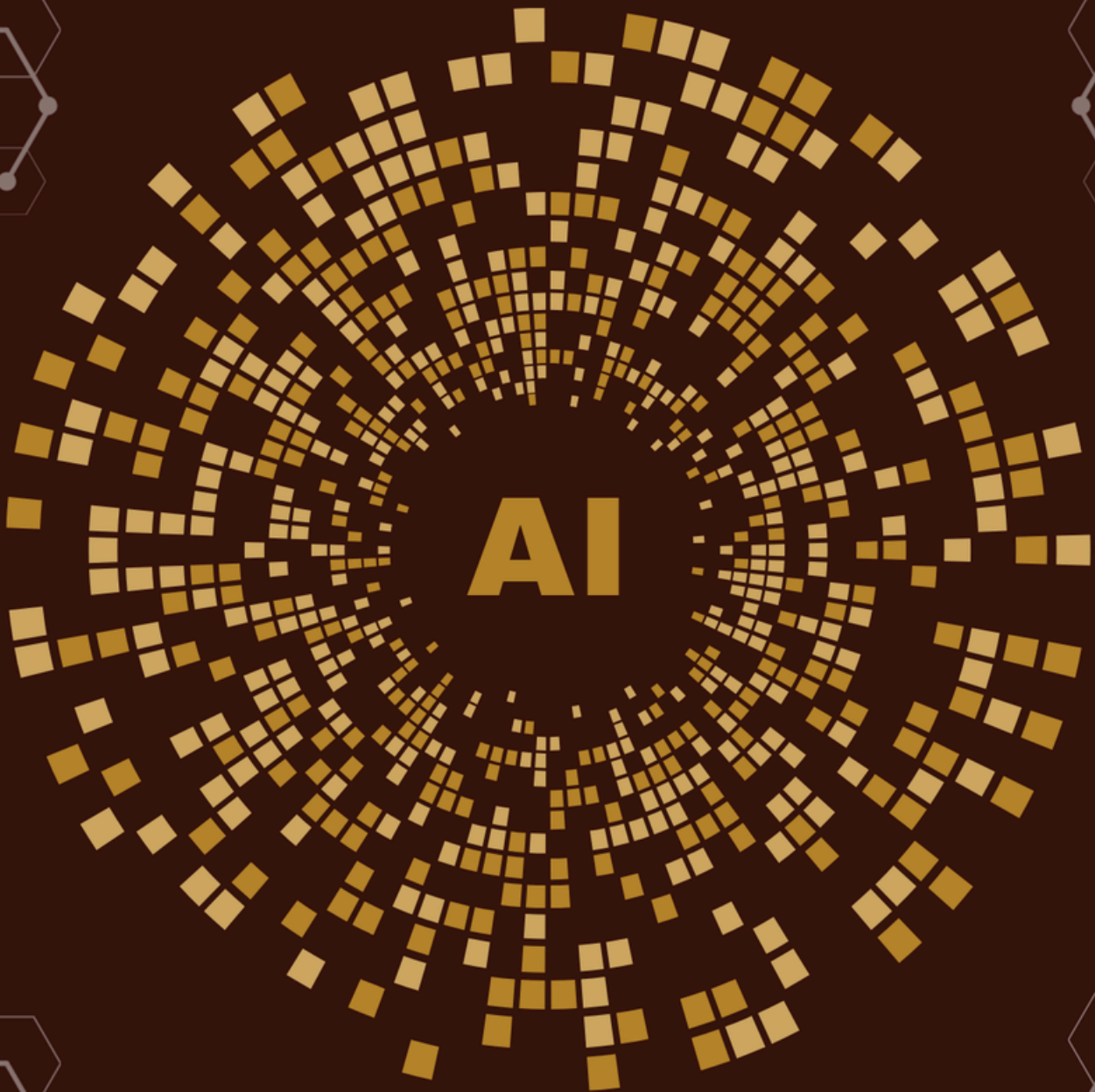




MINDS
MANDELA INSTITUTE FOR DEVELOPMENT STUDIES

AI FOR AFRICA'S DEVELOPMENT: FROM INNOVATION TO IMPACT

Roundtable Discussion Report



PREPARED BY MANDELA INSTITUTE FOR DEVELOPMENT STUDIES

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The roundtable on “AI for Africa’s Development: From Innovation to Impact” convened MINDS Scholars, alumni and invited experts to examine how artificial intelligence can be understood, adopted and shaped in ways that advance African development priorities. The discussion moved beyond general enthusiasm for AI and focused on a more strategic question: how can young African leaders ensure that AI becomes a tool for productivity, sovereignty, inclusion and Pan-African problem-solving rather than another technology imported without sufficient local agency?

The central message was that AI is not a distant future issue. It is already changing work, education, entrepreneurship, research, public administration and institutional decision-making. For MINDS Africa, this matters because the organisation’s scholarship and alumni community is positioned at the intersection of leadership development, continental problem-solving and cross-border collaboration. The discussion therefore highlighted AI as both a practical tool for scholars and alumni and a strategic domain in which the MINDS network can contribute to Africa-centred innovation.

Six strategic insights shaped this report: Africa must move from passive adoption to active production; data infrastructure is foundational; AI systems reproduce the bias of the data on which they are trained; education must shift from memorisation to critical, adaptive and AI-complementary learning; Pan-African collaboration is essential for scale; AI creates opportunities for youth entrepreneurship and productivity; and the conversation must now move from reflection to implementation.

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1. Background and Context

Artificial intelligence has become one of the defining technological shifts of the current development era. It is affecting how organisations analyse information, how professionals work, how students learn, how governments deliver services and how businesses scale solutions. For Africa, the opportunity is significant because AI can support leapfrogging in sectors such as healthcare, agriculture, education, public administration, logistics, identity systems and financial inclusion.

