

Our Human Future with AI

Episode 2: Is AI Causing or Reducing Global Inequalities?

Fola Adeleke

in conversation with Thérèse Murphy

Thérèse Murphy (TM): Hello, and welcome, everyone. This is a podcast series by the Global Campus of Human Rights. It's all about artificial intelligence. Specifically it's about our human future with artificial intelligence. I'm your host. My name is Thérèse Murphy, and in this episode, I'm asking: is artificial intelligence increasing or reducing global inequalities?

My guest today is Dr. Fola Adeleke. Fola's a law professor. He's also Executive Director of the Global Center on AI Governance. It's an award-winning center. It's Africa's leading voice working globally to reduce inequalities that are exacerbated by artificial intelligence. Fola, it's great you could join us today. You're very welcome, and I'm looking forward to hearing all about the center's mission, and it definitely sounds like it lives up to its name, that's a really big mission, reducing global inequalities exacerbated by AI. So, we'll get to the detail of that mission as the conversation unfolds, but what I'd like to do for our listeners, Fola, is to start with the basics.

So, my first question for you, Fola, is I read a lot, I hear a lot about something called a 'digital divide', and what I'd like you to talk to us about is in plain simple terms, what is the digital divide? Over to you, Fola.

Fola Adeleke (FA): Thank you, Thérèse, for having me. The way I see it, the digital divide refers to this gap between people who have access to digital technologies, such as the internet, electricity, mobile devices that are internet-enabled, and those who don't. Quite often, the people who have access to these digital technologies are citizens of the Global North, whereas those who don't are usually based in what we call Global Majority countries, countries whose citizens are based in Africa, Latin America and Asia. Now, a lot of policy leaders, especially in Africa, often refer to this concept of the digital divide as a problem that needs to be addressed, but that concept is really not explained in the African Union frameworks and instruments, they refer to tackling the digital divide as an objective, and then they describe this objective through various dimensions. So, for example, the African Union released its Digital Transformation Strategy for Africa about six years ago, and the overall objective of that strategy is to transform African societies and economies to promote Africa's integration, generate inclusive economic growth, and break the digital divide.

More recently, the African Union also released a Data Policy Framework, and it is that framework that gives the perhaps closest thing to a conceptual elaboration of what the digital divide means, and they describe that within the context of data, so the framework argues that there are data deserts in many African countries, which reflect the digital divide, because many people lack access to the services and systems used to generate the data needed to train algorithms or analyse for decision making. So, while we don't have an exact definition of the digital divide, at the very least we know that it's a reference point for this gap between what's available in the Global North and the limited access we have in Global Majority of Global South countries.

TM: Thanks, Fola, that's super clear. So, no precise definition of a digital divide, but it's a compelling reference point designed to capture the access differences to technologies between Global North countries and Global Majority countries in, for example, Africa, Asia, Latin America.

What I'd like to do now is ask you to, if I can, you know, explain another term that I've come across quite a lot in what I've been reading and what I've been listening to, and it's less immediately easy to understand than the term digital divide, it has a less plain English meaning. So, this other term I've come across is digital sovereignty. So, seeing this referenced more and more lately, and it's really the same question, Fola, as the last one. Can you help me and our listeners to understand this term, digital sovereignty? My understanding of it is that it's calling on countries to try to step up and ensure that individually they're not overly dependent on a very small number of large technology companies typically located in the Global North, so I'm wondering, Fola, have I got the right understanding of digital sovereignty? What is it, and why do we need to be concerned about it? Over to you.

FA: Thank you, Thérèse. So, like you, I've heard the term digital sovereignty quite a few times, especially from political leaders, when they are talking about the AI moment, and how to build economies to be resilient through digital sovereignty, but when I hear this term, digital sovereignty is often referred to as this concept of States building resilient economies that are insulated from geopolitical tensions, in relation to AI, for example. But there are two perspectives to digital sovereignty that I think are relevant, especially from an African perspective. There's the one perspective in relation to independence from big tech, and the other one in relation to independence and resilience in relation to other sovereign nations.

So, if you take the first one, independence from other sovereign nations, recently the United States government, for example, has been pushing African states to conclude what are called Healthy Data Sharing Agreements that would allow the United States to access the sensitive health data of Africans in exchange for foreign aid. Some African governments agreed, there was a pushback, especially from citizens across the continent. So, some governments, like in Ghana, Nigeria, and Zambia, have rejected this US-linked Health Data Sharing Agreements that would have moved citizens' data outside the borders. But the second perspective on digital sovereignty, the one in relation to big tech, is a little more contested. So, just yesterday, a publication called Rest of the World addressed this question we are talking about, and my colleague Rachel Adams, who is a co-founder of the Global Center on AI Governance, stated that Africa's push for digital sovereignty cannot mean total independence from global AI supply chain, and that's a pragmatic perspective. Digital sovereignty means stronger control over sensitive data, better public procurement rules, investment in local infrastructure, because the reality is, if we are going to essentially build a resilient economy, smaller states are very much dependent on the investments and infrastructure that's provided by big tech companies.

