

*Fostering African Data Commons: Embracing the Philosophy of Ubuntu*

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The advancement of Artificial Intelligence (A.I.) in Africa is gaining attraction, serving as a driver for economic expansion and industrial progress across sectors like agriculture, healthcare, and education. However, the A.I. development in Africa is still in its nascent phase due to several factors, including the high cost with building data infrastructure, limited internet accessibility and a shortage of powerful computing resources essential for training A.I. models. Central to these challenges is the scarcity of access to high-quality training data, predominantly controlled by companies located outside of Africa, a phenomenon some describe as “data colonialism.” The fundamental problem arises from the proliferation of privacy-centric regulations embedded within various regulatory regimes and contractual agreements. Consent serves as the mechanism through which individuals in Africa relinquish their personal information. At its essence, data governance centers on the rights of individuals regarding their personal information, reflecting a regulatory philosophy originating in the West.

To foster a localized African data ecosystem for A.I. development, our proposal entails the construction of a data governance regime that draws inspiration from the philosophy of *Ubuntu*. Grounded in the essence of collective responsibility from all societal actors, the value system of *Ubuntu* serves as the bedrock for nurturing an inclusive and harmonious society. A modern axiom comes from South Africa where various Zulu language sub-groups relate it as *ubuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* (I am because of who we all are). *Ubuntu* reframes data governance and rights debates, forming a decolonial intervention. This approach offers a collectivist approach to data rights, posits that the unitary understanding of privacy that focuses on individual control, itself an illustration of coloniality, and suggests more pluriversal understandings of privacy across varying contexts are useful when it comes to developing data governance approaches in varying contexts.

Given the intertwining of the philosophy of Ubuntu with the governance of commons, and recognizing that A.I. relies on high-quality training data, akin to the production of “scholarly information” as a common-pool resource, we apply the analytical framework of commons developed by Charlotte Hess and Nobel Prize Laureate Elinor Ostrom. By distinguishing between artifacts, facilities, and ideas, we have a better understanding of the production of a successful A.I. model, where the product serves as the artifact, the data center as the facility, and the ideas as the training data. The notion of the tragedy of the commons is the constraint of computational power that supports the system. This approach offers a more holistic perspective on constructing a successful A.I. model, drawing upon a governance framework deeply embedded in African culture and traditions. The goal is to provide insights into what must be undertaken to cultivate a localized data ecosystem, pinpointing the cooperative behaviors and system resilience necessary to sustain training data for Africa’s A.I. development, in perpetuity.