At the same time, the African AI agenda cannot be reduced to adoption of external tools. The roundtable repeatedly returned to questions of data, infrastructure, representation, skills, ownership and identity. Participants recognised that Africa's development challenges are often deeply contextual, and that imported systems may not adequately reflect African languages, histories, local conditions or institutional realities.

The topic is particularly relevant for MINDS Scholars and alumni because the MINDS Scholarship Programme is designed to nurture young African leaders with a Pan-African mindset.

As Carine Seke emphasised, the diversity of the scholarship community, across fields such as ICT, law, anthropology, health and other disciplines, is central to MINDS' belief that continental challenges require multidisciplinary leadership. AI therefore becomes not only a technical issue, but a leadership, ethics, education and development issue.

2. Main Themes Emerging from the Discussion

2.1 AI as an opportunity for African development

The roundtable framed AI as a powerful opportunity to address longstanding African development challenges. David Stephen Mhya opened the discussion by placing AI alongside previous technological breakthroughs that helped African innovators enter sectors once considered inaccessible. Participants noted potential applications in healthcare, precision agriculture, adaptive learning, public sector accountability, digital identity and entrepreneurship. For MINDS Africa, the implication is clear: AI should be treated as a practical development capability that scholars and alumni can learn to use in their fields, not as a specialised subject reserved only for technologists.

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2.2 From consumption to production of African solutions

A recurring concern was that Africa often consumes technologies designed elsewhere while African innovators struggle to have their solutions adopted locally. Professor Moise used the example of digital identity systems to show how African countries may contract European or Asian providers even when African talent exists. This raises a strategic challenge for MINDS: the network should help normalise trust in African expertise by spotlighting African-led solutions, connecting innovators across countries and encouraging scholars to think as producers of technology, policy and knowledge.

