

Policy Brief

Implementing AI Literacy Programs for Policymakers

Practical Guidelines

 **Trust**

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Executive Summary

Artificial intelligence (AI) is rapidly transforming economies, public services, and governance systems around the world. Governments are increasingly required to make policy decisions about AI adoption, regulation, and oversight. Yet in many countries, particularly across the Global South, policymakers often lack the foundational knowledge needed to understand how AI systems function and what governance challenges they present. Limited AI literacy can lead to weak regulatory responses, missed opportunities for innovation, and insufficient safeguards against risks such as algorithmic bias, data misuse, and opaque automated decision-making.

This policy brief draws on lessons from AI literacy masterclasses implemented by Qhala Trust in Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa. These programs brought together policymakers, regulators, and public sector leaders in interactive workshops designed to demystify AI technologies and explore their governance implications. Each program engaged between 30 and 60 participants and was delivered in partnership with governments, universities, development organizations, and foundations. The analysis presented in this brief is based on observations from these training sessions, participant feedback, facilitator reflections, and recurring patterns of knowledge gaps and learning outcomes observed across multiple workshops.

The experience of these programs highlights several key insights. First, many policymakers initially struggle to distinguish AI from broader digital technologies such as automation or digitization, limiting their ability to identify the specific risks associated with AI systems. Second, participatory and experiential learning approaches, including case studies, policy simulations, and structured discussions, proved significantly more effective than lecture-based teaching in improving policymakers' understanding of AI governance challenges. Third, the use of accessible language and policy-oriented explanations is essential when introducing AI concepts to non-technical audiences. Sessions that relied heavily on technical terminology or complex explanations often reduced engagement and comprehension.

Importantly, the programs also demonstrated that AI literacy initiatives can catalyze broader national policy conversations. In several workshops, discussions evolved from basic AI concepts to questions about national AI strategies, regulatory frameworks, and institutional readiness for AI governance. These experiences suggest that AI literacy programs can serve as important entry points for governments seeking to develop comprehensive AI governance approaches.

The brief concludes that strengthening AI literacy among policymakers is an essential step toward responsible AI governance. To achieve this, governments and partners should institutionalize AI literacy training within public sector training institutions, strengthen multi-stakeholder partnerships for AI capacity building, expand experiential learning approaches in policymaker training, and promote broader AI literacy initiatives that extend beyond government to the wider public.

1. Introduction

Understanding global AI investments and national strategy adoption across continents

\$ \$2T
Projected AI Spending by 2026
Global AI-related spending is expected to exceed \$2 trillion by 2026, reflecting explosive growth in this sector

\$15.7T
Global Economic Impact by 2030
AI's economic impact is estimated to add as much as \$15.7 trillion to the global economy by 2030

National AI Strategies Worldwide

The global race to develop comprehensive AI governance frameworks

95+
Countries with Published AI Strategies
Nations worldwide have already published national AI strategies

Continental Europe
AI Strategy Adoption

60% of countries

Africa
AI Strategy Adoption

33% of countries

African Countries with AI Strategies
15 nations leading the way

Algeria	Kenya	Egypt	Mauritania	Mauritius
Libya	Ghana	Rwanda	Senegal	Zambia
Zimbabwe	Benin	Lesotho	Namibia	Ivory Coast

The Opportunity Gap

While Africa has made progress with 33% of countries developing AI strategies, there remains significant opportunity for growth compared to Continental Europe's 60% adoption rate. This gap represents both a challenge and an opportunity for African nations to leapfrog traditional development pathways.

