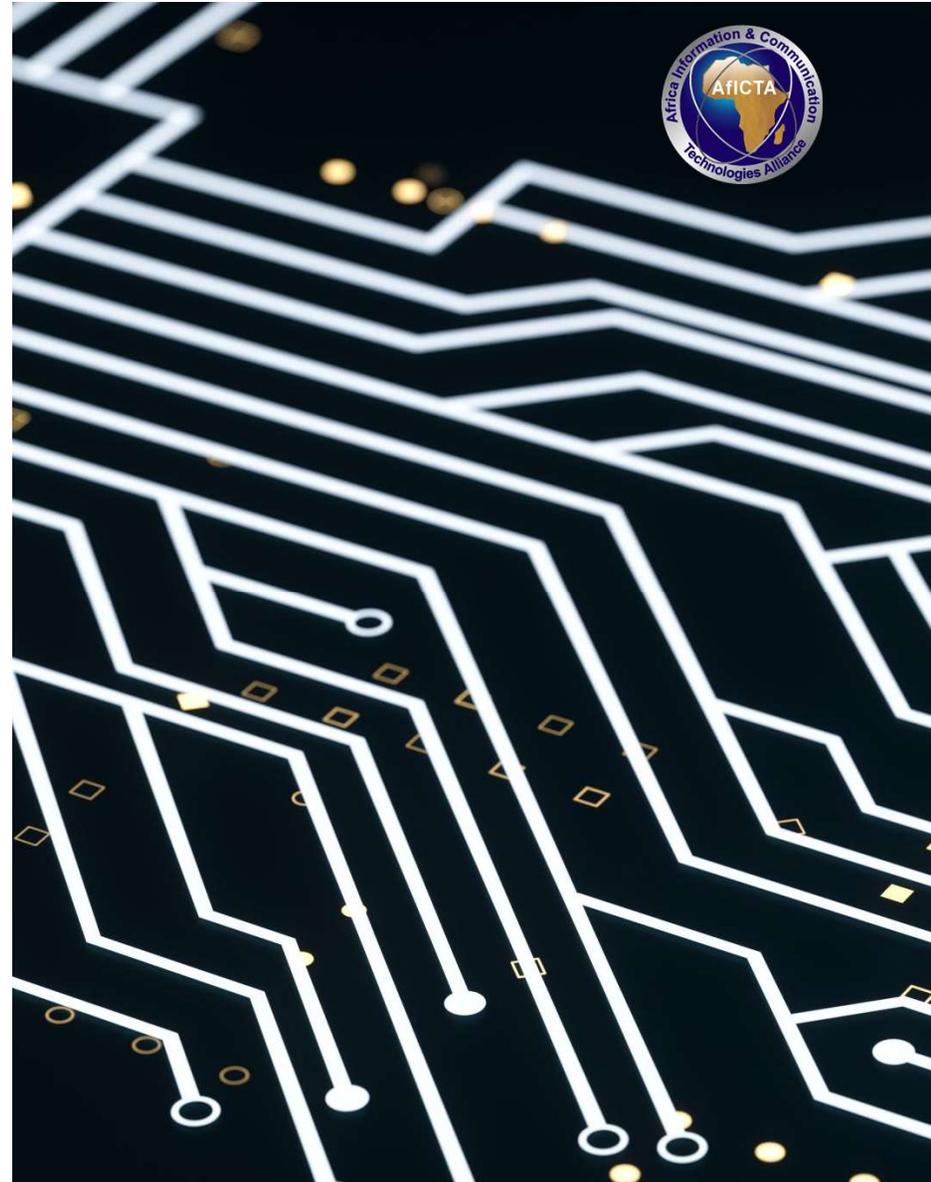
Digital Governance and Policy Maturation

- **Data Protection Laws:** Over 30 countries have enacted comprehensive data protection and privacy laws, often modeled after the European Union's GDPR (e.g., Nigeria's NDPR/NDPA, South Africa's POPIA). This establishes a critical governance framework.
- **Cybersecurity Frameworks:** Many nations are adopting National Cybersecurity Strategies and establishing dedicated Computer Security Incident Response Teams (CSIRTs) to enhance resilience against digital threats.
- **Regional Policy Alignment:** Bodies like the African Union and regional economic communities (ECOWAS, SADC) are working to harmonize digital policy and foster cross-border data flow agreements.



