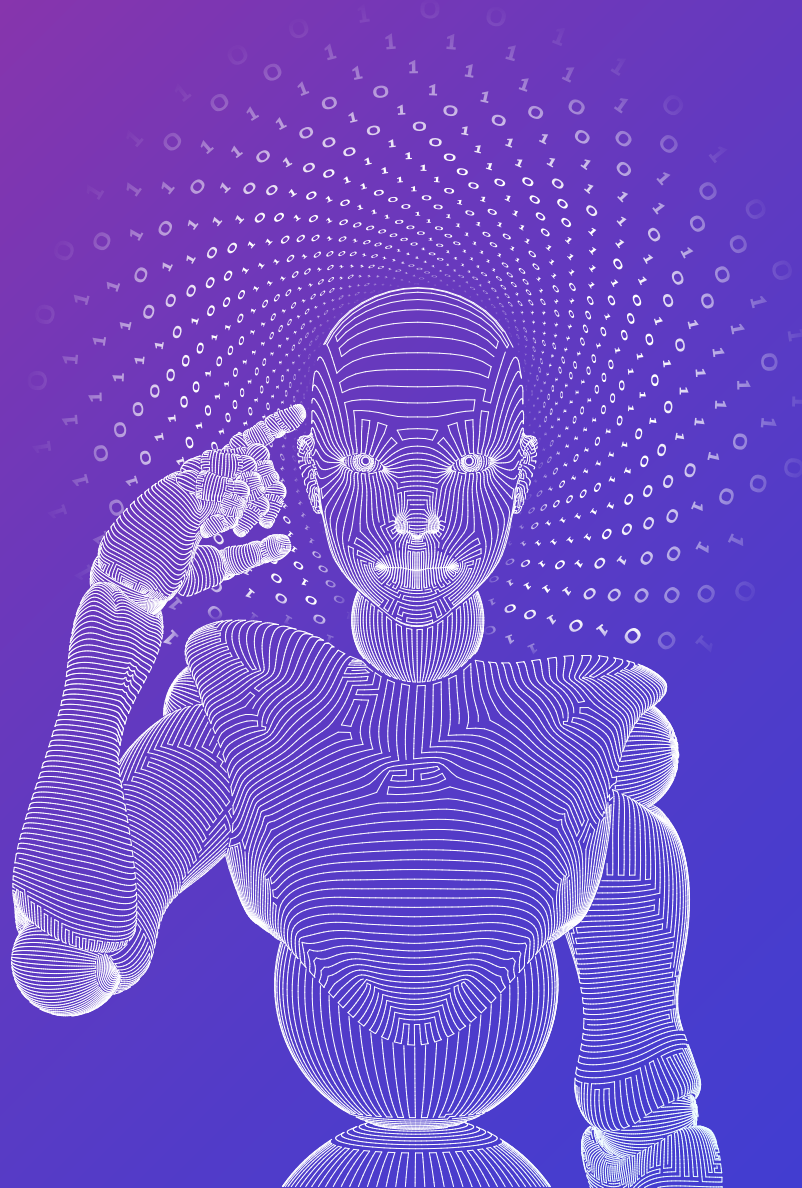


## ISSUE BRIEF

# Why AI-Supported Civic Technologies Are Not Yet Transforming Participation

Evidence from seven African countries on civic-technology markets, policy framing, and the structural conditions that mediate AI's civic impact



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PREPARED FROM

Reimagining Civic Engagement in Africa: Technology, Artificial Intelligence and Civic Engagement - Issues and Emerging Framework

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# Executive Summary

Across Africa, civic technology is growing but artificial intelligence (AI) is not yet the engine of civic participation that policy rhetoric implies.

A continent-wide review of 299 civic-technology products in 54 countries, combined with country deep-dives in Egypt, Ghana, Kenya, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda, and Nigeria and a survey of Nigerians, finds that AI is overwhelmingly a supplementary feature in existing platforms rather than a core driver of citizen engagement.

