Concept Note

Launch of the ACTS AI Institute
"Charting the Path Towards an African-Centered AI Future"

Date: 15th July 2025, 2:00 – 5:00 PM EAT

Venue: Zoom | https://bit.ly/4ezcr0y

The African Centre for Technology Studies (ACTS) is launching the ACTS AI Institute, formerly the Digital Economy Programme. This new strategic direction was approved by the ACTS governing Council in January 2025, and it is directed to position Africa at the forefront of responsible AI innovation, development and adoption.

The ACTS AI Institute comes at an important point in global technological evolution. As AI increasingly shapes economic, social and governance systems worldwide, African nations must develop contextually relevant approaches that harness AI's potential whilst addressing its unique regional challenges. The Institute will serve as a nexus for research, policy development, capacity building and strategic partnerships in the AI domain across Africa.

BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE

For over thirty years, ACTS has been at the forefront of science, technology and innovation policy research in Africa. The Centre has historically structured its work through five programmatic areas: Agriculture, Food Security and Nutrition; Climate Change; Youth, Gender and Inclusive Development; Science, Technology and Innovation Policy; and Digital Economy.

The evolution of the Digital Economy programme into the ACTS AI Institute reflects the growing significance of AI as a transformative force across these domains.

The decision to establish a dedicated institute was informed by several key factors:

1. The rapid advancement of AI technologies globally presents both opportunities and significant challenges for African development. The region requires institutions capable of navigating this complex landscape with contextual understanding and foresight.
2. Various initiatives within the Digital Economy Programme, such as the UK-Kenya AI Challenge, AI4D Scholarship Project, Lacuna fund AMR Project and Facebook AI for Jobs project, has shown the potential for impactful AI applications when developed through partnerships and with attention to local contexts. These initiatives have created momentum that can be amplified through a dedicated institute.
3. There remains a critical gap in Africa-centred research, policy frameworks and implementation guidance for responsible AI development. The ACTS AI Institute will address this gap through rigorous research and practical guidance grounded in African realities.
4. The establishment of the ACTS AI Institute aligns with continental priorities expressed in the African Union's Digital Transformation Strategy and national development plans across Africa that increasingly recognise AI as a strategic domain.

Strategic focus

The ACTS AI Institute works to ensure that AI serves African development priorities through excellence in research, policy formulation, capacity building, and stakeholder engagement. The Institute is committed to developing AI solutions that are ethically sound, contextually appropriate, and responsive to Africa's unique challenges and opportunities.

PILLAR 1: DEVELOPMENT AND DEPLOYMENT OF RESPONSIBLE AI SOLUTIONS

This pillar focuses on establishing frameworks, standards and practical approaches for ensuring AI systems deployed in African contexts uphold principles of responsibility, trustworthiness and ethical alignment.

Key activities include:

- Development of Africa-appropriate AI ethics frameworks that reflect continental values, priorities and challenges.
- Research into mechanisms for ensuring AI transparency, accountability and fairness in contexts with varying levels of digital literacy and infrastructure.
- Creation of assessment tools and methodologies for evaluating AI systems' alignment with ethical principles and developmental objectives.
- Establishing trust-building mechanisms between technology developers, users and regulatory bodies

PILLAR 2: AI POLICY DEVELOPMENT AND REGULATORY SERVICES (GOVERNANCE)

This pillar addresses the critical need for appropriate governance frameworks and policy instruments to guide AI development and deployment in African contexts. It builds upon our existing work on AI governance, expanding into comprehensive policy frameworks that balance innovation with appropriate safeguards.

PILLAR 3: AI AND JOBS (ECONOMICS OF AI)

This pillar explores the adoption of AI technologies to address priority development challenges across Africa, with particular focus on agriculture, healthcare, climate resilience, and education while strengthening the capacity of African countries to harness the potential of AI for job creation . The pillar will also explore how AI transformation will impact sector wide economic efficiency, market competition, pricing mechanisms, labour market shifts and broader economic structures.

PILLAR 4: AI CAPACITY BUILDING AND SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

This pillar focuses on strengthening Africa's human capital for AI development and governance through targeted training programmes, curriculum development, and knowledge transfer initiatives for African AI policymakers, researchers, entrepreneurs and civil society.

PILLAR 5: DATA SCIENCE

This pillar addresses the use of data science in Africa, including appropriate data science techniques (ML, DV and NLP) and methodologies (mixed method, quantitative or qualitative), computational infrastructure, and enabling technological ecosystems that respect data sovereignty while facilitating innovation.

> There is no doubt that AI-driven automation will arrive in Africa, the question is: are we prepared for it?

Launch objectives

1. To **create awareness of the ACTS AI Institute** among current and potential stakeholders to position the institute as a thought leader in responsible AI development.
2. **Establish interconnectedness between the AI and the various socio-economic sectors** outlined in AU Agenda 2063, and the global goals 2030 such as health, food, education, infrastructure, agriculture, climate and environment.
3. **Develop and strengthen strategic partnerships to steer the development of responsible AI** innovations on the continent, in line with the continent's aspirations of Science, Technology and Innovation.

Launch programme

Time (PM)	Session	Moderator
2:00 – 2:10	Arrival/logging in	
2:10 – 3:10	**Opening remarks** 1. Prof. Tom Peter Migun Ogada, Executive Director, ACTS 2. Dr Veerle Vandeweerd, Platform for Transformative Technologies 3. Prof Brando Okolo, Head of Science, Technology, and Innovation (STI), AUDA-NEPAD 4. Amb. Prof Bitange Ndemo, Kenya's Ambassador to the Kingdom of Belgium 5. Naser Faruqui, Director, International Development Research Centre (IDRC) (TBC)	Prof. Mammo Muchie, Research Professor, Tshwane University of Technology, South Africa.
3:10 – 3:30	**Keynote address** Dr. Laurent Bochereau, Minister-Counsellor, European Union Delegation to the African Union	Prof. Shem Wandiga, Former Director, Institute of Climate Change and Adaptation (ICCA), University of Nairobi (Dean)
3:30 – 3:55	**Overview of the ACTS AI Institute -** Dr. Ojenge, Principal Research Fellow, ACTS	
3:55 – 4:05	**AI4D: Opportunities for the Institute -** Gillian Dowie, Senior Program Specialist, IDRC	
4:05 – 4:15	**Continental AI Strategy: Challenges and opportunities within the policy space/opportunities for partnerships with ACTS/ACAII -** Prof. Emeritus Berhanu M. Abegaz, former Executive Director, African Academy of Sciences, Ethiopia	Prof. John Ouma Mugabe, University of Pretoria
4:15 – 4:25	**Interlinkages between AI and other sectors with a gender lens (Agriculture, Climate, Health, Education) -** Dr. Devotha Nyambo, Senior Lecturer and Researcher Nelson Mandela African Institution of Science and Technology	
4:25 – 4: 35	**Responsible AI in African Context - Where are the gaps and opportunities -** Prof. Divine Fuh, Director, HUMA - Institute for Humanities in Africa	

Time (PM)	Session	Moderator
4:35 – 4:45	**Discussion Session**	Prof. John Ouma Mugabe, University of Pretoria
4:45 – 5:00	**Official launch -** Prof. Alfred Oteng-Yeboah, Chair, ACTS Governing Council	
5:00 – 5:10	**Vote of thanks**	

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