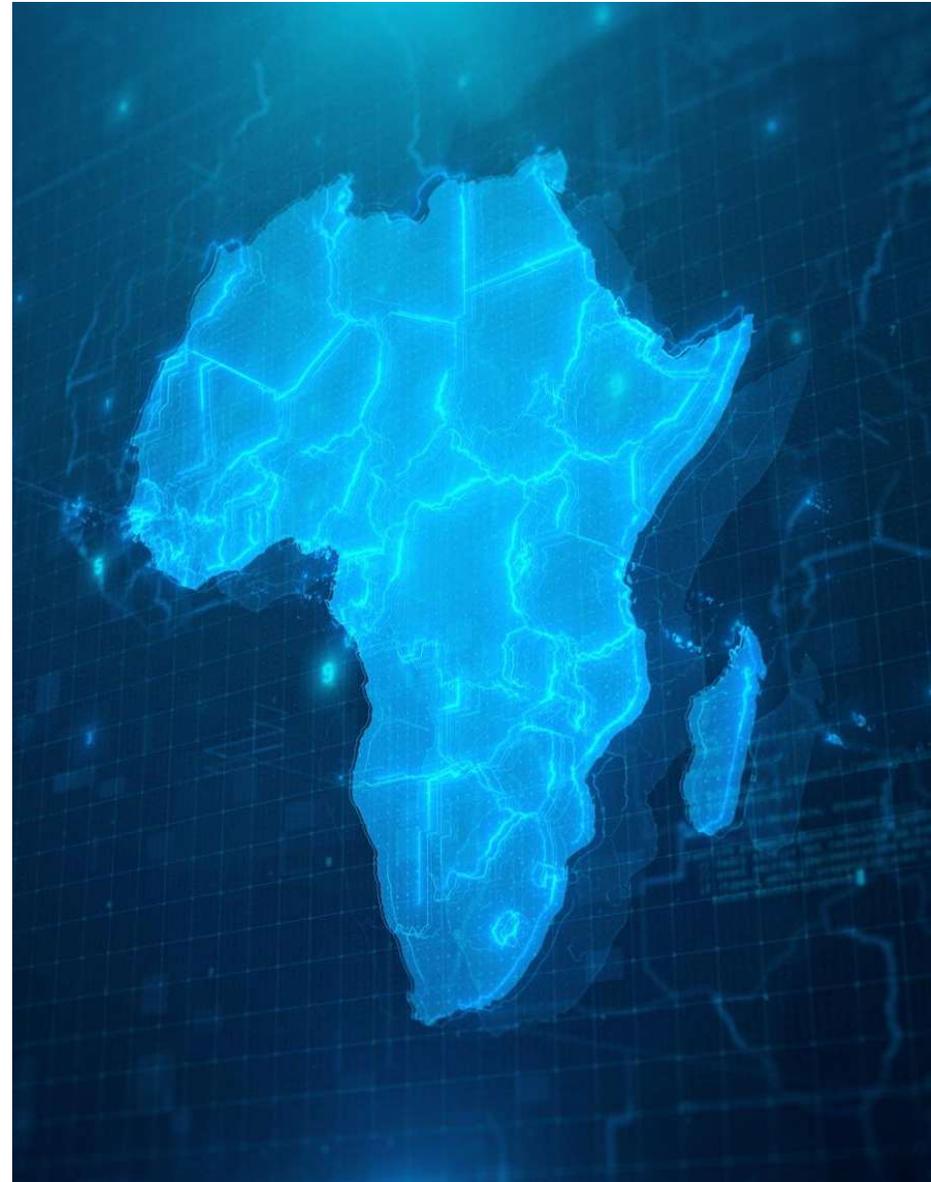
Innovation and Ecosystem Growth

- **Fintech Revolution:** *Africa has the highest concentration of mobile money and fintech innovation globally. Countries like Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa lead in attracting venture capital, primarily driven by digital financial services that boost inclusion.*
- **Tech Hub Proliferation:** *The number of established tech hubs, incubators, and innovation centers has surged, supporting local entrepreneurship and skill development in major cities like Lagos, Nairobi, Cairo, and Cape Town.*
- **Startup Funding Surge:** *Despite recent global slowdowns, the continent continues to see significant year-on-year growth in venture capital funding targeting tech startups, affirming confidence in the digital economy*



Digital Identity and e-Government Services

- **National Digital ID Programs:** Several governments are actively implementing large-scale *National Digital Identity programs* (e.g., Nigeria's NIN, Kenya's Huduma Namba project), creating a foundational layer for verifiable online service delivery and financial inclusion.
- **Shift to e-Government:** There is a clear trend toward *digitizing public services*, including land registration, tax filing, and business permits, improving efficiency and transparency. Rwanda is often cited as a leader in this domain.