Artificial intelligence (AI) is driving rapid change across economies and public services. For example, global AI-related spending is projected to exceed \$2 trillion by 2026, reflecting explosive growth in this sector while AI's economic impact is estimated to add as much as \$15.7 trillion to the global economy by 2030. This scale of investment points to why governments around the world are prioritizing AI. As a result, over 95 countries have already published national AI strategies. In Continental Europe, over 60% of the countries have an AI strategy, compared to Africa's 33%. In Africa, these countries include Algeria, Kenya, Egypt, Mauritania, Mauritius, Libya, Ghana, Rwanda, Senegal, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Benin, Lesotho, Namibia, and Ivory Coast. These strategies outline not only the approach to AI governance but the use cases for prioritization. However, harnessing AI's benefits requires more than technology, it demands human capacity to govern it. UNESCO emphasizes that preparing all students to live and work safely and effectively with AI is a shared global challenge.

Despite this need, AI literacy is uneven and often low in many parts of the Global South. AI literacy means having the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to understand and critically evaluate AI technologies. It includes grasping concepts like machine learning, data privacy, algorithmic bias, and AI's social implications. UNESCO's recent surveys reveal stark gaps: in one study of higher-education leaders, 90% reported using AI tools, yet over half admitted low confidence or understanding of AI's societal and ethical implications. Similarly, recent analyses highlight that while advanced economies are investing heavily in AI education, research, and infrastructure, many developing countries lag behind in building the institutional and human capacity required to govern and deploy AI effectively. This growing digital and AI divide risks leaving policymakers in many countries without the foundational knowledge needed to shape appropriate governance frameworks. This digital divide risks leaving policymakers without the basic AI understanding needed to regulate and adopt AI wisely. For instance, when public officials confuse AI with generic automation or traditional digital tools, they may miss the specific governance risks such as algorithmic bias, misinformation, or data privacy that AI uniquely poses. Consequently, low AI literacy constrains effective policy.

These challenges have direct implications for governance. AI literacy is becoming as fundamental as traditional literacy and numeracy. Governments that lack AI-literate staff risk either overregulating out of fear or under-regulating and exposing citizens to harm. Indeed, UNESCO's Beijing Consensus on Artificial Intelligence and Education emphasizes the need for governments to strengthen AI literacy and build institutional capacity, including among policymakers, educators, and researchers, while integrating AI skills into education systems to prepare societies for the AI era.

2. Case for AI Literacy for Policymakers

In response to the capacity gaps outlined above, Qhala Trust collaborated with governments, universities, and development partners to implement a series of AI literacy masterclasses for policymakers in Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa. Each program convened between 30 and 60 participants drawn from government ministries, regulatory agencies, legislative bodies, and public institutions responsible for technology policy, economic development, and public service delivery. The objective of these masterclasses was to demystify artificial intelligence, introduce policymakers to its practical applications, and explore the governance challenges associated with its deployment in public and private sectors.



30 - 60

Participants Per Program

Each masterclass convened carefully selected leaders and policymakers from key government institutions

Participants



Government Ministries



Regulatory Agencies



Legislative Bodies



Public Institutions

Experiences from these sessions revealed a consistent pattern across the target countries: many policymakers initially had limited familiarity with the technical foundations of AI and often conflated AI with broader digital technologies such as automation, digitization, or data analytics. This gap in understanding had important governance implications. Without a clear grasp of how AI systems operate and the risks they pose, policymakers may struggle to design appropriate regulatory responses or assess the societal impacts of AI-driven technologies. As a result, the masterclasses prioritized foundational concepts such as machine learning, algorithmic decision-making, data governance, and AI ethics, while linking these concepts directly to policy challenges such as algorithmic bias, transparency, public accountability, and responsible innovation.

The design of the masterclasses also provided valuable insights into what approaches are most effective for building AI literacy among policymakers. Interactive and participatory learning methods proved particularly successful. Case studies, group discussions, and policy simulation exercises enabled participants to engage directly with real-world governance dilemmas, encouraging them to apply AI concepts to practical policymaking scenarios. These exercises helped translate abstract technological ideas into concrete policy questions, allowing participants to explore trade-offs between innovation, regulation, and public protection. Participants consistently reported that these experiential approaches made complex technical issues more accessible and relevant to their day-to-day policy responsibilities.

