Digital Cooperation and Digital Governance in Africa

Key Messages from the Expert Dialogue Series: June-July 2023

Africa's youth population is growing rapidly, and by 2050, it is expected that most young people in the world will live on the continent. Yet, there is a lack of decent jobs to absorb the up to 20 million young Africans entering the labour market each year. Governments across the continent have been struggling to develop strategies and policies that translate to significant job growth, particularly in industries in the field of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR). For example, the World Bank estimates that 230 million jobs in Africa will require basic digital skills by 2030. The challenges range from transforming education and training to accelerating manufacturing and industry to providing clear regulatory frameworks for data protection, digital privacy, and responsible Artificial Intelligence.

KAS, IOE, and ACET have collaborated on three dialogues with experts and policymakers, culminating in an event at the UN High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) on July 12, 2023. These dialogues have been designed to facilitate knowledge sharing among policymakers, development partners, and other stakeholders in multilateral institutions to identify concrete policy actions to accelerate the development of digital skills in Africa. The three topics have been "Re-imagining Technical and Vocational Education and Training for the Fourth Industrial Revolution" with ACET as the lead organizer; "Disinformation, Data Management, and Citizen Skills" with KAS as the lead organizer; and "Technical and Soft Skills in the Digital Era" with IOE as the lead organizer. Key messages from the expert dialogues and HLPF event are below.

Re-imagining Technical and Vocational Education and Training for the Fourth Industrial Revolution. This dialogue took place on June 13, 2023 with thirty-nine experts and was informed by a background paper prepared by ACET. Key messages included:

TVET for 4IR must be a continuum. New development thinking is required to introduce 4IR skills along the full continuum of education, including pre- and post- TVET training. For education policymakers this will require evolutions in approaches as the definition of jobs and work changes due to new technologies.

TVET content should be informed by employability in the age of advanced technologies. This means a focus on core skills, agile and responsive curricula, skills for the informal sector and leveraging the democratization of learning (such as informal learning, online learning). But it also means looking critically at the skills needed for jobs of the future – for example in renewable energy, artificial intelligence, mechatronics, etc. This understanding of labor markets and labor demands for the future must be informed with better data and greater collaboration with industry.

The business case for TVET. Around the world TVET suffers from poor perceptions. More is needed to make the business case for TVET, both for the worker (perception they can get good jobs) and for industry (perception they can get good skills). The return on investment from TVET needs to be better understood in the African content and with regard to new technologies, and stakeholders need to do more to capture and communicate success stories. Addressing the business case for TVET is also important due to the high cost of technology needed for 4IR jobs.

Investment is needed in digital leadership. Countries need to be intentional about developing digital leadership across government, academia and the private sector. This can be buttressed by supporting thought leaders who can bring new ideas and approaches to educational systems, including TVET, that are contextualized to each nation's educational and labor needs.

Policy implementation is needed – not more institutions. There should be a focus on getting policies implemented, thereby creating a strong environment for TVET learning – and there should not be a focus on establishing more TVET institutions. At the same time, the industrial fabric is weak in many countries, whereby incentives are needed for companies to invest in training or collaborations. Among informal workers and SMEs, there are not adequate policies in place to improve access to finance, address access to market spaces, and help workers invest in adequate equipment.

Much more is needed to create ecosystems whereby industry can inform policy decisions. The role of Ministries of Education are critical, but in many cases a culture change is needed that includes a much closer collaboration with employers. And this collaboration should be with a wide-cross section of industry, not only traditional sectors such as manufacturing, and may begin with cooperation between educational institutions and industry. At the same time, as noted in the context of the business case, industry needs to be assured that its views are adequately informing TVET approaches.

Addressing Disinformation in Africa: Strengthening data management and citizen skills. This dialogue took place on June 23, 2023. Key messages included:

Education on the key signs of misleading content is important as technology advances and especially in the lead-up to elections in Africa. Beyond countering disinformation, there is a more fundamental need for basic skills and digital literacy. African Youth are not only consumers but also content creators. Digital literacy has to become part of official school curricula. The speed of AI and the acceleration of disinformation presents challenges for fact-checking, which is a time-consuming process. Departments of Education may provide guidelines for content development; however, this is a slow process. In this context, Africa Check follows a dual approach to work with governments and the education system to access schools directly. To build digital skills, we need to collaborate with universities, journalists, and content creators to create responsible content and reach a broad and diverse range of people

(of all ages) on media platforms. The main challenges to doing so include: the backsliding of the digital economy, the increasing cost of the internet, and the growing digital divide.

