

African govts take on big techs as data becomes new gold

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Even before fully shackling off the previous colonialism and struggle for sovereignty, as data becomes the new gold, sub-Saharan Africa faces a new wave of digital colonialism. This time, it's driven not by imperial governments, but by powerful multinational technology companies.

Across the globe, the world's most influential corporations are now fueled by data, their revenues rivaling, and in some cases exceeding the combined economies of major African regional blocs. For instance, 2023-24 revenue figures show that Amazon raked in at least \$574 billion, Apple \$383 billion, and Alphabet (Google's parent company) \$307 billion.

Compare this to sub-Saharan regional blocs: the Southern African Development Community's (SADC) \$924 billion, the Economic Community of West African States's (ECOWAS) \$705 billion, and the East African Community (EAC) at \$303 billion. This stark contrast illustrates a simple truth: data is the new raw material, and Africa is once again the supplier, often unknowingly, and with little benefit.

AFRICA'S UNTAPPED VULNERABLE RAW DATA

Unlike historical exploitation of minerals or agricultural products, today's scramble is for citizen data, which largely remains raw, unrefined, and unprotected on the continent. While countries such as Ghana, South Africa, and Rwanda have made progress in data governance, most African ecosystems remain fragmented and nascent.

At a recent Data Governance Capacity Building Workshop in Kampala, Patrick Mundua, assistant commissioner for Information Technology at the ministry of Public Service, said many Ugandans still do not appreciate the value of quality data in planning and decision-making.

"That is why even when someone is in possession of actual figures, they still say about. There is a lot of 'aboutism' in Uganda because officials don't take data

seriously."

Lucrezia Biteete, senior digital policy advisor at GIZ Uganda, urged Ugandan civil society to emulate countries like Kenya where civic actors actively shape national AI and data governance processes.

In Africa, big techs often exploit weak legal systems, poverty, and regulatory gaps to harvest and monetize data with minimal oversight. Data holds enormous potential; it can improve public services, drive innovation, open new markets, and empower citizens. Ugandan government officials at the workshop emphasized that data lies at the heart of their digital transformation strategy.

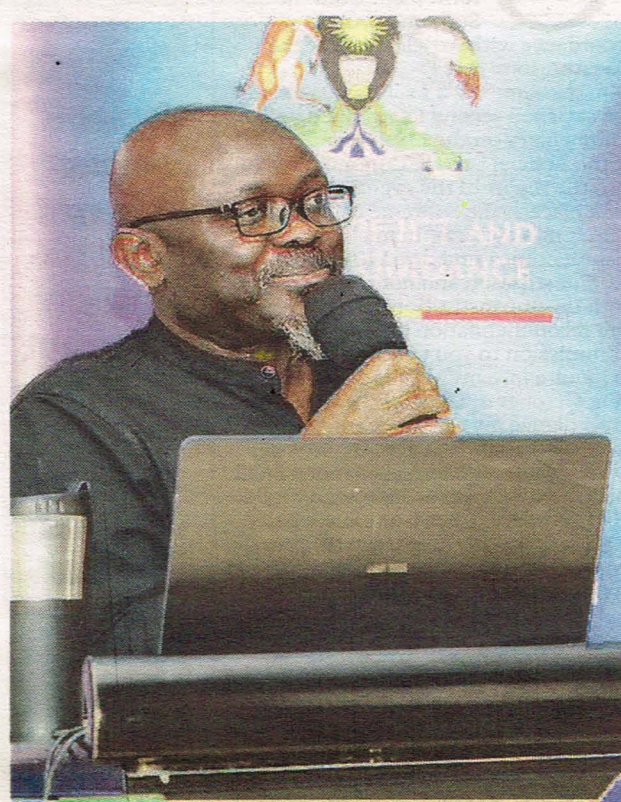
However, big techs are not waiting for Africa to catch up. Like colonial powers of old, who used religion and weaponry to establish dominance, tech giants today employ both incentives and covert techniques.

They promise investments such as data centers while extracting enormous datasets, sometimes through questionable means. Much like the colonial playbook, where religion and political manipulation paved the way for control today's tech giants use both incentives and covert strategies. They offer investment in data centres while quietly extracting massive datasets, sometimes through questionable practices. They seem to revel in Africa's broken governance systems.

Just last week, Google LLC withdrew its appeal in a landmark case filed by four Ugandan lawyers, Frank Ssekamwa, Sharon Pamela Leni, Raymond Amumpaire, and Mercy Owino. The petitioners accused Google of violating the Data Protection and Privacy Act (2019) by among others, failing to register with the Personal Data Protection Office (PDPO), and conducting cross-border data transfers without PDPO approval.

DIGITAL IDS: NEW FRONTIER OF EXTRACTION

Concerns around AI amplify these issues. Africa remains heavily dependent



Dr Wakabi

on foreign-built digital tools, creating structural vulnerability. At the 2025 Forum on Internet Freedom in Africa (FIFAfrica) in Windhoek, Namibia it emerged that global digital ID systems, often promoted as tools for efficient service delivery, may actually be pipelines for big techs to centralize and commercialize biometric data.

Critics argue that centralised bio-data is easier to aggregate, mine, and monetise, and that the near-simultaneous rollout of these systems across Africa is no coincidence. Many projects are funded by the same global actors pushing for global interoperability on their terms with citizens compelled to hand in their data so as to receive services.

Uganda, through the Digital Acceleration Project, recently secured \$200 million from the World Bank to expand fibre networks, including into refugee-hosting communities. Yet this raises a critical question: should data remain in-country even when local infrastructure is weak, or should efficiency override sovereignty?

Countries like Estonia, through platforms like X-Road, show that secure,

interoperable systems are possible even empowering when states retain full control.

Mundua noted that Uganda plans to invest heavily in data services, data centres, and cloud infrastructure so that national data can be consolidated, protected, and properly managed.

He observed that much of Uganda's data currently sits in systems run by multinational players in banking and telecom, meaning data is effectively stored abroad. He said government intends to expand high-speed connectivity, ensure affordable internet access, and use data for evidence-based planning and socio-economic transformation.

Yet as Dr Wairagala Wakabi, CIPESA's executive director, noted, political will and frameworks must translate into harmonised and actionable implementation, similar to Ghana, Kenya, and Rwanda.

Uganda has yet to ratify the Malabo Convention, despite its importance for cybersecurity and data governance. Only 15 African countries have ratified it, and in East Africa, only Rwanda has.

Wakabi emphasized that certain datasets, such as open weather or public health data can actually serve as public goods when managed responsibly, benefitting entire communities and enabling equitable development.

He also highlighted datafication as a socio-technical process in which massive data generation reshapes state operations, market intelligence, and citizen engagement.

UGANDA'S LOCAL-FIRST STRATEGY

A Ministry of ICT official who preferred anonymity said Uganda's approach—to build local foundations and nurture local innovators, may appear slower than Rwanda's fast-paced adoption of off-the-shelf digital systems, but will ultimately deliver more sustainable and inclusive benefits.

While Uganda's policies and frameworks are often praised as progressive, experts urged greater harmonisation and alignment with the EAC Data Governance Policy Framework, AU Data Policy Framework (2022), Malabo Convention, and the AfCFTA Digital Trade Protocol.

Only then, they argued, can Uganda fully unlock the economic potential of its data, and guard against the accelerating wave of digital colonialism.

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