ETHICAL FRAMEWORKS FOR AI GOVERNANCE IN AFRICA: A MIXED-METHODS EMPIRICAL STUDY

By

Dr. Samuel Adekunle Adebayo
Department of Computer Science,
University of Ibadan, Nigeria
Email: samuel.adebayo@ui.edu.ng

Dr. Ibrahim Suleiman Abdulrahman
Department of Information Technology
Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, Nigeria
Email: iabdulrahman@abu.edu.ng

Abstract

Artificial intelligence (AI) systems are increasingly integrated into governance, economic planning, and social service delivery across African countries. While these technologies offer transformative potential, they also raise profound ethical concerns relating to accountability, transparency, fairness, and cultural legitimacy. Existing global AI governance frameworks largely originate from Global North contexts and may inadequately address Africa's institutional capacities, socio-cultural values, and developmental priorities. This study empirically examines ethical frameworks for AI governance in Africa, focusing on their contextual relevance and perceived effectiveness. Using a mixed-methods design, quantitative survey data were collected from 412 AI practitioners, policymakers, and academics across Nigeria, Ghana, and Tanzania, complemented by qualitative interviews with 27 key stakeholders. Secondary analysis of national policy documents and international AI ethics frameworks further informed the study. Quantitative results indicate strong stakeholder support for context-sensitive ethical governance, with cultural relevance emerging as a significant predictor of trust in AI systems. Qualitative findings reveal persistent governance gaps, including limited regulatory capacity, weak public participation, and misalignment between imported ethical principles and local realities. The study contributes empirically grounded insights into African AI governance and proposes adaptive ethical frameworks that integrate global principles with indigenous values. These findings advance scholarly discourse on AI ethics while offering practical guidance for policymakers seeking responsible and inclusive AI deployment in Africa.

Keywords: Artificial intelligence, AI ethics, governance frameworks, Africa, mixed-methods research

Introduction

Artificial intelligence (AI) has rapidly transitioned from a niche technological domain to a central driver of socio-economic transformation. Governments worldwide increasingly rely on AI-driven systems for decision-making in areas such as welfare allocation, predictive policing, health diagnostics, and agricultural optimization. In Africa, AI adoption is expanding through digital government initiatives, fintech innovations, and development-oriented technologies. However, alongside these advancements are growing ethical concerns about algorithmic bias, opacity, accountability, and the marginalization of vulnerable populations.

AI governance refers to the institutional, legal, and ethical mechanisms that guide the development and deployment of AI systems. While numerous global AI ethics frameworks have emerged, including those advanced by the OECD, UNESCO, and the European Union, their normative assumptions often reflect Western institutional contexts. Scholars increasingly question whether such frameworks sufficiently address the realities of African societies, characterized by diverse cultures, uneven regulatory capacity, and distinct ethical traditions.

This study responds to the need for empirically grounded research on AI ethical governance in Africa. By integrating stakeholder perspectives with policy analysis, the study seeks to move beyond abstract ethical principles toward contextually meaningful governance frameworks.

Aims and Objectives

Aim

To empirically investigate ethical frameworks for AI governance in Africa and assess their contextual relevance, effectiveness, and societal acceptance.

Objectives

1. To critically examine dominant global AI ethics and governance frameworks.
2. To analyze African stakeholder perceptions of ethical AI governance.
3. To identify gaps between global ethical principles and African governance realities.
4. To propose adaptive, context-sensitive ethical AI governance frameworks for Africa.

Research Questions

1. How do African stakeholders perceive existing AI ethical governance frameworks?
2. What ethical challenges arise from AI deployment in African governance contexts?
3. To what extent do global AI ethics principles align with African socio-cultural values?
4. How can AI governance frameworks be adapted to enhance legitimacy and effectiveness in Africa?

2. Literature Review (Further Expanded and Deepened)

2.1 Normative Foundations of AI Ethics

The ethical governance of artificial intelligence is rooted in long-standing traditions of moral philosophy, particularly deontological ethics, consequentialism, and virtue ethics. Deontological perspectives emphasize rule-based constraints on AI design, such as respect for human autonomy and rights, while consequentialist approaches focus on harm minimization and benefit maximization in AI outcomes. Virtue ethics, though less frequently applied, emphasizes moral character and responsibility among AI developers and institutions (Floridi et al., 2018).