At the same time, the masterclasses revealed several challenges that limited learning outcomes when not addressed carefully. Lecture-heavy sessions or highly technical explanations often reduced engagement and made it difficult for participants without technical backgrounds to fully grasp key concepts. Similarly, excessive reliance on jargon or complex technical terminology created barriers to understanding. These observations underscored the importance of tailoring AI literacy programs to the needs of non-technical policy audiences by using accessible language, policy-relevant examples, and participatory teaching methods.

Taken together, the experiences from the AI literacy masterclasses highlight both the urgency and the opportunity of strengthening AI capacity among policymakers. They demonstrate that while knowledge gaps are widespread, well-designed training programs can significantly improve policymakers' understanding of AI and their ability to engage with governance questions. The lessons emerging from these programs provide important insights into how AI literacy initiatives can be designed and implemented effectively. The following section summarizes the key findings that emerged from the masterclasses conducted across the three countries.

3. Key Findings

The AI literacy masterclasses conducted in Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa generated several important insights into the current state of AI knowledge among policymakers and the most effective approaches for strengthening policy capacity in this area. These findings draw from participant feedback, facilitator observations, and recurring patterns observed across multiple training sessions.

First, the programs revealed **significant gaps in foundational AI literacy among policymakers**. Many participants initially struggled to distinguish artificial intelligence from broader digital technologies such as automation, digitization, or data analytics. This lack of conceptual clarity limited participants' ability to identify the specific governance risks associated with AI systems, including algorithmic bias, opaque automated decision-making, and large-scale data processing. These knowledge gaps highlight why AI literacy is increasingly becoming a prerequisite for effective digital governance.

Without a basic understanding of how AI systems function and where risks may arise, policymakers may face difficulties designing regulatory frameworks, evaluating procurement decisions, or assessing the societal impacts of AI deployment.

Second, the masterclasses demonstrated that **participatory and experiential learning approaches are significantly more effective than traditional lecture-based training for policymakers**. Interactive activities such as case studies, structured debates, and policy simulations enabled participants to engage directly with real-world governance challenges and to apply AI concepts in practical policymaking contexts. These exercises helped translate abstract technological ideas into policy-relevant questions, allowing participants to examine trade-offs between innovation, regulation, and public protection. Participants consistently reported that these interactive methods improved both comprehension and engagement, particularly for those without technical backgrounds.

Third, the programs highlighted **the importance of accessible and policy-oriented communication when teaching AI concepts to non-technical audiences**. Sessions that relied heavily on technical terminology or complex explanations often reduced engagement and created barriers to understanding. In contrast, training that used simple language, relatable examples, and practical policy scenarios proved far more effective. These findings suggest that AI literacy initiatives must prioritize clarity and accessibility, ensuring that policymakers can understand the implications of AI technologies without requiring advanced technical expertise.

Fourth, the masterclasses showed that **AI literacy programs can act as catalysts for broader policy conversations**. In several sessions, discussions extended beyond basic AI concepts to include questions about national AI strategies, regulatory frameworks, and institutional readiness for AI governance. Participants began exploring how AI could affect sectors such as healthcare, agriculture, and public administration, and what policy safeguards might be needed to manage these changes responsibly. This demonstrates that AI literacy initiatives can serve as entry points for more comprehensive national discussions about AI governance and digital transformation.

Finally, the programs underscored the importance of **adopting a whole-systems approach to AI capacity building**. Effective AI literacy cannot be achieved through isolated training sessions alone. Instead, sustainable capacity requires collaboration among governments, universities, civil society organizations, technology experts, and development partners. Multi-stakeholder engagement strengthens training programs by combining technical expertise with policy perspectives and by ensuring that learning reflects the real-world challenges policymakers face. This ecosystem approach also helps expand the reach of AI literacy initiatives and supports the long-term institutional capacity needed for responsible AI governance.