Three patterns explain why. First, the African civic-tech market is concentrated and uneven: West Africa hosts roughly 53% of products, Nigeria alone holds more than 80, and most products fall into low-tech or generic-app categories rather than proprietary AI-driven tools. Second, national policies, strategies, and plans frame the “problem” narrowly as digital under-utilisation or skills gaps and routinely omit structural questions of digital justice, sovereignty, and power. Third, where AI does appear, its civic impact is mediated almost entirely by sociopolitical context: regression analysis from a Nigerian survey shows AI awareness alone explains just 7.2% of AI civic-tool use, but adding barriers and sociopolitical context lifts this to 12.3% and the link between AI tool use and actual civic engagement rises from 4.8% to 19.6% under the same moderation.

## Headline finding

AI strengthens civic engagement only when embedded in enabling sociopolitical conditions. Without legal protection for digital civic action, freedom of information, independent AI oversight, and affordable broadband, AI civic tools risk becoming symbolic rather than transformative.

## What this brief recommends



1. Reframe the problem. Move national instruments from “AI readiness” and “lack of uptake” to digital justice, sovereignty, and community co-creation.
2. Build foundational AI civic literacy. Institutionalise it in secondary and tertiary curricula and run campaigns in local languages (Hausa, Yoruba, Igbo, Swahili, Amharic, Arabic).
3. Fund proprietary, locally owned AI civic tools, including the missing AI-enabled e-petition layer rather than layering AI onto generic apps.
4. Strengthen the structural moderator. Protect digital civic actors in law, expand affordable broadband, and create independent AI oversight bodies.
5. Measure what matters. Track participation, accountability demands, trust, and policy responsiveness not product launches.

# Background and Context

Civic space sits alongside the executive, legislative, and judicial branches as the neutral terrain on which citizens, businesses, and organisations engage in dialogue, accountability, and peaceful contestation.

Like any institution, it depends on resources among them, technology. Across Africa, both governments and civil-society actors have for years deployed simple digital tools (web portals, SMS, social media) to share information, mobilise citizens, and monitor service delivery. The arrival of generative and other AI capabilities has raised the question of whether these tools can move from incremental adaptation to genuine transformation of how citizens engage the state.

To answer that question, the source report assembled an African Civic Technology Product Database covering 54 countries, conducted document and corpus analysis on 26 national instruments across seven case countries plus the African Union, applied automated interest mining via Google Trends, and surveyed 382 Nigerians. The seven country cases: Egypt, Ghana, Kenya, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda, and Nigeria span North, East, West, and South Africa.

A continental market that is uneven and shallow



Three structural facts shape the analysis:

- 299 civic-tech products are catalogued across the continent. West Africa accounts for roughly 53% of them, and Nigeria alone holds more than 80.
- Only four countries namely Nigeria, Kenya, South Africa, and Uganda have meaningful civic-tech production capacity. Many states (Eritrea, South Sudan, Central African Republic, Seychelles) have zero domestically developed products.
- Strategic group mapping places the bulk of products in two low-leverage categories low-tech public tools and generic civic apps. A much smaller group of proprietary AI-driven tools sits at the frontier.

## A policy frame that misses structure



The African Union's Digital Transformation Strategy for Africa (2020–2030) frames the continental challenge as the under-utilisation of digital technologies and the socio-economic barriers that prevent transformation. Applying the “What’s the Problem Represented to be?” (WPR) lens, the source analysis shows that this framing centre harmonisation and global competitiveness while leaving out digital sovereignty, local agency, and the unequal power relations that shape who builds and benefits from civic technologies. National instruments largely echo this framing. Where AI is mentioned, it is treated as a productivity layer “AI readiness” to be achieved rather than as a contested socio-technical system whose risks include surveillance, manipulation of public opinion, and reinforcement of existing inequalities.

