May 2025

Key Takeaways: Europe Day Celebration "Towards responsible AI Innovation: Leveraging the European-African partnership"

On 12 May 2025 the EU Delegation to the OECD and UNESCO and the UN B-Tech Project co-organized a workshop on responsible AI innovation and the role of the European-African partnership, hosted at the OECD Conference Centre in Paris, as part of Europe Day celebrations. The event consisted of an expert workshop, followed by a public panel discussion and student debate.

This document summarizes key takeaways, which could be fruitful for further discussion by the participating organizations and the field at large. Hence, the discussed themes are not an exhaustive list and are instead a summary of expert views regarding responsible practices related to the development and use of AI systems.

1. Artificial intelligence policies must be anchored in human rights

There is a need to anchor the rapid development of AI systems – and their related products and services – in human rights. Different organizations such as the European Union, UN OHCHR and OECD each play a distinct role in developing and promoting the implementation of better policies related to AI and human rights.

In this context, stakeholders at the meeting discussed challenges related to the development of responsible AI policies in the multilateral context. The EU AI Act stands out as a robust tool to protect citizens by setting out broad expectations on key actors in the AI value chain to conduct risk assessments, develop risk mitigation plans, and be transparent about the safety and capability of AI systems.

The OECDs work on responsible business conduct in AI was also highlighted, outlining two main international legal instruments: (1) The OECD Recommendation on AI (commonly known as the AI Principles), which sets out a common, government-backed definition on what constitutes AI and principles for the development of responsible and trustworthy AI; and (2) the OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises on Responsible Business Conduct, which are aligned with the UN Guiding Principles, and set out the government-backed expectation on business to identify and address adverse human rights impacts related to their operations, products and services. These frameworks are increasingly being codified into law. The OECD outlined its objectives to support policymakers and guide the global policy discussion towards a coherent approach on responsible AI, and also to help companies navigate overlapping requirements.

Stakeholders also presented different efforts by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR). Through the B-Tech Project, OHCHR is engaged in ensuring human rights are central to digital and AI governance. In addition, the use of AI by OHCHR through its Tech-Hub to

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identify and address human rights issues globally was highlighted, as manual approaches are no longer adequate for dealing with the scale and complexity of today's challenges. It was emphasized that limitations in AI should not be reduced to "technical bugs". AI should support—not replace—human decision-making. Mentioning the example of Sudan, where AI was used by the United Nations to identify where to look for human rights violations but supporting, not replacing humans in the process.

2. Promoting local AI and data sovereignty is central to inclusive innovation across continents

Stakeholders discussed the importance of addressing the disparities between Africa and Europe in approaches to responsible AI. While most developed nations have already implemented national AI strategies, AI strategies in Africa have been slower in uptake but with a currently growing momentum. This disparity underscores the need for inclusive governance approaches that are grounded in local context.

Stakeholders noted both progress and ongoing challenges in AI development across Africa and many others in development or revision phases. Innovation must include African perspectives, not merely operating around the continent. Concerns were raised about the use of AI in policing, the opacity of training data, and the need for robust accountability mechanisms. Calls were made for "sovereign AI" approaches that prioritize data sovereignty and local relevance, especially in areas like healthcare, where secondary impacts can be significant.

Connected to the previous aspect, some stakeholders proposed building a joint Africa–Europe technology infrastructure where a shared application layer could support cooperative development. Others emphasized barriers such as digital literacy, linguistic diversity, and limited connectivity, stressing the importance of open-source solutions and collaborative regulatory frameworks to promote equitable AI development.

The coordination with Africa was mentioned as a growing priority for the OECD, highlighting the Global Partnership on AI, which includes 44 countries and promotes best practices in AI governance. Dialogue between the OECD and the African union is serving as a key platform for this work, while stakeholders emphasized the importance of further collaboration between the EU and AU.

Examples were also shared to illustrate positive regional momentum. One stakeholder pointed to Kenya, where AI is already being used in financial services (M-Pesa) to reduce fraud and where public authorities are investing in innovation hubs as part of a national AI strategy.

3. Investors play an important role in driving responsible AI innovation, yet often remain underequipped for new challenges

Stakeholders emphasized the influential role investors can play in shaping a rights-based AI ecosystem. By setting clear benchmarks for responsible AI and aligning investments with human rights standards, investors have the potential to shift market behaviour toward more ethical innovation.

However, concerns were raised about widespread knowledge gaps among general partners and funds with limited understanding about African contexts. While ESG considerations are increasingly driven by limited partners, many investors still lack the tools to assess the human rights implications of AI systems. Stakeholders stressed the importance of tracking companies' human rights performance and policies, addressing the risks of AI in areas like lending, and enhancing data privacy practices. Investors are beginning to realize the systemic risks in AI but

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don't yet know how to address it: 75% consider there to be a big risk but only 17% feel that they are well equipped to respond to those issues.

In this regard, a stakeholder highlighted concerns about the concentration of AI power among a few dominant tech firms and argued that AI governance is only the tip of a broader iceberg of structural challenges to address.

4. AI regulation and innovation can, and should, reinforce each other

Stakeholders made clear that AI regulation should protect human rights, while promoting responsible innovation. Governments are not merely regulators but also standard setters, investors and creators of market conditions and should be more involved in fighting underlying issues.

In this context the importance of considering vulnerable groups and the role of governments in promoting AI reliability and sovereignty was highlighted. Mechanisms such as conditional funding and a continental AI oversight board, allowing for whistleblowers and active monitoring, were named as possible ways to avert human rights harms without hindering innovation.

As an example of AI regulation that allows for investment and innovation, a stakeholder emphasized that while many jurisdictions are developing legislation, the EU AI Act stands out as a robust tool to protect citizens. Regulation does not contradict investment; in fact, stable, predictable frameworks can foster innovation.

5. Governance must be participatory and multi-stakeholder

To address the previously mentioned issues, stakeholders agreed that AI governance must be participatory and multi-stakeholder, highlighting the importance of youth involvement and justice.

In this regard, a stakeholder reiterated the importance of not just technical standards but also socio-technical standards that are implemented before the technical development for example regarding decision-making within companies. Such governance should include a multi-stakeholder approach to human rights due diligence. In this respect, a lot of lessons can be drawn from existing work around the UNGPs and responsible business conduct.

The need for strong remedy mechanisms was highlighted, while a stakeholder warned against techno-solutionism and argued for embedding values directly into technological systems. In addition, the urgency of addressing real-world implications, such as the role of AI in food supply chains across borders and the importance of grounding the discussion in lived realities, was pointed out.

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