

1. GLOBAL SIGNALS — LABOR, GOVERNANCE & SOCIETY

A US Judge Lets the NAACP's Pollution Case Against xAI's Data-Center Turbines Go Forward

On October 19, Judge Debra Brown of the US District Court for the Northern District of Mississippi refused the Justice Department's request to dismiss a Clean Air Act lawsuit brought by the NAACP against xAI, Elon Musk's AI company, and its energy affiliate MZX Tech. The suit, filed in April with the Southern Environmental Law Center and Earthjustice, alleges that xAI has been running dozens of methane gas turbines in Southaven, Mississippi, about a mile from its Colossus 2 data center in South Memphis, without federal permits. The NAACP says the plant could emit more than 5,000 tons of nitrogen oxides and 400 tons of fine particulate matter a year.

The Justice Department had joined the case in June, arguing that it alone could end such citizen suits and calling the turbines a national-security matter. The judge disagreed: no “fairly possible” reading of the law, she wrote, gives the government that power. The ruling does not decide whether xAI broke the law, and a request to shut down the turbines while the case continues is still pending. xAI holds a state permit for 41 permanent turbines due to run from 2027.

> **Why it matters:** When the grid cannot power a data center fast enough, companies generate their own electricity, often next to people's homes. This ruling keeps open the right of residents to go to court over the air they breathe, even when the government sides with the AI company. That matters wherever AI infrastructure is being built faster than the rules meant to govern it.

Sources: IBTimes UK | TechCrunch

ALSO THIS WEEK

- Microsoft has withdrawn as anchor tenant of Nscale's planned 50-megawatt AI campus in Loughton, England, after grid officials said they could not supply power before the 2030s; Nscale calls it a London-wide grid problem and is exploring other power sources. [source]
- A policy paper from Vodacom and law firm Bowmans proposes an African approach to governing AI: shared principles of fairness, transparency and accountability, stronger data-protection and competition laws first, and non-digital ways for people to challenge AI decisions that affect them. [source]

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2. INFRASTRUCTURE & COMPUTE

South African Activists Call for a Halt to New Data Centers Until Rules Exist

Civil-society groups in South Africa, including Housing Assembly, Extinction Rebellion and the UK non-profit Foxglove, represented by the Legal Resources Centre, want construction of new data centers halted until specific regulations exist. South Africa has more than 60 data centers, the

most in Africa; Cape Town has about a dozen and has approved five more. In Barcelona, a Cape Town community without piped water or sanitation, residents are appealing the city's rezoning of nearby land that could allow Equinix to build near the airport. The appeal was heard in October; a non-binding recommendation is due within 90 days.

Housing Assembly estimates that a hyperscale site using standard cooling could consume more than 4.4 billion liters of water a year, about what 18,000 households use, in a city that narrowly escaped running dry in 2018. Communications Minister Solly Malatsi says there are no data-center-specific rules yet; operators must follow existing building and environmental law and should supply their own electricity and water. Equinix says it has no immediate plans for the land and uses dry cooling. Its center outside Johannesburg employed about 750 people during construction and has 26 permanent staff.

> **Why it matters:** Data centers bring investment but few lasting jobs, and they draw on the same water and power as the people around them. Residents are not asking to stop AI; they are asking for disclosure of water, power and cumulative impact before approval rather than after. As University of Cape Town researcher Pitso Tsibolane put it, “Serious investors are not deterred by clear rules.”

Sources: Africanews / AFP | The Star / AFP

ALSO THIS WEEK

- Oman is the Gulf's newest AI compute destination: a consortium led by Mubbadrah plans a $3 billion campus of up to 400 megawatts, though no buyer for its capacity has signed yet, while in Saudi Arabia Nebius agreed to take up to 50 megawatts at Humain's Oxagon campus from late 2027. [source]

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3. EDUCATION & HUMAN CAPACITY

Africa's AI Tutors Are Reaching Students Through WhatsApp and SMS

A group of African education start-ups is bringing AI to students through the phones they already have. FoondaMate, founded in South Africa, runs an AI study assistant on WhatsApp and Messenger that has answered more than 100 million student questions in South Africa, Zimbabwe and Nigeria. Kenya's M-Shule delivers adaptive lessons by SMS to basic feature phones, with no broadband needed. Nigeria's Afrilearn offers lesson notes, videos and more than 500,000 quizzes to over four million learners. NGScholars is adding AI guidance on scholarships and admissions, and AltSchool Africa has launched an “AI for 10M Africans” skills initiative.

Commentators add two cautions: engagement figures are not proof that students learn more, and general-purpose AI models may not follow local curricula or may give wrong answers. Few of these tools have been rigorously tested. One that has, the Rori maths tutor, raised scores in Ghanaian schools, and a larger trial across 100 public schools is under way.

> **Why it matters:** For a student in a rural area with a basic phone and no broadband, the AI tutor that matters is the one that works over WhatsApp or SMS. The next step is evidence: showing that these tools improve learning, in local languages and curricula, before ministries scale them up.

