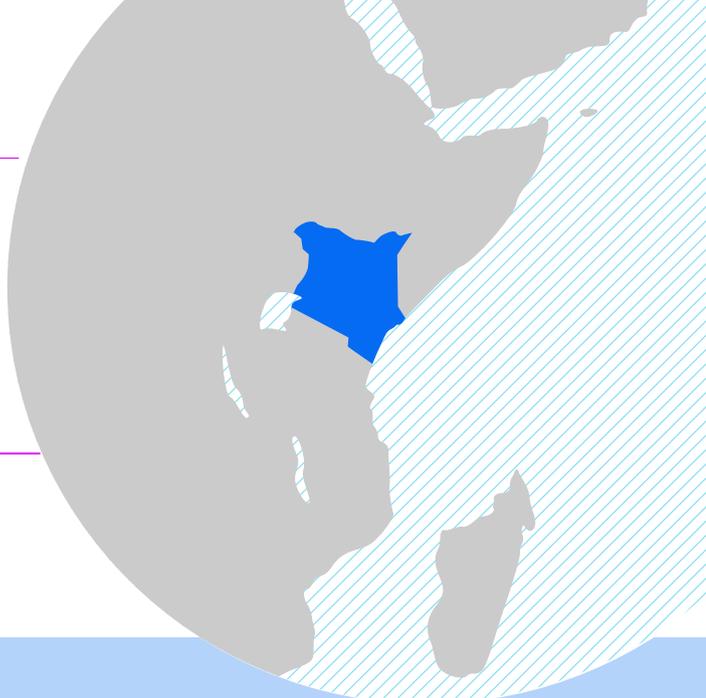

KENYA

Shaping the national discourse on artificial intelligence in the Kenyan national science system

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Key takeaways

- The Kenyan national science system comprises the State Department of Science, Research and Innovation, with key agencies (National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation, National Research Fund, and Kenya National Innovation Agency), specialized research institutions, higher education, the private sector and development partners.
- The *Kenya National Artificial Intelligence Strategy 2025–2030* aims to transform the country from a consumer of AI technology to a net exporter of home-grown solutions.
- Kenya is consciously shifting its focus from primarily using AI as a methodology to address problems towards foundational AI research and tool development.
- The bulk of AI research funding in Kenya remains dependent on foreign grants and multinational corporations.
- Institutional policies are evolving towards an ethical framework that encourages the responsible use of AI tools while maintaining academic integrity.
- Kenya currently lacks a single, dedicated AI law, relying instead on the *Data Protection Act, 2019*.

Kenya's science and innovation landscape is a complex network of government agencies, academic institutions and private sector participants, each playing a specific role in shaping the research agenda and driving innovation. At the top of this structure is the State Department of Science, Research and Innovation, which sets the overarching policy and provides oversight. Below this, the ecosystem is guided by key agencies established under the *Science, Technology and Innovation Act, 2013*: the National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation, which regulates and coordinates research; the National Research Fund, which mobilizes research funding and manages research grants; and the Kenya National Innovation Agency, which aims to commercialize research outputs (*Science, Technology and Innovation Act, 2013*). Outside these main government bodies, the ecosystem is enhanced by a variety of other actors, including specialized research institutions, higher education and technical and vocational education and training institutions, the private sector, innovation hubs and development partners.

AI strategy

Kenya's approach to AI is ambitious and strategic, guided by the *Kenya National Artificial Intelligence Strategy 2025–2030*. The strategy's primary aim is to transform Kenya into a regional leader in AI research and development, shifting the country from a consumer of AI technology to a net exporter of tailored, home-grown solutions. It recognizes significant challenges, including a shortage of advanced AI experts, underinvestment in local research and development, and gaps in data and regulation. To address these, the strategy emphasizes capacity building by integrating AI into curricula at all levels and creating an AI Innovators Programme. The country is also actively drawing inspiration from global best practices, including the AI policies of the European Union and the United States of America, as well as the African Union's Continental Artificial Intelligence Strategy. Key sectors prioritized for AI development include agriculture, health care and financial services, with a specific focus on creating solutions that are inclusive and leverage local languages and data. A multi-stakeholder institutional arrangement is set to oversee the strategy's implementation, involving a proposed AI Task Force, academia and private and civil society actors. While a specific timeline for this undertaking is still to be determined, the focus is clearly on establishing a comprehensive, collaborative governance model from the outset (Ministry of Information, Communications and the Digital Economy, 2025).