Together, these findings demonstrate that while AI literacy gaps among policymakers are widespread, they are highly addressable through well-designed training programs that emphasize practical relevance, accessible communication, and collaborative learning environments.

4. Policy Recommendations

Following the successful roll out of the masterclasses for policymakers in Nigeria, Kenya and South Africa, we have outlined policy recommendations below. These policy recommendations have been described for clarity and the main advantages, disadvantages and cost and feasibility of implementation and responsible stakeholders of each have also been set out in the table below to give practical guidelines for implementing AI literacy programs for policymakers in Africa.

Category	 #1	 #2	 #3	 #4
 Policy Recommendation	Institutionalize AI Literacy Training	Multi-Stakeholder AI Literacy Partnerships	Experiential AI Governance Training	Public AI Literacy and Education
Description	Integrate AI literacy modules into existing government training institutions such as civil service academies and leadership development programs.	Develop AI literacy programs through partnerships between governments, universities, development partners, and technology experts.	Design training programs using interactive learning methods such as policy simulations, debates, and case studies.	Expand AI literacy initiatives to the wider public through school curricula, community programs, and digital literacy campaigns.
 Main Advantages	Builds long-term institutional capacity for AI governance. Reaches policymakers who shape national policy.	Combines technical, academic, and policy expertise. Reduces financial burden on governments. Encourages collaborative AI ecosystems.	Highly effective for adult learners. Encourages critical thinking about governance risks and policy trade-offs.	Builds broader societal awareness of AI technologies. Promotes informed public participation in technology governance discussions.
 Main Disadvantages	Requires development of training curricula and expert facilitators. May become overly theoretical if not designed carefully.	Coordination between partners may be complex. Stakeholders may have competing priorities.	Requires skilled facilitators and carefully designed training materials. May require longer training sessions.	Requires significant outreach and resources. Difficult to reach remote or underserved communities.
 Cost and Feasibility	Moderate cost. Feasible where public sector training institutions already exist.	Moderate cost with shared funding among partners. Feasible where development partners and universities are active.	Low-moderate cost. Can be implemented through workshops or short training programs.	Moderate cost depending on scale. May require integration into education systems and public communication strategies.
 Stakeholders Responsible	Governments, civil service academies, leadership training institutes, universities.	Governments, universities, development organizations, foundations, multilateral institutions, and the private sector.	Training institutions, policy think tanks, AI experts, universities.	Ministries of education, digital economy agencies, civil society organizations, media organizations.

5. Conclusion

Artificial intelligence is no longer a distant technological development. It is already rapidly shaping economic systems, public administration, and social life across the world. For governments, the challenge is not only how to adopt AI technologies but also how to govern them responsibly. This requires policymakers who possess the foundational knowledge to understand AI systems, evaluate their risks and benefits, and design regulatory frameworks that protect citizens while enabling innovation.

The experiences from AI literacy programs implemented by Qhala Trust across several African countries demonstrate that capacity gaps among policymakers are real but also highly addressable. When policymakers are provided with accessible, policy-oriented training that explains AI concepts in practical terms, their ability to engage with governance questions improves significantly. Interactive learning approaches, such as case studies and policy simulations, are particularly effective in helping participants understand complex technological issues and their policy implications.

However, building AI literacy cannot rely on isolated training sessions alone. Sustainable capacity requires institutionalization within government systems, strong partnerships across universities, civil society, and the private sector, and broader public engagement to ensure that societies can participate meaningfully in discussions about AI governance. Strengthening AI literacy among policymakers also creates a foundation for wider national efforts, including the development of AI strategies, regulatory frameworks, and innovation ecosystems.

Ultimately, AI governance will be shaped not only by technological capability but by the knowledge and preparedness of those responsible for making policy decisions. Investing in AI literacy is therefore a strategic step toward ensuring that AI contributes to inclusive development, economic growth, and responsible governance across the Global South.

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The logo for QTrust features a stylized 'Q' with an orange diagonal bar, followed by the word 'Trust' in a white, sans-serif font.