3. THE BOTTLENECKS



| Specific Bottleneck | Impact on Digital Agenda |
|---|--|
| Regulatory Fragmentation | 22 countries lack comprehensive data protection laws, inhibiting secure cross-border data flows and creating inconsistent operating environments for businesses. |
| Policy Agility Deficit | Governments struggle to develop flexible, rapid regulations for emerging technologies (e.g., AI, complex data flows), leading to reactive rather than proactive governance. |
| Weak Unified Frameworks | Disparate policies across regions prevent the creation of a Digital Single Market, limiting scale and economic integration. |
| External Infrastructure Dependency | Over-reliance on foreign cloud and data hosting compromises Digital Sovereignty, increases security risks, and prevents economic value retention locally. |
| Access and Inclusion Gap | Despite mobile growth, the overall ~43% internet penetration rate leaves a large segment of the population excluded from the digital economy, undermining the goal of inclusion. |
| Mobile-Centric Governance Gaps | The overwhelmingly mobile-first nature of access demands specialized security and governance solutions that are often insufficiently prioritized, exposing users to risks. |
| Digital ID Implementation Challenges | Large-scale identity programs (like NIN) face logistical hurdles and public resistance, slowing the foundation needed for secure e-government services. |

Governance and Regulatory Bottlenecks

i. **Regulatory Fragmentation and Gaps:**

- 22 African nations still lack comprehensive data protection legislation. This fragmented environment creates legal uncertainty, complicates cross-border data transfers, and makes it difficult for multinational companies to scale digital services securely across the continent.

ii. **Lack of Unified Governance Frameworks:**

- Disparate policies across different countries and regional blocs hinder the creation of a seamless, secure *Digital Single Market* necessary for large-scale economic growth and innovation

iii. **Policy Agility Deficit:**

- Difficulty in developing flexible and rapid policies to govern **emerging technologies** like AI, quantum computing, and complex cross-border data flows, leaving nations reacting to, rather than shaping, technological shifts.



2. Infrastructure and Sovereignty Bottlenecks

External Infrastructure Dependency:

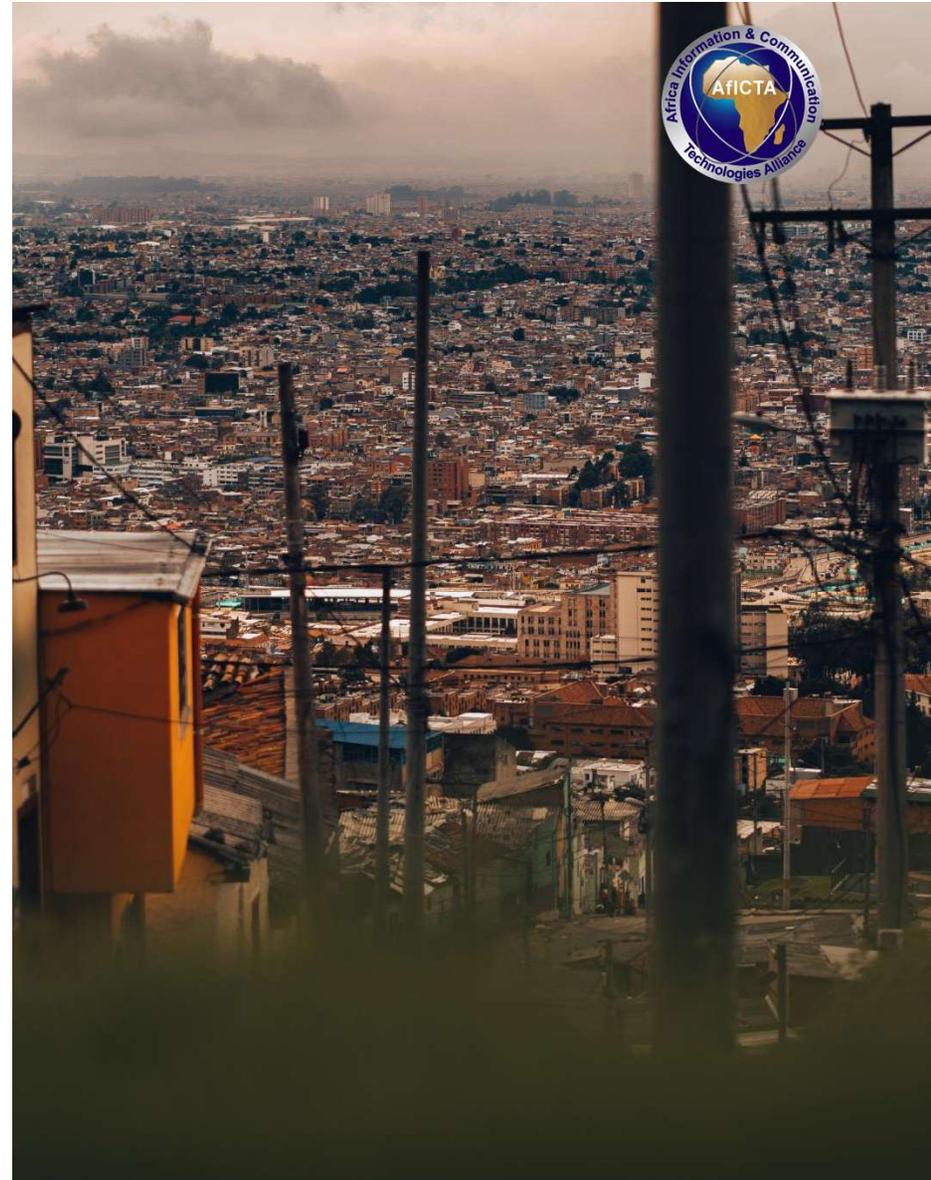
- - Dependence on foreign-hosted data centers and cloud services undermines digital sovereignty, increases data latency, and exposes African data to external legal risks.
- **Africa has less than 1% of the world's data center capacity, despite housing 18% of the global population.** - This gap forces local fintech companies and innovators to rely on foreign hosting services. - **Only about 43% of**
- **Africans have reliable electricity, with a projected \$400 billion needed for improvements in transmission and distribution by 2050.**