Source: Punch, via AF.net

ALSO THIS WEEK

- Senegal and the Gates Foundation have launched a Senegal AI Scaling Hub in Dakar to take AI for health and agriculture from pilot projects to national scale, with tools designed locally and training for young and older people in new jobs; it was presented as the Foundation held its Goalkeepers summit in Dakar on “Equitable AI and the Future of African Youth”. [source]

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4. CREATIVE INDUSTRIES

African Storytellers Meet in Mombasa to Ask Who Owns Their Stories in the Age of AI

From October 28 to 31, Afrotellers held its first conference in Mombasa, Kenya, under the theme “Narrative Sovereignty in the Age of AI and Shifting Global Power.” Filmmakers, journalists, musicians, researchers and policymakers from Kenya, Zimbabwe, South Africa, Malawi, Ghana, Nigeria, the DR Congo, Lesotho, Togo, Madagascar, Mali and beyond were invited to work on three themes: algorithmic colonialism, policy and advocacy, and how creative economies can sustain themselves. The agenda covers how algorithms decide which stories are seen, how AI is changing production, and who owns training data and intellectual property, alongside a festival and a market for creators' work.

At a preparatory dialogue in August, Dr McDonald Lewanika of Accountability Lab urged storytellers to use AI as an assistant without surrendering control of their data, languages and culture, and warned against “algorithmic imperialism.” “AI, a phenomenon as it is, cannot replace us,” he said. The organizers acknowledge that the real test will be practical partnerships that help creators earn a living from their work.

> **Why it matters:** AI systems are trained mostly on stories, music and images from outside Africa, and platform algorithms decide which African stories reach an audience. When creators set their own terms on data, language and ownership, they have a better chance of being represented, and paid, fairly.

Sources: Capital FM | Citizen Digital | CITE

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5. REGIONAL LENS — AFRICA & THE GLOBAL SOUTH

African AI Start-ups Count on Government Clients, but Government Contracts Make Them Wait to Be Paid

Governments are the main target market for African AI companies: 44% of firms surveyed for “AI Made in Africa,” a new report by the German development agency GIZ and research firm Briter, sell to the public sector, and 32% name access to public procurement as a top policy priority. The terms can be hard to meet. South Africa's Companies and Intellectual Property Commission is tendering for an AI chatbot to handle about two million customer interactions a month on a three-year contract with no advance payment; invoices are paid within 30 days of work being accepted, so the supplier must finance delivery itself.

The survey, covering 311 mapped businesses and 85 respondents in 38 African countries, shows how thin the margins are: only 15% are profitable, 61% cite high cloud costs as their main bottleneck, and more than half price their products below $2,500 a year while paying cloud bills in dollars. Asked about the first barrier to growth, 65% name customer trust and AI literacy rather than cost, and 62% would like subsidies for research and computing.

> **Why it matters:** When governments buy AI built at home, public services can be designed for local languages and needs, and local firms grow. Payment terms written for large contractors shut small ones out. Milestone or advance payments could do as much for African AI as another national strategy.

Sources: TechCabal, via Afropolitain | Ecofin Agency

ALSO THIS WEEK

- South African investor INFRAGORA Global Capital plans to start building two AI-ready data centers in Nigeria in 2027, the first phase of a $3–5 billion program across seven African countries; a US-funded feasibility study is under way and financing has not yet closed. [source]

6. OPPORTUNITIES & EVENTS

The Gates Foundation Is Hiring AI Fellows in Abuja, Addis Ababa, Johannesburg and Nairobi — Apply by November 11

The Gates Foundation is recruiting AI Fellows for its Africa regional offices in Abuja, Addis Ababa, Johannesburg and Nairobi. The 12-month, full-time position focuses on building AI tools for public-sector problems: decision support for public finance, supply chains for essential medicines and predictive analytics for health planning. Fellows lead projects with expert mentorship and work with governments, multilateral agencies, NGOs, universities and industry.

Applicants need a bachelor's or master's degree in computer science, data science, engineering, applied mathematics or a related field, at least two years of experience applying AI (ideally in health or agriculture) and hands-on experience building prototypes with large language models. Candidates must already be authorized to work in the country they choose; the Foundation offers no visa sponsorship or relocation support. Applications close on November 11.

> **Why it matters:** Too often, the AI tools used in African health and public services are designed far from where they are used. A fellowship that pays African technologists to build them inside the region, with the people who will use them, helps keep that expertise at home.

Sources: Gates Foundation careers | Opportunity Desk

ALSO THIS WEEK

- Reminder: applications for Carnegie Mellon University Africa's free online AI Certificate for Africa close on November 15; the next cohort starts on January 17, 2027. [source]

ONE SIGNAL WE ARE WATCHING

Who carries the cost, and who shares the gain. This week, communities asked for a say in how AI is built around them: residents near xAI's turbines in Mississippi and in Cape Town's Barcelona settlement want their air and water weighed before approval, and African storytellers in Mombasa asked who will own their stories. At the same time, AI is reaching people on their own terms, through tutors on basic phones and local start-ups serving their own governments. At Tomorrow Foundation, we believe AI's progress should be measured by whether the people who live alongside it share in its benefits, not only bear its costs. Those who host the infrastructure, provide the data and tell the stories deserve a voice in the rules, and a fair share of what AI makes possible.

AI for All Global Brief is a publication of Tomorrow Foundation.