In contemporary AI ethics discourse, these philosophical foundations have been operationalized into widely cited ethical principles: fairness, accountability, transparency, non-maleficence, and beneficence. These principles have gained prominence due to their intuitive appeal and adaptability across technological contexts. However, scholars caution that ethical abstraction risks detachment from social realities, particularly in non-Western contexts where moral reasoning may be relational rather than individualistic (Mittelstadt, 2019).

2.2 From AI Ethics to AI Governance

AI ethics and AI governance, while related, are analytically distinct. AI ethics primarily concerns normative values and moral reasoning, whereas AI governance focuses on institutional mechanisms, regulatory frameworks, and enforcement structures (Kaye et al., 2020). The transition from ethics to governance is critical, as ethical principles alone lack coercive power and may be selectively interpreted or ignored.

Governance frameworks typically involve legal regulation, oversight institutions, accountability mechanisms, and stakeholder participation. Scholars argue that effective AI governance requires embedding ethical principles into binding institutional processes rather than voluntary guidelines (Yeung et al., 2019). This distinction is particularly salient in African contexts, where weak regulatory capacity can render purely ethical declarations ineffective.

2.3 Dominant Global AI Ethics and Governance Frameworks

Several global frameworks have shaped contemporary AI governance discourse. The OECD AI Principles emphasize human-centered values, transparency, robustness, and accountability, positioning ethical AI as a driver of inclusive economic growth (OECD, 2019). UNESCO's Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence adopts a broader socio-cultural lens, emphasizing cultural diversity, environmental sustainability, and social inclusion (UNESCO, 2021).

The European Union has advanced a more regulatory approach through its proposed Artificial Intelligence Act, which introduces a risk-based classification system and legally binding obligations (Veale & Borgesius, 2021). While these frameworks represent significant progress, critics argue that they implicitly assume strong institutional capacity, stable legal systems, and high levels of technical expertise—conditions that may not hold across much of Africa (Jobin et al., 2019).

2.4 Power, Political Economy, and AI Governance

AI governance is inseparable from global political economy. The concentration of AI development within a small number of multinational corporations and technologically advanced states creates asymmetrical power relations. Zuboff (2019) argues that AI-driven surveillance capitalism enables unprecedented behavioral control, raising ethical concerns about autonomy and democratic accountability.

In African contexts, these asymmetries are exacerbated by dependence on imported technologies and external data infrastructures. The concept of data colonialism captures how data extraction from the Global South reproduces historical patterns of resource exploitation and epistemic dominance (Couldry & Mejias, 2019). This literature underscores the need for governance frameworks that address not only technical ethics but also structural inequalities.

2.5 AI Governance in Africa: Institutional and Regulatory Landscapes

Empirical studies on AI governance in Africa reveal fragmented regulatory environments and uneven policy development. While countries such as Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, and South Africa have articulated digital transformation strategies, few have comprehensive AI-specific regulations (Gillwald et al., 2019). Regulatory agencies often lack technical expertise and resources, limiting effective oversight.

Eke et al. (2022) observe that African AI governance frequently adopts international ethical language without corresponding enforcement mechanisms, resulting in symbolic rather than substantive governance. This phenomenon highlights the gap between policy rhetoric and practical implementation.

2.6 African Ethical Philosophies and Indigenous Knowledge Systems

African ethical traditions offer alternative conceptualizations of moral responsibility that challenge dominant Western frameworks. Ubuntu philosophy, which emphasizes relational personhood, communal flourishing, and mutual care, has been proposed as a foundation for African AI ethics (Metz, 2017). Within this framework, ethical evaluation extends beyond individual rights to collective well-being and social harmony.

Scholars argue that incorporating indigenous ethical concepts into AI governance could enhance social legitimacy and trust (Ewuoso & Hall, 2019). However, critics caution against romanticizing indigenous values without addressing contemporary political and institutional realities. Empirical research is therefore essential to understand how such values can be operationalized within formal governance systems.