2.3 Pan-African collaboration and regional complementarity

The conversation linked AI to the deeper question of Pan-Africanism. Professor Moise argued that Pan-Africanism requires recognising a shared history, dignity and destiny, and moving from competition between countries to complementarity. In AI, this means that African countries and institutions should not all attempt to duplicate the same capabilities in isolation. For MINDS, this insight reinforces the value of its cross-border alumni network, which can help identify complementary skills, projects, datasets, institutions and policy priorities across the continent.

2.4 Productivity, work and the changing skills agenda

Dinah Amimo presented AI as a productivity multiplier rather than only a threat. She explained how tasks that previously required days can now be completed in hours when AI is used responsibly. However, participants also recognised the reality of job displacement, including in technology roles. The strategic implication is that MINDS should help scholars and alumni develop AI-complementary skills: problem definition, critical judgement, ethical reasoning, domain expertise, entrepreneurship, communication and the ability to use AI tools to increase impact rather than simply automate routine tasks.

2.5 Mindset, perception and adaptability

Several speakers emphasised that AI adoption begins with mindset. Dinah Amimo asked participants to examine whether they see AI as a threat, a replacement, a shortcut or a tool for learning and productivity. This is important because fear-based adoption can lead to avoidance, while uncritical adoption can lead to dependency. MINDS' leadership development model can add value by helping scholars develop an adaptive mindset: open to experimentation, aware of risks and grounded in African development purpose.

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2.6 Data gaps, infrastructure and sovereignty

The African data gap emerged as one of the strongest themes. Participants noted that data often exists in hard-copy files, fragmented systems or inaccessible repositories, making it difficult to build robust AI models. The statement that whoever owns infrastructure owns data captured the concern that Africa's technological dependency may also become a data dependency. For MINDS Africa, this suggests a need to treat data literacy, data governance and digital infrastructure as part of the wider leadership agenda.

2.7 Bias, representation and Africa-centred AI

Ephraim Adongo's contribution highlighted the risk that global AI systems may reproduce incomplete or distorted narratives about African history, politics and identity because they are trained primarily on non-African or externally curated data. This matters for education, research, historical consciousness and the next generation's understanding of Africa. The implication for MINDS is that AI ethics in Africa must include questions of cultural memory, linguistic diversity, historical accuracy and knowledge sovereignty.

2.8 Education, critical thinking and learning in the age of AI

The roundtable showed that education systems are being forced to rethink assessment, teaching and learning. Professor Moise argued that education must prepare people to work with AI rather than simply punish AI use. Participants also cautioned that AI can weaken critical thinking when used passively. MINDS can respond by encouraging scholars to use AI as a thinking partner, research assistant and productivity tool while maintaining intellectual discipline, verification and contextual judgement.

2.9 Moving from discussion to implementation

Amanda Sitjeo and Gifty Osei both emphasised the need to move beyond conversation. The roundtable was valuable, but its strategic worth will depend on whether it generates practical follow-up: mapping expertise, collecting ideas, forming working groups, testing use cases and linking AI discussions to leadership practice. This is a direct opportunity for MINDS to convert intellectual engagement into a structured alumni and scholar mobilisation process.

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3. Key Contributions from Speakers

David Stephen Mhya framed the roundtable by presenting AI as a major opportunity for Africa to leapfrog traditional development pathways. He highlighted infrastructure, funding and digital gaps, but also pointed to homegrown innovation, including examples of language translation tools and AI applications in healthcare, agriculture and adaptive learning. His framing established the core question: how can MINDS Scholars and alumni contribute to African solutions rather than remain observers of technological change?

Carine Seke situated the event within the purpose of the MINDS Scholarship Programme. She reminded participants that MINDS was launched to nurture young people with a shared mindset and the capacity to solve the continent's economic and social challenges. Her remarks clarified why the discussion was internal and strategic: MINDS Scholars and alumni constitute a pool of diverse leaders who can help define where Africa should start and what practical action points should emerge.

