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BEFORE AFRICA COUNTS AI JOBS, IT MUST GOVERN AI

The jobs dividend depends on governance, not just adoption.

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Before Africa Counts AI Jobs, It Must Govern AI

Under its optimistic full-activation scenario, the African Development Bank sets out the potential for AI to add up to $1 trillion to Africa's GDP by 2035. That would lift the continent's economy from about $4.23 trillion to $5.23 trillion in constant 2015 US dollars. The same scenario projects 35 to 40 million net new digital and digitally enabled jobs.

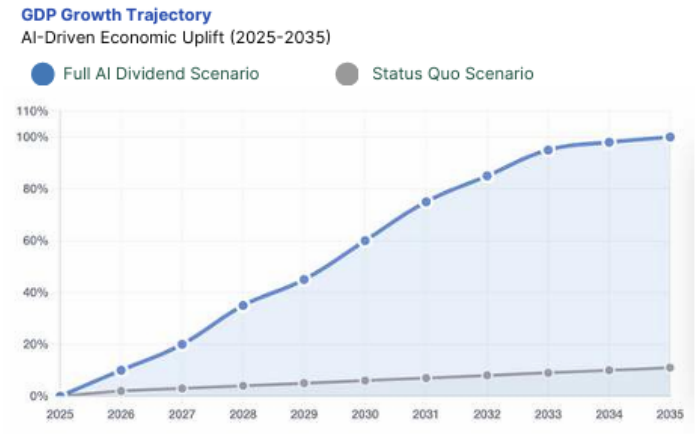

Figure 1. Africa's projected GDP with and without AI, 2025–2035
(Baseline vs. AI-enhanced path. See Annex A for projections.)

Source: AfDB report

After decades of youth unemployment, this reads as a game-changer. Almost every industry can find a use for AI now. Deciding where to start is the harder part.

The AfDB lists five enablers: data, compute, skills, trust and capital. Power, connectivity and institutions sit underneath them and decide whether any of it works on the ground. If AI is adopted faster than those foundations are built, a lot of the gain never shows up.

Where the gains could come from

Most of the projected gain lands in sectors that already employ millions of Africans. Agriculture and food systems lead at an estimated $200 billion. Wholesale and retail trade follows at $140 billion, manufacturing at $90 billion, finance at $80 billion and health at $70 billion. Together that is about 58 per cent of the $1 trillion.

Twiga Foods shows how this can play out in Kenya. It began by linking farmers to urban retailers, then used AI for logistics and inventory forecasting, and used its transaction data to extend credit to small traders.

These sectors depend on each other. Farms supply trade and transport. Retail relies on finance and logistics. A gain in one spreads to the others. That is a good reason to move ahead with adoption. It still leaves the question of whether institutions, infrastructure and safeguards can support AI at that scale.

The bucket with holes!

I think of Africa's AI opportunity as a bucket, but a bucket with holes, which will struggle to fill however much water is poured into it.

The holes range from unreliable power, limited connectivity and missing skills to weak data systems, cyber threats, opaque AI systems and low trust.

The IMF looks at the same question from the readiness side. At current levels of preparedness, it estimates AI adds only about 0.2 per cent to sub-Saharan Africa's GDP over the next decade. With better power, connectivity, skills and practical rules, that rises to about 4 per cent. That is a twenty-fold difference.

Trust is one of the biggest holes

Trust sits at the centre of adoption. Organisations are already using AI on farmer records, loan applications, customer data, health information, hiring decisions and public services. If people believe those systems are insecure, biased or unaccountable, they will avoid them. Adoption slows, and the job gains are never realised.

Cyber risk adds to the problem. AI increases dependence on data, models, vendors and automated decisions. It can also make fraud, scams and disinformation cheaper and more convincing. A company that rolls out AI without cyber resilience risks a breach. It also risks the trust its whole adoption plan rests on.

Kenya has started to address this. The AI Bill, now before the Senate, would require workforce impact assessments where AI is likely to affect employment. If enacted, it would bring the jobs question into the decisions organisations make before deployment, which is where it belongs.

The workforce question needs an owner

Every deployment changes tasks. Some are automated. Some workers are supported to do more. Some new roles emerge in oversight, data quality, exception handling and assurance.

An organisation should know which tasks a system will take over, which roles will change and what skills the new setup needs. It should name an owner for

workforce impact, as it already does for model risk, data protection and cybersecurity. Human judgement needs a defined place too, especially around credit, health, safety, employment and access to services.

The AfDB's jobs scenario depends on people being ready to work with AI. Training must cover technical skills, but also oversight, assurance, data quality, cyber hygiene and the ability to challenge AI-supported decisions. Without these skills, nobody inside the organisation can tell when a system is wrong.

Start with strategy

Governments and companies should begin with what they want AI to do. For a government, that might be better service delivery, wider financial inclusion, stronger food systems or better health access. A company should set its objective, name the problem AI should solve and show how that fits its wider strategy.

Only then should it assess the conditions required to deliver that outcome: data, compute, skills, trust and capital. Whatever is missing becomes the first job. This prevents AI from becoming a technology purchase in search of a purpose.

Each use case needs a stated justification and an approval before it goes live, with human review wherever a decision affects someone's livelihood. If AI changes someone's job, that change needs an owner, an assessment and a control.

Governance

Good governance settles the practical points before anything goes live. A team should be able to say what decision the system supports, what data feeds it and who answers when it fails. It should know where a human stays involved, how the data is protected and what happens to the workers whose tasks change.

These matters apply to every organisation adopting AI, whether it is a bank assessing credit, a farm using IoT data, a manufacturer managing logistics or a health facility managing patient records.

If AI touches sensitive data, it needs cyber resilience. If AI supports a decision that affects a person's livelihood, it needs human oversight and a way to challenge the outcome.

The real dividend

But before Africa counts AI jobs, it must govern AI.

The dividend will come when AI is useful, secure and accountable enough for people to rely on it.

Sources: African Development Bank, *Africa's AI Productivity Gain: Pathways to Labour Efficiency, Economic Growth and Inclusive Transformation* (June 2025); International Monetary Fund, *Africa Can Grow Faster With AI: If It Moves Now* (July 2026).