Connectivity and Access Gap:

- Despite an internet penetration rate 43%, a significant portion of the population remains digitally excluded, hindering efforts toward universal inclusion and economic participation.

Mobile-First Governance:

- Africa's mobile-first internet access requires specialized governance and security solutions that are often overlooked, leaving users vulnerable on insecure platforms.



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Competence Bottleneck and the Skills Gap

- Fewer than 10% of African youth currently receive formal ICT training, a sharp contrast to the over 50% reported in Europe.
- Alarming statistics reveal that 90% of children in Africa reportedly leaving school without basic digital skills.



Capacity, Independence, and Enforcement Bottleneck

-
- i. **Gap between legislative adoption and effective enforcement.**
 - 34 countries have Data Protection Authorities (DPAs), 20 lack the resources needed to enforce regulations.
 - ii. **Operational independence is often compromised.**
 - About 24 of the 36 DPAs depend on state funding, which can lead to political interference.
 - iii. **High legislative activity and low enforcement capabilities**
 - suggests that regulatory actions are more about political appearance than genuine rights protection.
 - iv. **Inadequate enforcement jeopardises citizen safety**
 - creates risks for legitimate businesses, and erodes public trust, which is crucial for digital adoption and inclusion.

Implementation and Trust Bottlenecks

Implementation Challenges in Digital ID:

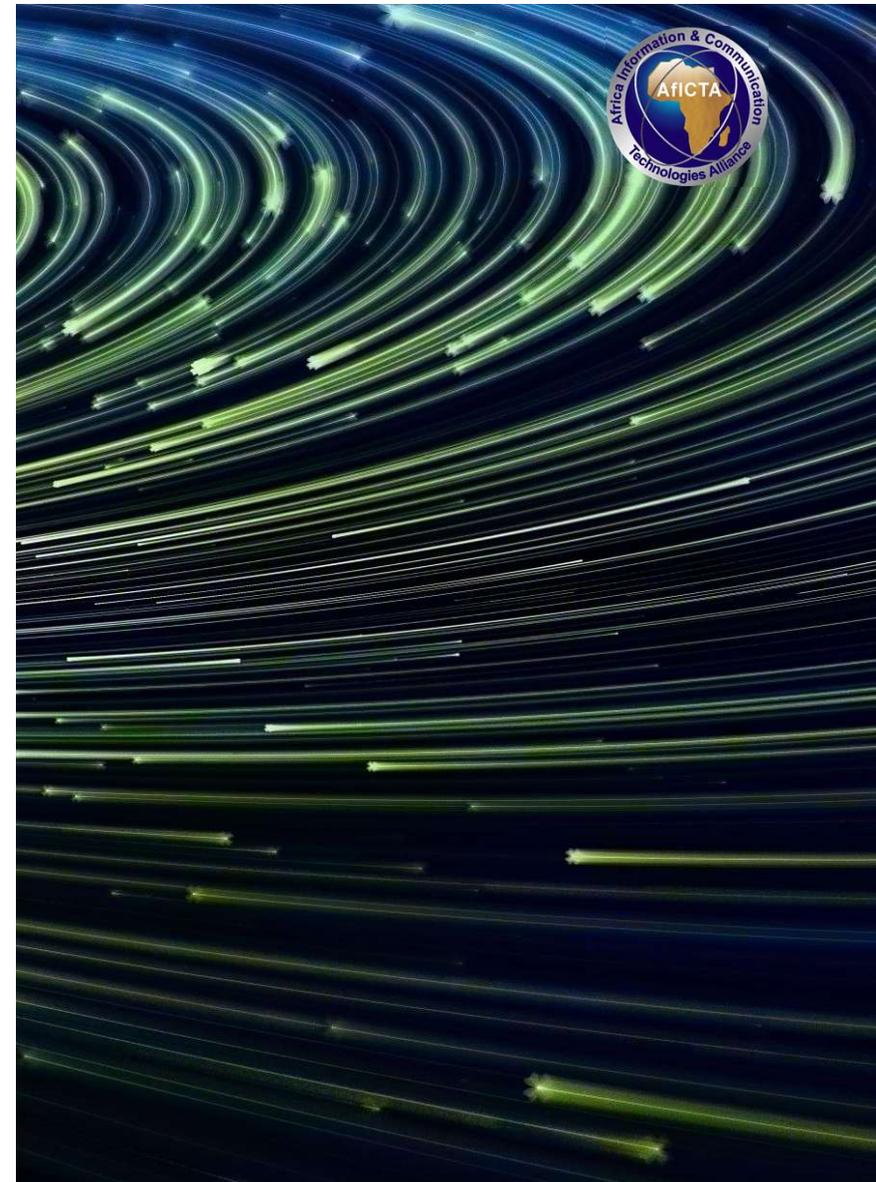
- While programs like Nigeria's NIN are foundational, the actual **mandatory rollout and linkage** to services (like SIM cards and BVN) face significant logistical and public resistance challenges, slowing the foundation for secure e-government services.