## A conceptual frame that takes structure seriously

### How AI translates or fails to translate into civic action

AI awareness and use can promote civic engagement, but the extent to which they do depends on the socio-political environment and perceived barriers: regulation, access, political openness, institutional trust, and inequality. These are not merely obstacles. They are contextual conditions that determine whether AI capacity becomes civic action or stays on the shelf.



# Problem and Evidence

AI-supported civic technologies in Africa are not yet transforming participation for five interlocking reasons. Each is grounded in the source report's mixed-methods evidence: market mapping, document analysis, corpus and trend mining, and a Nigerian survey.

## **1. AI is supplementary, not foundational**

Across the 299 catalogued products, AI is overwhelmingly an embedded feature in existing web, SMS, or social-media platforms rather than the core capability of new tools. Strategic group mapping identifies only one frontier cluster proprietary AI-driven civic solutions and most products sit in low-tech or generic-app groups. The implication is structural: even if all African civic-tech users adopted every existing AI tool tomorrow, the gain in genuinely AI-driven participation would be modest, because the supply side is thin.

## **2. National policies frame the wrong problem**

Applying the WPR framework to 26 instruments across seven countries and the AU, the source analysis finds a recurring pattern: governments define the problem as a deficit (low readiness, low skills, low uptake) and the solution as more infrastructure or more training. Structural questions of affordability, data sovereignty, surveillance risk, who governs the algorithms, who owns the data are largely absent. The Egyptian Vision 2030, Ghana's AI Strategy, Kenya's Digital Economy Blueprint, Tanzania's AI Readiness Assessment 2025, Uganda's Vision 2040 and Digital Transformation Roadmap, and South Africa's Strategic Plan 2025–2030 all share this framing. The result is policy that produces strategies and plans without the legal, fiscal, and political conditions for AI to redistribute power between citizens and the state.

## **3. Digital inequality and skills gaps remain binding constraints**

The Nigerian survey provides the lived-experience evidence. Internet access frequency does not solve the problem: 71.5% of daily internet users and 58% of weekly users say unequal internet access still limits their participation in AI-based civic engagement. Limited digital skills are a barrier even for highly educated respondents, 54.2% of those with a Bachelor's degree, and 18.6% of those with a Master's, agree that limited digital skills affect their use of AI civic tools. Skills programming has not closed the AI civic-literacy gap, particularly outside urban centres and in non-English languages.

## What the Nigerian regression evidence shows

The survey of Nigerians found that awareness and knowledge of AI had a 26.9% relationship with AI civic tool use, yet explained only 7.2% of why people use these tools. When barriers and the political environment were added as moderating factors, this relationship rose to 35.1%, with a 12.3% explanatory contribution. More strikingly, using AI civic tools on its own had just a 4.8% explanatory contribution to civic engagement, meaning the tools alone make very little difference. However, when poor internet access, limited digital skills, distrust of government, and the political environment were factored in alongside tool use, the relationship strengthened to 44.3% and the explanatory contribution rose to 19.6%. Simply put, the conditions surrounding the tools matter far more than the tools themselves.

### 4. AI's civic effect is conditional, not direct

The same Nigerian regression results show that AI awareness, knowledge, and use are necessary but not sufficient conditions for civic engagement. AI tools translate into participation only when political openness, freedom of expression, institutional trust, and digital inclusion are present. In countries where civic space is restricted such as Eritrea, South Sudan, Somalia, Central African Republic domestically developed civic tech and petition activity are both low regardless of population size or median age. In repressed-but-active settings such as Egypt, Ethiopia, Guinea, Sudan, and Zimbabwe, civic actors become issue-specific and cautious, and innovation is stifled.

### 5. Demographics matter less than expected

Conventional wisdom assumes that youth, education, and urban residence will drive AI-enabled civic engagement. The Nigerian survey complicates that view. Across socio-demographic predictors: gender, age, education, primary occupation, residential area, internet access, the combined contribution to civic engagement remains under 10%. Gender alone contributes 7.4%; age and education add little. The more decisive factors are political interest, trust, and whether civic tools actually work for users. Continent-wide, having a youthful population does not by itself translate into more petition activity or civic-tech use.