Professor Moise offered the main conceptual framing. He described the uncertainty surrounding AI as a major opportunity for young people because unclear technological environments reward knowledge, positioning and imagination. He connected AI to Pan-Africanism by arguing that Africa's development challenge is not only technological, but also relational: African countries must learn to trust, complement and build with one another. He also stressed that education must evolve so that learners develop skills that complement AI rather than skills easily replaced by it.

Dinah Amimo's contribution focused on mindset, productivity and practical adoption. Drawing on her experience as a software engineer, she argued that AI can multiply productivity and help individuals complete tasks faster, learn more effectively and address problems in sectors such as healthcare, agriculture, accountability systems and education. Her intervention shifted the discussion from fear of replacement to the need for intentional and measurable use of AI in daily work and institutional problem-solving.

Ephraim Adongo introduced a critical perspective on bias, African data and identity. He acknowledged AI's efficiency but warned that global AI systems often lack African data, African historical depth and African cultural context. He argued for Africa-centred AI

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systems trained on African languages, histories, heritage and realities. His contribution made data sovereignty and narrative sovereignty central to the discussion.

Amanda Sitjeo emphasised that the roundtable must not end at discussion. She connected the topic to MINDS' wider role as a leadership community and asked participants to think about what they are doing, from where they are, to influence Africa's AI future. Her intervention pushed the conversation towards action, institutional responsibility and practical implementation.

Gifty Osei closed by returning to the fundamentals: infrastructure, data access, research capacity, culture and history. She argued that Africa must strengthen the foundations needed for AI development and ensure that African history is not lost in the process of technological change. Her remarks drew a useful distinction between culture, which naturally evolves, and history, which must be preserved, documented and represented accurately.

4. Strategic Analysis

The roundtable revealed that Africa's AI challenge is not simply about access to tools. It is about power, positioning and capability. AI creates opportunities for young Africans to build businesses, improve public services, increase productivity, strengthen research, develop local language tools and solve problems in sectors where existing systems are overstretched. For scholars and alumni, AI can become a multiplier of learning, professional performance and social impact when used with discipline and purpose.

However, the risks are significant if Africa remains a passive adopter. Dependency on external AI systems may deepen existing patterns of technological and epistemic dependence. If African users rely on models that are not trained on African realities, they may receive incomplete, biased or decontextualised outputs. If African institutions do not build data infrastructure, they may become users of systems whose foundations, standards and priorities are controlled elsewhere.

Data sovereignty is therefore critical. It concerns not only ownership of datasets, but also the ability to decide how African realities are documented, stored, governed, interpreted and used. The discussion made clear that many African institutions still need stronger data collection, digitisation, interoperability and access systems. Without this foundation, AI strategies may remain aspirational or dependent on external infrastructure.

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African historical, cultural and linguistic representation is equally important. AI systems increasingly mediate how people learn, research and form opinions. If African histories, languages and knowledge systems are marginal in these systems, future generations may encounter Africa through distorted or incomplete representations. This makes Africa-centred AI not only a technical project, but a cultural, educational and leadership project.

The conversation also suggests that education must be reimagined. The purpose of learning can no longer be limited to memorisation or routine production. AI makes information retrieval easier, but it also increases the importance of judgement, verification, problem framing, ethical reflection, creativity and contextual intelligence. MINDS Africa could play a strategic role by helping scholars and alumni become leaders who use AI critically, productively and in alignment with Pan-African development priorities.

5. Key Takeaways

- AI should be approached as a development capability that can support African solutions in health, agriculture, education, governance and entrepreneurship.
- Africa's strategic challenge is to move from consuming imported AI tools to producing, adapting and governing Africa-centred technologies.
- Pan-African collaboration is essential because no single country can build the full AI ecosystem alone; regional complementarity is a practical necessity.
- Productivity gains from AI are real, but they require new skills, new mindsets and disciplined use rather than passive dependence.
- Job displacement is a serious risk, especially for routine knowledge work, and must be addressed through reskilling, entrepreneurship and AI-complementary capabilities.
- The African data gap is a foundational constraint; without quality, accessible and contextual data, African AI systems will remain limited.
- AI bias is not only a technical problem; it is linked to whose histories, languages and knowledge systems are represented in the data.
- Education systems need to evolve from memorisation-based assessment towards critical thinking, problem-solving and responsible AI use.
- MINDS Scholars and alumni can become a practical network for identifying use cases, sharing expertise and building African AI leadership.
- The roundtable should be treated as a starting point for structured action, not as a standalone event.