Skepticism and Trust Deficits:

- The rapid digitization process, especially concerning sensitive personal data and identity, can lead to **public skepticism and trust deficits** if governance and security guarantees are not transparently and rigorously enforced.

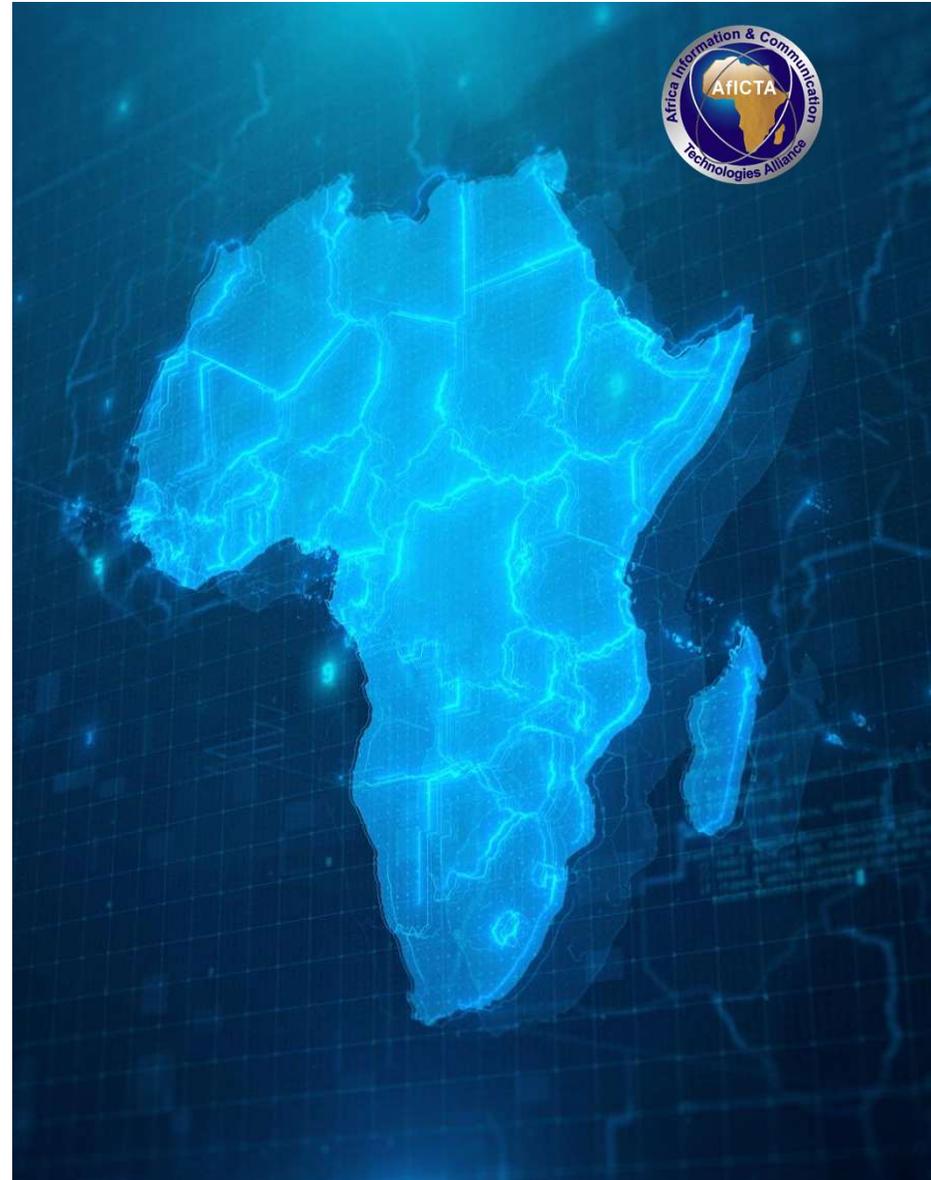
Value Retention Leakage:

- Inadequate governance means that the economic value generated by African data often **accrues to foreign entities** rather than remaining within local economies, limiting the full potential of the digital sector's contribution to GDP.