## The bottom line on evidence

Africa is a continent with AI-supported civic-tech products for wide public participation rather than as a core driver of civic technology. Civic engagement is shaped by the interaction between technology and socio-political structures not by AI capability alone.

# Country Illustrations

Seven country cases illustrate how the same continental pattern plays out under different political economies. The table shows the size and shape of each country's civic-tech market; the narratives below explain why AI has not become a transformational force in any of them.

Country	Civic-tech products	Internet penetration	What the case shows
South Africa	24	78.9%	Mature digital civic engagement; AI Policy Framework 2024 leads region; civic actors strong but AI tools still mostly supplementary.
Nigeria	86	45.4%	Largest market by volume but low penetration; AI is a feature, not a driver; missing AI-enabled e-petition layer.
Kenya	22	48.0%	Digital Economy Blueprint and Master Digital Plan frame the problem as readiness gaps; little attention to data sovereignty or grassroots risk.
Ghana	12	69.9%	Adaptation, not transformation; AI applied most boldly to inclusion (e.g., DeafCanTalk) but rare elsewhere.
Egypt	4	81.9%	High connectivity, very low civic-tech supply; only one explicitly AI-driven product (Digital Egypt Platform); CSO-led but under political constraint.
Uganda	15	28.0%	Affordability and devices are binding constraints; civic tech tilts to information and monitoring rather than mobilisation.
Tanzania	4	29.1%	AI Readiness Assessment 2025 and Digital Economy Strategic Framework focus on infrastructure and skills; rights, equity, and shared governance under-treated.

Sources: African Civic Technology Product Database; product counts and internet penetration as reported in Brain Builders Youth Development Initiative (2026), Tables 4 and country trajectories (Tables 6-11).



### **Egypt - high connectivity, thin civic supply**

Despite 81.9% internet penetration, Egypt has only four catalogued civic-tech products. Just one (Digital Egypt Platform) is explicitly AI-driven; Ushahidi is AI-supported. The remainder rely on web apps, SMS, and social media. CSOs lead most products, but the most recent (2020) is government-led, suggesting a closing space for independent civic innovation. The National AI Strategy (2025–2030) and National Strategy of Youth and Sports (2025–2032) sit alongside Vision 2030 but treat AI as a productivity opportunity rather than a participation lever.



### **Ghana - adaptation, not transformation**

Ghana's civic-tech trajectory layers new technologies onto existing civic practices rather than reimagining engagement itself. AI is most boldly applied to inclusion-focused initiatives such as DeafCanTalk, signalling ethical motivation in some niches. But this remains the exception. Rural access, language diversity, and broader disability inclusion are largely untouched by current tools.



### **Kenya - readiness framing crowds out justice framing**

Kenya is a regional hub (22 products, 48.0% internet penetration) and its instruments in the Master Digital Plan, Digital Economy Blueprint, and Youth Policy frame the problem as insufficient digital readiness, infrastructure, and skills. The source analysis flags what is missing: the possibility that AI deepens age and gender inequalities; grassroots risks; data sovereignty; and the need for participatory, community-driven adoption.



### **South Africa - strongest framework, still mostly supplementary AI**

South Africa leads the southern region with 24 products, 78.9% internet penetration, and the most complete policy stack: National Youth Policy 2020–2030, Strategic Plan 2025–2030, National AI Policy Framework 2024, and Digital Transformation of Government. Public interest in AI surged in 2025, the year AI-related civic-tech products began entering the market. Even here, AI sits primarily as a feature inside existing civic tools rather than as the core engine of new participatory infrastructure.