Common standards on generative AI must be developed to ensure biases are not created and reinforced. There is a new paradigm of surveillance and AI techniques influencing citizens and undermining trust in the electorate cycle. While AI software in Africa is mostly produced by African innovators, we should be aware of the aspect of digital colonialism, where those controlling the data decides who can participate. However, policy making in Africa is at an impasse stage as compared to efforts to create cyber-norms in the European Union, for example. UNESCO highlighted their ethical AI initiative and impact assessment tools, urging countries to start legislating ethical AI policies. As a recommendation, the African Union and United Nations could lead in the development of normative frameworks, foresight ('sandboxes'), implementation of data protection mechanisms, strategic monitoring, and crisis planning capacity for electoral bodies. For the current set of legal frameworks an audit could identify their viability for addressing disinformation. Self-regulation by service providers is not deemed sufficient.

Innovation must be balanced with adequate frameworks for data governance. Two-thirds of African countries have data protection laws, but many are still at an awareness raising stage. In addition, more than 20 African countries are in the process of updating policies on data protection and cross-border data flows. This landscape suggests a risk of diverging standards on AI and cyber security, privacy, free speech, and the ease of cross-border data transfer on the continent. Moving forward, an audit of laws could help to understand what norms should be further developed for AI. There must be a minimum level of regulatory mechanisms, as well as calls on governments to progressively shift towards higher levels of human rights impact assessments, independent audits, and transparency in political advertising. Multi-stakeholder partnerships are key to promoting a culture of responsible data governance.

Human and Social Skills in the Digital Era. This dialogue took place on June 29, 2023. Key messages included:

The Business Case for Human-centric Digital Transformation: In the context of Africa's swift digitization, it's crucial to note that technology alone isn't sufficient to achieve sustainable progress. Alongside advanced technical competencies, human and social skills remain vital to drive the change. Workers need to embrace creativity, critical thinking, collaboration, and communication to use technology effectively, fostering an environment where technology serves as a tool rather than a substitute for human connection.

The Power of Digital Inclusion: The digital revolution holds the potential to democratize access to information and opportunities. As digital platforms become central to education, work, and social interaction, we must establish the right infrastructure and connectivity to ensure no one is left behind. It involves investing in high-speed internet access, digital literacy programs, and

affordable devices, promoting a culture of lifelong learning in the digital age. The ripple effects of digitalization extend beyond the realms of education and economy to significantly influence the very fabric of governance. Digital platforms augment governance by fostering transparency, improving efficiency, and enhancing citizen engagement. A noteworthy example of this transformative power is evident in Guinea, where digitalization is reshaping governance paradigms. The government has leveraged digital platforms to offer an array of public services online to students, making them more accessible and efficient.

Partnerships for Youth Upskilling: In today's digital economy, it's necessary to re-evaluate traditional education and training models. To equip the youth with the skills they need to thrive, forging partnerships between educational institutions, businesses, non-profit organizations, and government bodies can create a more comprehensive and flexible learning ecosystem. These collaborations can foster innovation in education, facilitate knowledge transfer, and offer practical training opportunities, enabling young people to adapt to the rapidly evolving digital landscape. Prominent tech companies like Microsoft are at the forefront of this paradigm shift, extending a wide array of courses that aim to equip the youth with requisite digital skills. Microsoft's learning initiatives, for example, offer comprehensive programs spanning various fields, including AI, cloud computing, data science, and coding. These programs are designed to meet the diverse learning needs of the youth, from novices interested in exploring a new field to experienced professionals seeking to upgrade their skills.

Soft Skills as Catalysts of Change: While the importance of technical skills cannot be understated in a digitally-driven economy, 'power skills' such as adaptability, problem-solving, leadership, and emotional intelligence are just as crucial. These skills enable individuals to navigate complex environments, build strong relationships, and make informed decisions, fostering a culture of continuous innovation and growth. An investment in power skills development is an investment in a resilient and dynamic workforce, capable of driving meaningful change.

Digital Transformation: A Human-centric Perspective: Digital transformation is about more than just implementing new technologies; it's about reimagining how we work, learn, and interact in the digital age. This transformation involves cultivating a workforce that can leverage technology to enhance productivity, creativity, and collaboration. It requires a culture that values soft skills, recognizing their role in facilitating effective communication, empathy, and problem-solving amidst digital disruption. Digital platforms can also augment governance by fostering transparency, improving efficiency, and enhancing citizen engagement. A noteworthy example of this transformative power is evident in Guinea, where digitalization is reshaping governance paradigms. The government has leveraged digital platforms to offer an array of public services online, making them more accessible and efficient. These platforms also provide a medium for citizens to voice their concerns and feedback, fostering a culture of participatory governance.