In African National AI Strategies, we are seeing this striking shift where countries are explicitly naming foreign dependence as a threat. So, the governments of Nigeria, Egypt, and Kenya, you know, have published, you know, they've drafted National AI Strategies where they indicate that dependence on foreign tech is potentially a threat to their greater survival. So, there's an acknowledgement in these emerging frameworks about the necessity for digital sovereignty in relation to foreign tech firms, but no clear pathways or action plan in achieving that sovereignty. There are conversations around building African language data sets, clear accountability for foreign AI providers, for example; that is great to see, but we need more to achieve digital sovereignty. One example is leveraging digital public infrastructure to foster digital sovereignty. The IndiaAI Mission provides 30,000 publicly funded GPUs to reduce dependency on foreign commercial providers. That is something that can potentially be replicated in Africa. Now, I recognise that African countries have smaller economies and wouldn't be able to independently publicly fund GPUs,

but you can start thinking about a regional public AI compute fund in Africa, for example, which would be a blended public-private financing vehicle that subsidizes access to AI compute and act as a multiplier on a state-owned investment. This would be a way of implementing digital sovereignty.

We can also be thinking about open-source models on African data infrastructure. In Africa we've got more than 2000 languages, and there's a lot of research out there that shows that these languages are largely absent from mainstream generative AI, and so African contexts are badly underrepresented. So, if you're going to talk about digital sovereignty, we can't just focus on initiatives that are being led by African startups trying to build the continent's most credible modern data sets. They need to be supported by African governments commissioning and curating large, high-quality, openly licensed corpora for African languages, speech, and other priority public interest domains. So, we need a deliberate roadmap of open models to be developed for foundational language and speech models to truly implement this concept of digital sovereignty that is not just seen as independence from other sovereign nations but also foreign commercial providers.

TM: Thank you, Fola. So, a really comprehensive, clear account helping us to understand that digital sovereignty doesn't mean one thing, it can mean independence from other states, it can also mean independence from big tech. But more than that, what I heard you say was that you know we need to approach this topic in quite a nuanced way, that it's an ongoing conversation, many different strands, we may need to be pragmatic, we need to think carefully about roadmaps, including implementation, how we get from the problems we have today to where we want to be.

So, thinking about that, I want to ask you a question about the regulation of Artificial Intelligence. Now, I was born in Ireland, which is in Europe, and I continue to live and work in Europe. In that world region, the European Union has created the AI Act. Now, from what I've read, some experts like the EU's AI Act, other experts are not so keen on it. Similarly, within tech companies, you know, some are okay with the EU's AI Act, some are not. So, but what I see overall is, you know, this legal initiative by the European Union has got quite a bit of attention when people talk about how we regulate or govern artificial intelligence. But I feel certainly in my, in my own reading, that I haven't come across that much about the regulatory choices that are being made in other parts of the world, and in particular in the Global Majority parts of the world. So, as you've been showing us, as we've listened to you today during this podcast so far, one of your areas of expertise is the African region. So, what do you want our listeners to know about regulatory choices in relation to artificial intelligence that are being made in Africa today? Over to you, Fola.

FA: It's interesting that the EU is potentially regretting its choices around regulation. There's something called the Brussels effect, which, as I understand it, this leadership by the EU in introducing robust regulation that then influences similar initiatives in other parts of the world. And now it's 2026 and we are seeing a new conversation take place about whether any country really wants to be the leader in AI regulation, that should be concerning. And in Africa we haven't seen any enforceable frameworks in relation to AI governance just yet. What we are seeing are national AI strategies, which are non-binding frameworks that define countries' ambitions for AI. We already have 19 countries on the continent with National AI Strategies. In 2026 alone, five countries have already published a National AI Strategy, Zimbabwe is the most recent country. And the important justifications for having standalone AI strategies, because it signals a country's government's commitment to the sector, it outlines clear priorities for resource allocation towards AI infrastructure capacity building, and also provide this opportunity to set, you know, guidelines for AI development and create some kind of certainty for investors, and demonstrate countries at least stick in global AI governance discussions.