2.7 Public Trust, Legitimacy, and Participatory Governance

Trust is increasingly recognized as a central determinant of ethical AI acceptance. Trust in AI systems is shaped not only by technical performance but also by perceptions of fairness, accountability, and inclusion (Shin, 2021). Participatory governance mechanisms—such as public consultations and stakeholder engagement—are critical for fostering trust, particularly in societies with histories of institutional mistrust.

In African contexts, where public confidence in state institutions may be fragile, participatory approaches to AI governance are especially important. However, existing literature notes limited public engagement in AI policymaking across the continent (Gillwald et al., 2019).

2.8 Synthesis and Research Gap

The literature reveals a growing recognition of ethical AI governance challenges but a persistent lack of empirical, context-specific research in Africa. Most existing studies are theoretical or policy-oriented, with limited engagement with stakeholder perspectives. This study addresses this gap by empirically examining how ethical governance frameworks are perceived and negotiated within African contexts.

3. Methodology (Expanded)

3.1 Research Design

A convergent mixed-methods design was employed, integrating quantitative and qualitative data to provide a comprehensive understanding of ethical AI governance.

3.2 Study Population and Sampling

The study targeted AI practitioners, policymakers, and academics in Nigeria, Ghana, and Tanzania. Stratified sampling ensured representation across professional groups. A total of 412 valid survey responses were collected. For the qualitative component, 27 participants were selected using purposive sampling based on expertise and involvement in AI-related governance.

3.3 Data Collection Instruments

- **Survey Questionnaire:** A structured instrument with five-point Likert-scale items measuring perceptions of transparency, accountability, fairness, inclusiveness, and cultural relevance.
- **Interview Guide:** Semi-structured interviews explored governance challenges, ethical dilemmas, and contextual considerations.
- **Secondary Data:** Analysis of national AI policies, regulatory documents, and international ethics frameworks.

3.4 Validity, Reliability, and Ethics

Content validity was established through expert review. Cronbach's alpha values for survey constructs ranged from 0.78 to 0.85, indicating acceptable reliability. Ethical approval was obtained from institutional review boards, and informed consent was secured from all participants.

5.5 Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and multiple regression analysis. Qualitative data were transcribed and analyzed thematically using inductive coding to identify recurring patterns and insights.

4. Results

4.1 Quantitative Results

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Ethical Governance Dimensions (n = 412)

Dimension	Mean	SD
Transparency	3.12	0.84
Accountability	2.98	0.91
Fairness	3.05	0.87

Dimension	Mean	SD
Inclusiveness	3.45	0.78
Cultural Relevance	2.67	0.89

Regression analysis showed that cultural relevance ($\beta = 0.41$, $p < .01$) and inclusiveness ($\beta = 0.33$, $p < .05$) significantly predicted trust in AI governance frameworks.

4.2 Qualitative Results

Key themes included regulatory capacity constraints, lack of public engagement, and skepticism toward externally imposed ethical models. Participants emphasized the importance of participatory governance and contextual adaptation.

5. Discussion (Further Expanded and Theoretically Integrated)

5.1 Interpreting Stakeholder Perceptions of Ethical AI Governance

The findings indicate that African stakeholders strongly support ethical AI governance but express skepticism toward externally developed frameworks. While transparency and accountability remain important, cultural relevance and inclusiveness emerged as the strongest predictors of trust. This suggests that ethical legitimacy is not derived solely from adherence to global principles but from alignment with local values and lived experiences.

These results resonate with critiques of universalist AI ethics, which argue that ethical principles divorced from social context risk irrelevance or resistance (Mittelstadt, 2019). In African settings, ethical governance is interpreted through relational and communal lenses rather than purely individualistic frameworks.

5.2 Cultural Relevance as a Core Ethical Governance Dimension

The prominence of cultural relevance underscores the limitations of one-size-fits-all governance models. Stakeholders emphasized the importance of reflecting indigenous values, languages, and social norms in AI systems and governance processes. This aligns with Ubuntu-based ethical reasoning, which prioritizes communal well-being and moral interdependence (Metz, 2017).

From a governance perspective, cultural relevance functions as both an ethical and practical requirement. AI systems perceived as culturally alien or imposed are less likely to gain public trust, regardless of technical sophistication.