4. PATHWAYS TO BRIDGING THE GAPS

- **Digital Governance and Sovereignty** are not peripheral concerns; they are the non-negotiable prerequisites for the **Africa ICT Alliance (AfICTA) Digital Agenda**
- **Africa's digital agenda (AU DTS 2020-2030) risks being undermined by offshore value extraction and regulatory fragmentation**



Digital Sovereignty Imperative: A Foundational Prerequisite

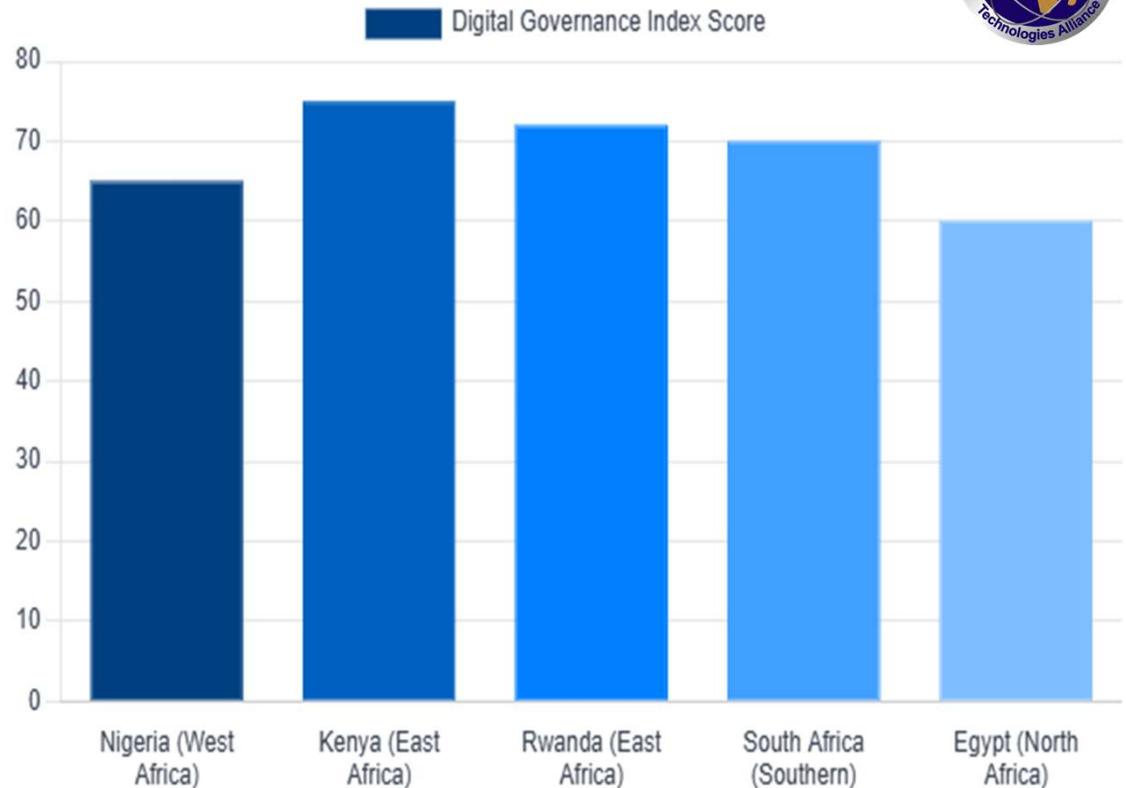
- Without asserting control over the regulatory environment, physical infrastructure, and proprietary data flows, Africa cannot own its digital future

| | |
|------------------------------|---|
| Digital Africa Target | ➤ Requires Sovereign Control Over |
| Innovation | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Computing Power is the New Sovereignty ➤ AI and other emerging tech make computing power the ultimate determinant of digital autonomy |
| Inclusion | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Accessible and Secure Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI) ➤ Creating an <i>African stack</i>, a form of localised digital architecture |
| Economic Growth | Harmonized Governance and Secure Cross-Border Data Flows across Africa. |

Quantifying Sovereign Deficit & Impact

| Metric | Africa Status (2024) | Sovereignty Implication |
|-------------------------|---|---|
| Internet Penetration | 43% (Lags global average of 66%) | Benefits accrue only to the connected urban elite |
| Physical Infrastructure | <1% of total global data center capacity | Local innovators rely on foreign hosting (value is exported) |
| Energy Access | Only 43% of the population has reliable electricity | Data centers require massive, reliable power—a \$400B investment gap exists |
| Skills Gap | Fewer than 10% of youth receive formal ICT training | Infrastructural investment cannot translate to inclusive growth |