Some of these strategies also indicate that, you know, there might be a future need for AI regulation that is enforceable, and in two of Africa's biggest economy, Nigeria and Kenya, we already have draft AI bills being considered, and those two bills have interesting provisions around how to finance AI investments, requiring, for example, a certain percentage of funding for research and development to be domesticated in the respective countries. Now, what is common across all the National AI Strategies in Africa is declared recognition of the use cases for AI, but there are certain inconsistencies, and my colleagues at the Global Center on AI Governance, about a year ago, published a piece around whether African states are putting the cart before the horse when it comes to the adoption of any strategy, and the argument there is: some of these strategies set out on realistic timelines in terms of realising their ambition, some of them speak about omnibus AI regulation, like you have in the EU, whereas within the African context, perhaps high-stakes sectors like health might require stronger regulation than others, but also small.

These strategies don't necessarily articulate a defined role in global governance. They speak about cooperation and participation in global AI governance, but don't provide any clarity on that and the country's intended responsibilities within this global AI governance. But I think what's most important as well is the fact that these AI strategies are building on top of existing digitalization ambitions that have yet to be realized. So, integrating AI into various sectors of the economy potentially then crowds out the role that other unique digital technologies could play, or are going to play. So, there needs to be a bit of caution in embracing this AI hype and actually thinking through what kind of innovative regulation might be relevant for the unique cultural and socioeconomic context within Africa.

TM: Thanks Fola. So, a clear call from you for a more considered approach to be taken by states in Africa as they take the next steps on this AI frontier. Interesting that Nigeria and Kenya both have draft AI bills. Also fascinating to hear that the primary focus overall in the African region is not on enforceable regulation at the moment, certainly, but instead on very ambitious, typically National AI Strategies, and I heard you tell us that your Center for AI Governance colleagues there, your colleagues did a deep dive into these strategies and identified some matters of concern, you know, you phrased it really clearly by saying maybe there's a little bit of putting the cart before the horse in various ways. So, you know, we look forward to seeing how these different strategies, these ambitions evolve, and who decides which countries in Africa decide they need enforceable regulation, and about what, or are there other ways to proceed?

I've got another question, then, Fola, on this issue of regulation, because what I've seen in the AI field, and it's something I've seen in relation to technology more generally, so it's not AI specific, it's this: it's that there seems to be a tension between regulation on the one hand and innovation on the other. And so, you know, some people line up pro regulation and other people line up pro innovation, and the people in the pro innovation camp often seem to be suggesting that regulation interferes with innovation, that it blocks innovation that's essential for economic well-being, for the health of the planet, for reducing inequalities, for...you know, for all sorts of vital goals for people. And so, what I'm interested in, Fola, is particularly from your expert standpoint around inequalities, do you think there is a tension between innovation and regulation? Over to you.

FA: The short answer to that is no. I don't think there's a tension. No one-size-fits-all regulation, I think, will be rational, as that will potentially require the regulator prescribing to industry exactly how to design, train, and use the algorithms, and we know that we are all learning in this AI space, so regulators equally lack even the required capacity to regulate with such specificity. So, you can think about an alternative, which would be, for example, adopting performance standards that specify outcomes to be achieved or avoided, and give the regulated companies the flexibility to decide how to implement the prescribed rules that meet or avoid the outcome in the regulatory standard. A couple of years ago, I did some work in relation to the need

for outcomes-based regulation, which describes regulation as a set of expected regulatory outcomes that allows the regulated community to develop processes required for achieving required outcomes, and unlike other prescriptive forms of regulation, which focus on means of inputs, outcomes-based regulation focuses on results, because we need agile, flexible, and resilient governance and regulatory practices to unlock the potential of emerging technologies, not just AI. And outcomes-based regulation, I believe, can provide this flexibility for industry to innovate and help regulated entities to keep pace with advances in technology. Now, outcomes-based regulation, in my opinion, can potentially respond to the challenge of governing AI-based systems that are still evolving. It allows for the regulator to allow for adjustments to changing technology with ease, given the persistent evolution in AI development and usage.

And this concept of outcomes-based regulation certainly might be difficult to implement in practice, because it is easier for regulators to measure their output, such as the number of inspections they did, the number of fines they issued, than to demonstrate outcomes such as responsible and equitable AI. And then you have another challenge with outcomes-based regulation, which regulators must deal with in balancing how tight controls should be in promoting consistency and accountability with how much discretion should be given to promote flexibility and innovation. But one thing that the EU has done, and is actually happening in the rest of the globe, is that this concept of outcomes-based regulation can be achieved through AI regulatory sandboxes. The EU AI Act envisages setting up coordinated AI sandboxes to foster innovation in AI, and sandbox is essentially this multi-stakeholder, you know, setting that allows different stakeholders to explore, experiment, and contribute to new and innovative products under the supervision of a regulator within a limited period of time. And we are seeing that also evolve in Africa, particularly regulatory sandboxes, which can enable this kind of agility in regulation as states then co-design their governance framework with industry experts to facilitate innovation opportunities, and then test this against unintended consequences.