Artificial Intelligence and People-Driven Technology in Africa: The digital transformation

sweeping across Africa is profoundly influenced by Artificial Intelligence (AI). However, the effectiveness and relevance of AI systems depend on the people who create, manage, and interact with them. As such, there's an exciting opportunity to develop an 'AI for Africa' - AI solutions tailor-made to address the continent's unique contexts and challenges, driven by locally relevant data, and designed to tackle critical issues in areas such as healthcare, agriculture, and education. Meanwhile, nurturing a balance between hard technical skills and soft human skills is of paramount importance. As technology becomes more integrated with our lives, it's vital to remember that it is fundamentally a people-driven force. Therefore, fostering skills ranging from coding and data analysis to creativity, empathy, and critical thinking will ensure technology's role as an enabler of inclusive and sustainable growth in Africa.

Policy Implementation is Needed: Addressing Digital Divide: Although digitization offers unprecedented opportunities, it also risks exacerbating inequalities if not managed effectively. Regions lagging behind in digital growth necessitate focused policy interventions to ensure equal access to digital resources. This involves crafting policies that promote digital literacy, affordable internet access, and ICT infrastructure development, along with encouraging private sector involvement in digital development projects.

The Entrepreneurial Edge in Digitalisation: As the digital revolution unfolds, entrepreneurs have unique opportunities to leverage technological advancements and interpersonal skills for increased efficiency. Digital tools can streamline operations, enhance market research, and foster customer engagement, while soft skills facilitate team management, decision-making, and innovative thinking. A balanced focus on digital competence and human skills can equip entrepreneurs to navigate business challenges and seize opportunities in the digital age.

Charting the Pathway Towards Accelerating Digital Transformation in Africa. This dialogue took place during the HLPF on July 12, 2023. Key messages included:

Improving core digital skills and connectivity are pre-requisites for sustainable digital transformation. Digital literacy and universal internet connectivity should be considered as the foundational pillars of the 4th Industrial Revolution, without which the digital divide may only worsen. There is an urgent need to promote foundational digital and soft skills for all age groups, which must be underpinned by improved connectivity across the continent. In pursuing this goal, good practices to scale up include the creation of e-learning centres, training programs for entrepreneurs, initiatives to build digital infrastructure, and programs to advance AI and digital skills to up-skill the labour force in Africa. Increased financing for such projects can contribute to a better balance between the supply and demand for digital skills in the labour market, thereby contributing to accelerated progress towards all SDGs in the long term. Advancing core skills is also an effective means to counter disinformation, which will grow ever more important as personal data is manipulated in the context of elections.

Employment, good governance and digitalisation are interlinked. The transformative potential of digitalisation is constrained by the broader political and economic context of African states. The challenges of corruption, political leadership, and governance emerged as barriers to transformative change. Polices to foster digitalisation will therefore not be sustainable if underlying issues, such as unemployment and business informality, are tackled in silos. In this regard, the application of new technologies can be used to improve the efficiency of criminal justice and e-governance systems, for instance, through building the digital literacy of judges and civil servants.

The time is ripe to establish a comprehensive policy on data and AI in Africa. The current data policy and regulatory landscape in Africa is highly fragmented, with some countries leading the way in establishing new frameworks while others lag behind. Policymakers should seek to map, identify, and fill the gaps in current regulatory frameworks, while aiming to strike the right balance between innovation and regulation through new policies. A robust regulatory framework must therefore permit an enabling environment for business. Inclusive public debate on new regulatory frameworks should also consider the integration of labour rights to ensure protections against the exploitation of personal data by private companies.

Sustaining digital transformation through policy implementation and partnerships. It is clear that further efforts are needed in policy implementation. Governments and businesses can create incentives to promote policy implementation, including in the area of access to finance. To promote political will for policy implementation, national development plans can serve as a vital instrument to bolster digital capacities in alignment with the SDGs. To further accelerate progress in this domain, partnerships are needed across industries to maximize available resources and improve coordination within the digital transformation agenda. In this regard, the role of the AU and the UN to assume a leadership role in the digital skills domain was emphasized.

Annex 1 – About the organizers

The International Organisation of Employers (IOE) is one of the leading voices for business at the global level and on the ground. With more than 150 EBMO members in 148 countries, IOE represents the interests of over 50 million companies. Quite simply, it is the largest global community network of the private sector. For over 100 years, it has been a powerful and balanced voice of business and offers a diverse and unique perspective based on members that include companies ranging from large multinationals to small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and a vast collection of industries.

Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS) is one of Germany's six political foundations and is closely associated with, yet independent from, the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), the party of former German Chancellor Angela Merkel. With more than 100 offices worldwide, KAS acts as a bridge between state and non-state actors in the promotion of democracy, rule of law and the social market economy.

The African Center for Economic Transformation (ACET) is a pan-African economic policy Institute supporting Africa's long-term growth through transformation. ACET produces research, offers policy advice, and convenes key stakeholders so that African countries are better positioned for smart, inclusive, and sustainable development. Based in Accra, Ghana, ACET has worked in nearly two dozen African countries since its founding in 2008.

Annex 2 – List of primary contributors to the dialogue series

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