From AI applications to AI fundamentals

Kenya's burgeoning AI ecosystem is primarily focused on utilizing existing AI tools to address practical problems in fields such as healthcare, agriculture and environmental conservation. This is, in essence, the application of AI as a means to an end or as a methodological approach. However, a crucial shift is underway, with emerging efforts aimed at foundational AI research and tool development. Academic institutions like the Dedan Kimathi University of Technology are moving beyond the application of AI to research focusing on novel machine learning methods and theoretical AI concepts (DSAIL, n.d). The government is also a key driver of this change through its national AI strategy, which explicitly aims to position the country as a leader in AI model development and research. Furthermore, private sector and international collaborations, such as Microsoft Research Lab – Africa, Google Research – Africa, and IBM Research – Africa in Nairobi, are developing globally equitable AI tools and models, including small language models for local languages.

AI research funding

In Kenya, while there is a growing commitment from the government, the bulk of AI research funding comes from foreign governments and multinational corporations. The National Research Fund is the primary local public funding body. While it has recently launched a specific call for AI-related proposals in 2025 (National Research Fund, 2025), the scale and scope of such government initiatives are often surpassed by international support. Key AI research funding sources in Kenya include grants from the UK-Kenya AI Challenge Fund, Google's significant investments in AI education and research, and the International Development Research Centre, which funds projects exploring the socio-economic impacts of AI in Africa. Additionally, organizations like the Science for Africa Foundation, backed by partners like the Gates Foundation, provide competitive grants for AI innovations in

global health. This reliance on external funding highlights a central challenge: while Kenya's government has an ambitious AI strategy, its AI research and development ecosystem remains heavily dependent on foreign funding.

Institutional-level AI policies

Institutional-level AI policies in Kenya are still evolving, with most universities and research centres using a mix of formal research and ethics guidelines, as well as strategic roadmaps, rather than a single, unified AI policy document. These frameworks mainly aim to promote the ethical use of AI tools, particularly in academic work, with a strong emphasis on maintaining integrity. For instance, some universities, like Aga Khan University, have issued guidelines requiring students to disclose and cite AI-generated content, treating it as a non-recoverable source (Aga Khan University, 2025). Beyond academic integrity, key research and policy centres such as the Centre for Intellectual Property and Information Technology Law at Strathmore University are conducting foundational research to inform ethical AI policy, with an emphasis on embedding Afrocentric values and human rights. Similarly, institutions like the Kenya Medical Research Institute follow strong research ethics frameworks as they incorporate AI into health research, ensuring data protection and human rights are prioritized. The higher education sector is now seeing a clear, emergent discourse on the profound implications and strategic utility of AI for enhancing pedagogy, student learning and cutting-edge research. Egerton University is taking a leadership role in this space, initiating a significant, ongoing institutional conversation that was formally launched by its AI in Higher Education Summit in October 2025 (Egerton University, 2025). Overall, the approach is not to restrict AI but to establish a transparent and ethical framework for its use in education and research.

Legal frameworks for AI in research and innovation

A single, comprehensive law does not govern the use of AI in research and innovation in Kenya; instead, the use of AI is guided by existing legislation and a forward-looking national strategy. The *Kenya National Artificial Intelligence Strategy 2025–2030* is the primary policy document, outlining a vision to position the country as a regional AI hub through a soft regulatory framework that balances innovation with ethics and a strong focus on data governance (Manwa Advocates, 2025). This strategy acknowledges that existing laws are insufficient and recommends the creation of a national data policy and specific AI regulations. Currently, the *Data Protection Act, 2019*, is the most relevant law, regulating how personal data is processed and providing individuals the 'right not to be subject to a decision based solely on automated processing' (Securiti, 2025). Additionally, the *Computer Misuse and Cybercrimes Act, 2018*, can be applied to address the misuse of AI systems. While proposals like the Kenya Robotics and Artificial Intelligence Society Bill, 2023, were introduced to create a specific legal framework, they have faced strong opposition from the tech community and have not been enacted, highlighting the need for extensive stakeholder consultation in future legislative efforts (Tech in Africa, 2024).

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