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6. Recommended Action Points for MINDS Africa

ACTION	PURPOSE	EXPECTED VALUE FOR MINDS AFRICA
Create an AI follow-up working group within the MINDS network.	To convert the roundtable discussion into a structured community of practice.	Sustains momentum and enables scholars and alumni to collaborate on concrete AI-related priorities.
Map MINDS Scholars and alumni working in AI, data, technology, education, policy and innovation.	To understand existing expertise and identify potential mentors, speakers and project leads.	Creates a visible talent base and strengthens internal mobilisation.
Develop an AI learning pathway for scholars and alumni.	To provide practical guidance on AI literacy, prompt use, ethics, data, productivity and sectoral applications.	Builds network-wide capability and links AI to leadership development.
Create an Africa-centred AI knowledge repository.	To collect relevant African datasets, case studies, tools, papers, policy resources and African-led solutions.	Positions MINDS as a convening platform for practical AI knowledge.
Encourage scholars to document AI use cases in their academic and professional work.	To move from abstract discussion to applied experimentation.	Generates examples that can be shared with partners, funders and the wider network.
Explore partnerships with African universities, AI labs, innovation hubs and policy actors.	To connect the MINDS network to technical expertise and implementation ecosystems.	Strengthens credibility and expands opportunities for collaborative projects.

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ACTION	PURPOSE	EXPECTED VALUE FOR MINDS AFRICA
Run a thematic series on AI ethics, data sovereignty and African identity.	To deepen critical reflection on bias, representation, culture and historical memory.	Ensures AI adoption remains aligned with African agency and values.
Collect post-roundtable feedback and project ideas from participants.	To identify practical interests, training needs and possible pilot initiatives.	Creates a clear evidence base for future programming and donor communication.

7. Possible Follow-Up Questions

- What practical AI challenge in your field of study or work could be addressed within the next six months?
- Which AI tools are you currently using, and how have they changed your productivity or learning?
- What skills do MINDS Scholars and alumni need most urgently to use AI responsibly and effectively?
- Which African datasets, languages, histories or knowledge systems are currently underrepresented in AI tools?
- How can the MINDS network better identify and support African-led AI solutions?
- What would an Africa-centred AI learning pathway for MINDS Scholars and alumni need to include?
- Which sectors should MINDS prioritise for AI-focused dialogue: education, health, agriculture, governance, entrepreneurship or policy?
- How can AI be used without weakening critical thinking, academic integrity or historical understanding?
- What partnerships should MINDS explore to move from discussion to implementation?
- Would you be interested in joining a MINDS AI working group or contributing to a practical AI project?

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8. Conclusion

The roundtable confirmed that artificial intelligence represents both a challenge and an opportunity for Africa. It can accelerate productivity, strengthen development solutions and create new spaces for youth entrepreneurship and institutional innovation. Yet it can also deepen dependency, reproduce bias and marginalise African histories, languages and knowledge systems if African actors remain passive users of systems designed elsewhere.

For MINDS Africa, the strategic value of the discussion lies in its connection to leadership. MINDS Scholars and alumni are not only future users of AI; they are potential designers, critics, policy actors, entrepreneurs, educators and conveners within Africa's AI ecosystem. The next step is therefore to transform reflection into concrete Pan-African action: mapping expertise, building skills, documenting African solutions, strengthening ethical awareness and creating platforms through which the MINDS community can contribute meaningfully to Africa's AI future.

~ THE END ~