TM: So that was a really clear short answer at the top of your answer, Fola. There isn't in your view some strong tension between innovation and regulation. I heard you reject that really clearly for us, that's great to have that clarity. And then your proposal to us was that really what we're looking for in this field is to be more creative, to be more imaginative around regulation, that what we need is - I heard you use the word agile, you know - we need a more flexible or agile form of regulation, and your thinking is, although it won't be easy to achieve, we might be able to find that agile form of regulation in what you call outcomes-based regulation, where the regulator engages with a range of stakeholders and tries to set down, to establish, to set down outcomes that, on the one hand, are to be avoided, that's one type of outcome, and then others, outcomes to be achieved, and you made it very clear to us this type of regulation isn't easy to do, but you also made it very clear that you think trying to do it has got to be key going forward, in Africa, but also elsewhere in the world.

Okay, I have just one final question for you today, Fola, it would be great to get your view on this. I remember reading somewhere, I can't remember where, and it wasn't in the specific context of AI, but still it made a powerful impact on me. It was someone asking the question, what technologies do we need for people who are living on less than \$1 a day? So, it was recognizing that technology can bring benefits, but also asking, well, what exactly is our conversation, our technology conversation focused on? Is it focused on people living in extreme poverty, or is it focused somewhere else? Okay, so from that starting point, Fola, here's my final question for you today: from your expert position, what do we need to be doing now to try to ensure that our human future with AI, including how we govern AI, is inclusive and participatory, and reduces, not exacerbates, inequalities. Over to you.

FA: That's an excellent question, Thérèse. To have inclusivity in the development of new technologies and the governance of these technologies we first need to acknowledge that there is global inequality that needs to be addressed through deliberate structural interventions. So, if we were to take governance, for example, of AI, we want resources to participation, where simple things like providing travel funding and logistical support to conveyance where conversations are taking place about their governance allows the participation of people from the Global South. You want to decentralize those conveyances, make sure that you host some of these conversations in different cities that are truly accessible, where you don't have prohibitive visa considerations limiting access. But if you take it beyond governance and just think about the development of new technologies with the people who are meant to benefit it in mind, you need to design those technologies with them. You don't make assumptions, and you have a process in place where you have no real-time feedback in the development of your protocols about the usefulness of these technologies, but structural as well.

We need to recognise that, for example, in Africa, we have a mobile internet usage gap, which is defined as people who are not using mobile internet, despite living in an area that has mobile network coverage. And this usage gap in Africa was estimated at more than 60% which represents more than 700 million people, and this gap persists despite increasing investments in network infrastructure in that expanding mobile internet coverage, but that doesn't achieve anything when people who live on less than \$1 a day can't afford a mobile device that's internet enabled. So, when you're thinking about inclusivity in relation to emerging technologies, we need to find pathways to, for example, increasing smartphone affordability, and don't leave that in the hands of the private sector alone. You need to introduce, for example, device financing schemes that are publicly funded.

So, while we are focusing on structural issues in relation to inclusive technologies, inclusive governance, I believe that there are more concrete actions that states can take to make access to these technologies affordable. The private sector can take actions that ensure they are designing these technologies with the user in mind, and the governance of these technologies truly factor in inclusive participation through resource participation, decentralized conveyance, and partnership with already existing networks that are successful in different parts of the globe.

TM: Thanks for the prescriptions, Fola. Clear direction to us that, well, I guess to put it bluntly, we need to do more talking about money, in particular talking about money in terms of concrete actions that states and others can take to make technologies accessible, particularly accessible to people living on less than \$1 a day. But then you added another or two important other layers in for us, and one was to say, technology, it can't simply be - it mustn't simply be - designing for people, it needs to be designing with people. So, people need to have a say in the technologies that they need to be able to live lives with dignity, not having people elsewhere, no matter how brilliant their technology training is, deciding for the rest of the world what people need. So, people need to be able to design with, they need to participate in ideas about what is getting designed and why, rather than having things designed for them.

And then I heard you very powerfully remind us that lots of conversations are taking place with lots of stakeholders around questions to do with AI design, with AI governance, but what you've reminded us is we need to be asking: well, in what places and spaces are these stakeholders getting together? Who is able to get to those places and spaces? Who's being blocked because of visa restrictions, because of the cost of travel. Where exactly are the places and spaces in which these conversations are taking place? And do we need to think about introducing different places and spaces, you said, decentralizing, is every, are all the conversations happening in places like Geneva and New York, for example, and shouldn't they be happening somewhere else?



Fola, it's been amazingly rich and interesting listening to you. I know you've had a super busy week, so thank you so much for joining us on this Global Campus podcast and sharing with us all your expertise to help us think more deeply and more carefully about our human future with AI. Thank you very much.

FA: Thank you for having me, Thérèse.

TM: Bye bye.

FA: Bye.