### **Tanzania - readiness without rights**

Tanzania's AI Readiness Assessment 2025, Digital Economy Strategic Framework 2024–2034, and E-Government Strategy 2022 frame the problem as gaps in infrastructure, skills, and governance. The source analysis argues that data rights, digital labour conditions, and shared governance with civil society should be foregrounded. With only four civic-tech products and 29.1% internet penetration, the supply side is too thin to test these ideas at scale.



### **Uganda - affordability as the binding constraint**

Uganda's Vision 2040, Digital Transformation Roadmap 2023–2028, and National Youth Action Plan 2016 emphasise modernisation and youth participation. But the majority of Ugandans cannot afford data subscriptions or devices for full economic and political participation. Civic tech consequently leans toward information and monitoring (e.g., Sema, ParliamentWatch.ug) rather than mobilisation, in part because of perceived political risk.



## Nigeria - the largest market, the conditional case

Nigeria holds more than 80 catalogued products by far the most on the continent, but internet penetration is only 45.4% and civic-tech use among Nigerians remains constrained by the structural factors documented in the survey. The country is the analytical centrepiece for the framework presented in the next section: it shows both the opportunity (a deep product base, a vibrant CSO ecosystem) and the limit (AI alone explains only a small share of civic engagement). The missing AI-enabled e-petition layer is a particularly visible gap.



# Implications for Policy and Practice

The evidence carries three implications for the actors who shape Africa's civic space: governments, civic organisations, and donors.

**For governments and policymakers:** Reframe the problem. Move beyond “AI readiness” and “digital under-utilisation” to digital justice, sovereignty, affordability, and the protection of civic actors. Treat civic technology as a public good that requires legal, fiscal, and political enabling conditions not merely a market to liberalise. Operationalise this in three concrete steps: enact and enforce protections for digital civic participation; expand affordable broadband as a universal-service obligation; and create independent oversight of public-sector AI use, including procurement transparency.

**For civic-society actors and product builders:** Build for the structural reality. The data show that products which prioritise inclusion, local language, and grassroots co-creation outperform generic apps in civic legitimacy, even when their AI footprint is smaller. Move into the proprietary AI-driven category where it adds genuine value (chatbots in local languages, AI-enabled e-petition platforms, fact-checking, GBV-survivor support, dashboards on budgets and procurement) and avoid layering AI onto products simply to attract funding. Invest in measurement: usage, completion rates, and downstream civic outcomes not just downloads.

**For donors and continental institutions:** Stop funding the same five product types. The market is concentrated in a handful of categories election monitoring, transparency dashboards, citizen-feedback chatbots and a handful of countries. Diversify portfolios toward under-served countries and toward the structural moderator: legal protection, broadband subsidy, oversight capacity, and locally owned data infrastructure that reduces dependence on Big Tech cloud hosting. Align reporting standards with the African Union's Digital Transformation Strategy and the four-pillar framework presented in the next section so that investments aggregate into measurable civic outcomes.

## A measurement reset

Track civic engagement outcomes in citizen participation in governance, accountability demands, trust in public institutions, policy responsiveness, and electoral and non-electoral engagement, rather than product launches and attendance figures.

# Recommendations

The source report's Artificial Intelligence Framework for Strengthening Nigeria's Civic Engagement System (AIF-NICES) organises action around four pillars. Although developed for Nigeria, the architecture transfers to other African contexts because the underlying logic that AI affects civic engagement only through interaction with sociopolitical structures applies continent-wide.

## Pillar 1 - Foundational capacity (AI awareness and knowledge)

- Institutionalise AI civic literacy in secondary and tertiary curricula, including digital ethics, rights, and the ability to distinguish AI-generated from human-generated civic content.
- Run public AI literacy campaigns in local languages including Hausa, Yoruba, Igbo in Nigeria; Swahili in East Africa; Arabic in North Africa; isiZulu and others in southern Africa not English alone.
- Equip journalists and community leaders, who shape what citizens consume and how they act on it, through structured training and grants tied to GenAI-enabled civic tool development.
- Prioritise non-urban centres, where AI literacy lags most sharply.

