

Africa has 18 months to build AI that serves it



ABBY JAMES TUMUSIIME
SWEDISH-UGANDAN AI
ARCHITECT

There is a conversation happening in the corridors of power in San Francisco, Beijing, Washington and Brussels. It is a conversation about which continents will own the next century, and which will rent it. Africa is not in that conversation. I do not write this from despair. I write it from unusual access. I was born in Kampala, raised in Stockholm, and have spent the last decade building artificial intelligence (AI) systems. I know that the window for Africa to enter the global AI economy on its own terms is roughly 18 months wide. After that, the architecture of the next century calcifies, and we spend the rest of our lives as tenants in systems built by others, for others, priced for others.

THE QUIET CATASTROPHE

Every African child born this year will live their entire economic life inside systems being designed without them. The models that will diagnose their illnesses, price their credit and govern their access to public services are being trained right now, on data that does not include African languages, African medical imagery, African soils or voices that sound like ours.

The data, the compute, the capital and the engineers do not live in Africa in any meaningful quantity, so the systems reflect the world of their builders. AI will work extraordinarily well for the people whose realities it was trained on, and poorly — or not

at all — for the rest of us. We will pay licensing fees to use it, hand over our data to train it and become a consumer market for someone else's intelligence layer. We have seen this before: with industrial machinery, with computing, with the Internet. Each time, Africa entered late and built almost nothing that was ours. This time will be different only if we make it different.

WHY THE WINDOW IS SO SHORT

Three realities are converging. Foundational models are crystallising, and the cost of including African data at the foundational layer is small,

WHAT MUST HAPPEN NOW

Five things must happen in parallel. African governments must invest in sovereign compute on African soil. Training institutions must scale tenfold within five years. The African Union must convene now to harmonise AI regulation that protects our data sovereignty and mandates language inclusion. African

capital must back African AI builders at scale, because the total deployed last year was less than a single US laboratory spent on one training run. And every African with skill, capital or influence must individually choose to bet on the continent rather than away from it. There is no policy that replaces that choice.

while retrofitting it later is enormous. Regulation is forming in the EU, the US, China and the Gulf, and the countries absent from those rooms will inherit rules they did not write. Talent is consolidating into a few laboratories in a few cities, with every African engineer who leaves lost to the continent for a decade. We lose them not because we lack capability, but because we have not built institutions worth staying for. The clock is not metaphorical. It is calendrical.

WHAT IS POSSIBLE IF WE ACT

I do not believe in describing danger without describing possibility. In agriculture, where over 60% of

sub-Saharan Africans work, a farmer can hold a phone to a banana plant and learn instantly whether it carries the wilt that has destroyed harvests for decades. The models exist. The phones are in their pockets. What does not yet exist is the African data layer that makes these tools work for our realities. I am building hardware for this. Kilimorobotics.co is producing a family of autonomous farming machines engineered for African conditions: the soils, plot sizes, crop varieties and energy realities that no Western or Chinese robotics company has prioritised.

In healthcare, where sub-Saharan Africa has roughly one doctor per

5000 people, AI multiplies the capacity of the workers we already have. A community health worker with a phone can flag pneumonia from a cough, identify malaria from a blood smear and route urgent cases to the nearest facility. This needs no breakthrough research — only deployment and the will to put it in frontline hands.

In governance, the African Union estimates the continent loses \$148b every year to corruption, much of it through procurement fraud, shell companies and collusive tendering. I built Anansiwatch.com to address exactly this: a sovereign AI platform built solely for African governments that maps hidden ownership, detects collusion in tenders and screens suppliers in real time.

African problems, African builders, African ownership of the intelligence layer. In education, our most valuable resource is our youth. By 2050, one in four humans alive will be African. I founded Yigaa.com, Africa's premier AI-powered technology institute, because I refused to wait for the establishment to adapt.

To enter this age as builders, we need to train the next million African engineers within 10 years, Yigaa is one institution attempting it. We need fifty more.

The writer is a Swedish-Ugandan AI architect