Digital Governance Maturity (Illustrative Index)



Regional Governance Case Studies

- African nations demonstrate varied paths to digital sovereignty, focusing on *legal frameworks, infrastructure, and e-government implementation.*

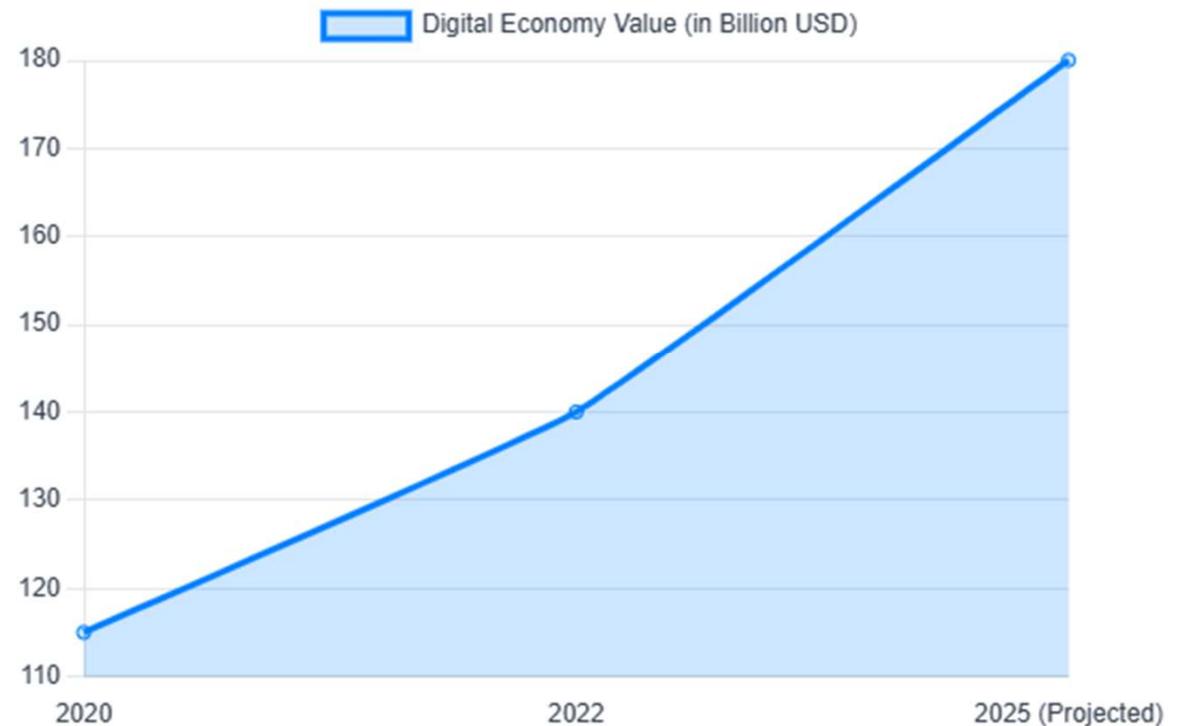
This illustrative index shows relative progress based on enacted data laws, e-government services, and local infrastructure investment. Rwanda and Kenya demonstrate strong e-government leadership, while South Africa and Nigeria have comprehensive data protection laws

The Economic Prize: Innovation, Inclusion & Growth

Effective digital governance is crucial for economic growth. A trusted digital environment fosters innovation, protects consumers, and attracts foreign investment, contributing significantly to the digital agenda..