## Pillar 2 - Operational interface (AI civic-tool use)

- Fund the missing layer: AI-enabled e-petition platforms that are currently absent from the regional market.
- Strengthen brand promotion and discoverability of existing tools – many are underutilised because users cannot find them.
- Move beyond election monitoring and chatbots into AI-supported budget, procurement, and service-delivery dashboards in local languages.
- Tie funding to evidence of inclusive uptake, not just product launch.

## Pillar 3 - Structural moderator (sociopolitical conditions)

- Enact and enforce legal protection for digital civic participation, including protections for whistleblowers, journalists, and digital-rights defenders.
- Implement freedom-of-information and open-government commitments in practice, with transparent default disclosure of public datasets.
- Create independent oversight of public-sector AI deployment, including procurement, model-risk review, and grievance mechanisms.
- Treat affordable broadband as a universal-service obligation; subsidise connectivity for low-income and rural users.
- Invest in locally owned data infrastructure to reduce dependence on Big Tech cloud hosting.

## Pillar 4 - System output (civic engagement outcomes)

- Citizen participation in governance - measured by inputs into budget cycles, consultations, and policy comment periods.
- Accountability demands - petitions filed, FOI requests submitted, audits triggered.
- Trust in public institutions - tracked through standardised national surveys.
- Policy responsiveness - share of citizen-raised issues that produce a documented government response.
- Electoral and non-electoral engagement - turnout, observation, and sustained civic action between elections.

### A note for cross-country adoption

The AIF-NICES pillars hold across Egypt, Ghana, Kenya, South Africa, Tanzania, and Uganda - but the binding constraints differ. South Africa needs to move from supplementary AI to AI-driven tools; Kenya needs a justice-and-sovereignty reframe; Egypt and Uganda need civic-space protection; Tanzania needs shared governance with civil society; Ghana needs scale beyond inclusion niches.



# Annex and References

## Primary source

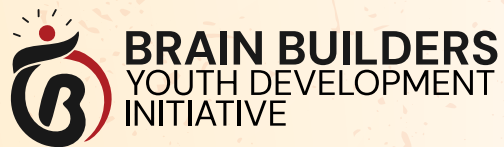
Brain Builders Youth Development Initiative (2026). Reimagining Civic Engagement in Africa: Technology, Artificial Intelligence and Civic Engagement - Issues and Emerging Framework. All product counts, regression coefficients, country trajectories, and the AIF-NICES framework cited in this brief are drawn from this report.

## Key continental and national instruments referenced

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- Egypt: Vision 2030; National AI Strategy (2025–2030); National Strategy of Youth and Sports (2025–2032).
- Ghana: Coordinated Programme of Economic and Social Development Policies; National Digital Economy Policy; National AI Strategy.
- Kenya: Master Digital Plan; Digital Economy Blueprint; Kenya National Youth Policy.
- South Africa: National Youth Policy 2020–2030; Strategic Plan 2025–2030; National AI Policy Framework 2024; Digital Transformation of Government.
- Tanzania: Digital Economy Strategic Framework 2024–2034; National Youth Development Policy 2020–2030; AI Readiness Assessment Report 2025; E-Government Strategy 2022.
- Uganda: Digital Transformation Roadmap 2023–2028; Uganda Vision 2040; National Youth Action Plan 2016.
- Nigeria: National Digital Economy Policy and Strategy; National AI Strategy; e-Government Master Plan 2023; National Youth Policy.

## Methods at a glance

- Document analysis of 26 national and continental instruments (Voyant Tools).
- Corpus and contextual text analysis; semantic network analysis of document titles.
- Automated Interest Mining via Google Trends (2021–2025).
- Strategic group mapping and cluster analysis of 299 products in the African Civic Technology Product Database.
- Survey of 382 Nigerians on AI awareness, knowledge, use, barriers, and civic engagement; regression with moderation analysis.



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