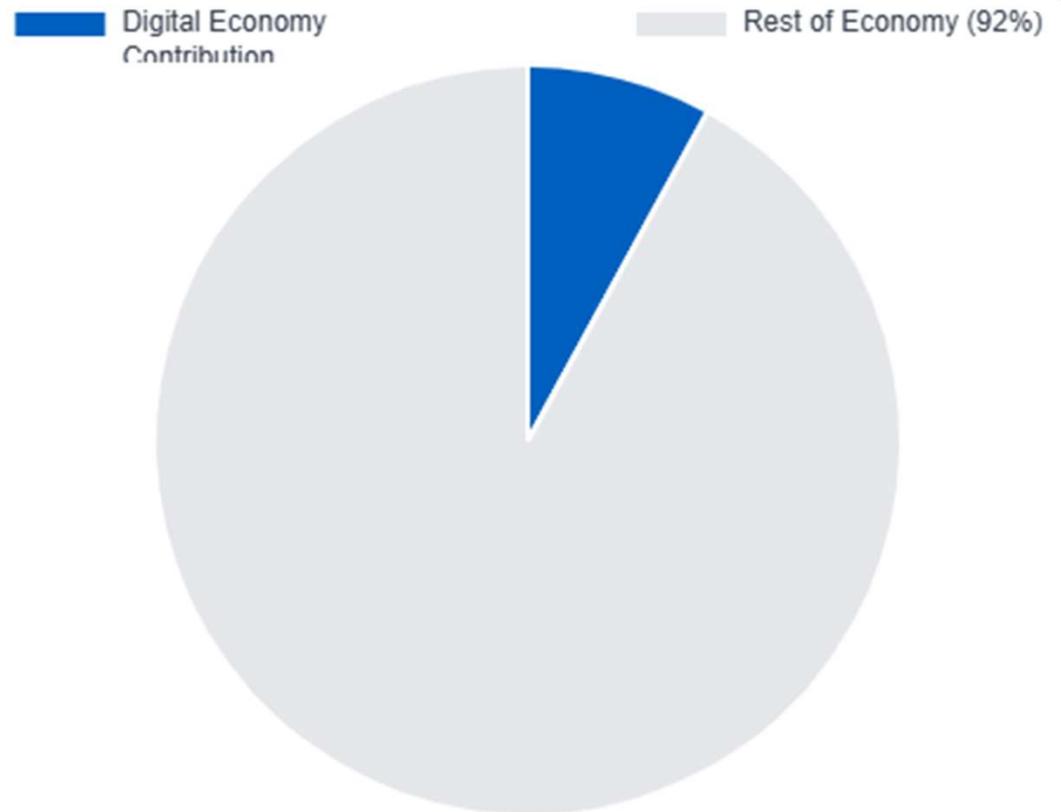
Digital Economy Growth Projection



Africa's "Internet Economy" has the potential to add over \$180 billion to the continent's GDP by 2025, and \$712 billion by 2050. This growth is contingent on a trusted digital ecosystem, which is secured by robust governance. (Google & IFC, 2020)

A trusted and sovereign digital environment encourages innovation, protects consumers, and attracts foreign investment, directly contributing to the digital agenda

Digital Economy Contribution to GDP



The digital economy is already a significant contributor to African GDP, with projections showing it will claim a larger share. Good governance can accelerate this shift, fostering local innovation in sectors like fintech, e-commerce, and agritech.

Comparative Analysis of Regional Digital Sovereignty Models

| Region | Key Sovereignty/Governance Initiative | Remarkable Feature | Learning from Nigeria Perspective |
|-----------------|--|---|--|
| West Africa | ➤ Nigeria NDPA 2023; Senegal 2026 Sovereignty Budget (CFA 33.8B) | ✓ <i>Strong regulatory enforcement and political/budgetary commitment to localisation.</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ NDPA offers a model for statutory regulatory independence and high enforcement penalties. ❖ Demonstrates that sovereignty requires both policy and physical assets. ❖ Focus on ensuring the local industry captures value from government digitisation efforts. ❖ Provides a model for stringent data control via redefining the legal scope of protection. ❖ Cautionary tale: Regulatory action must accompany fibre/data center rollouts to ensure proper control. |
| North Africa | ➤ Morocco's Digital 2030 Strategy; Dakhla Mega Data Center | ✓ <i>Prioritisation of physical infrastructure ownership and DPI (Digital ID) to position as a regional hub</i> ³³ | |
| Central Africa | ➤ Gabon's new legal framework (Sept 2025); High EGD advancement | ✓ <i>Operationalised sovereignty through national preference in digital procurement, fostering local industry</i> | |
| Southern Africa | ➤ South Africa POPIA: Protection extended to Juristic Persons | ✓ <i>Mature, strict, and uniquely broad localisation regime that increases multinational compliance friction.</i> | |
| East Africa | ➤ Kenya as a regional data center hub (ADC) | ✓ <i>Exemplifies the "Sovereignty Trap"—infrastructure growth without local policy control and ownership</i> | |

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

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- i. Institutional Strengthening and Enforcement Credibility:**
 - ii. Policy Harmonization and Urgency:**
 - *Enforce and develop implementation guidelines and a Model African Data Protection Laws similar to the AU Cybersecurity Strategy to streamline cross-border data protection standards, removing regulatory friction and unlocking the full potential of intra-African digital trade under the AfCFTA.*
 - iii. Sovereign Infrastructure and Resource Integration**
 - Prioritise local co-ownership models and mandatory hosting policies.
 - iv. Declare an African-wide emergency on Digital literacy and Capacity Building for Inclusion**
 - Invest in large-scale, industry-aligned training, prioritising youth and **MSMEs**
 - v. Empower Public-private partnerships to deliver scalable investments, with industry-aligned innovations.**

6. CONCLUSION

Digital Governance is the Master Key

For Africa to transition from a policy-focused approach to a sovereign reality, it's crucial to take decisive action.

By gaining full control over the digital landscape, from policymaking to infrastructure ownership, we can unlock huge economic opportunities, especially through the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) and AFICTA Interventions.

Thank you!



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