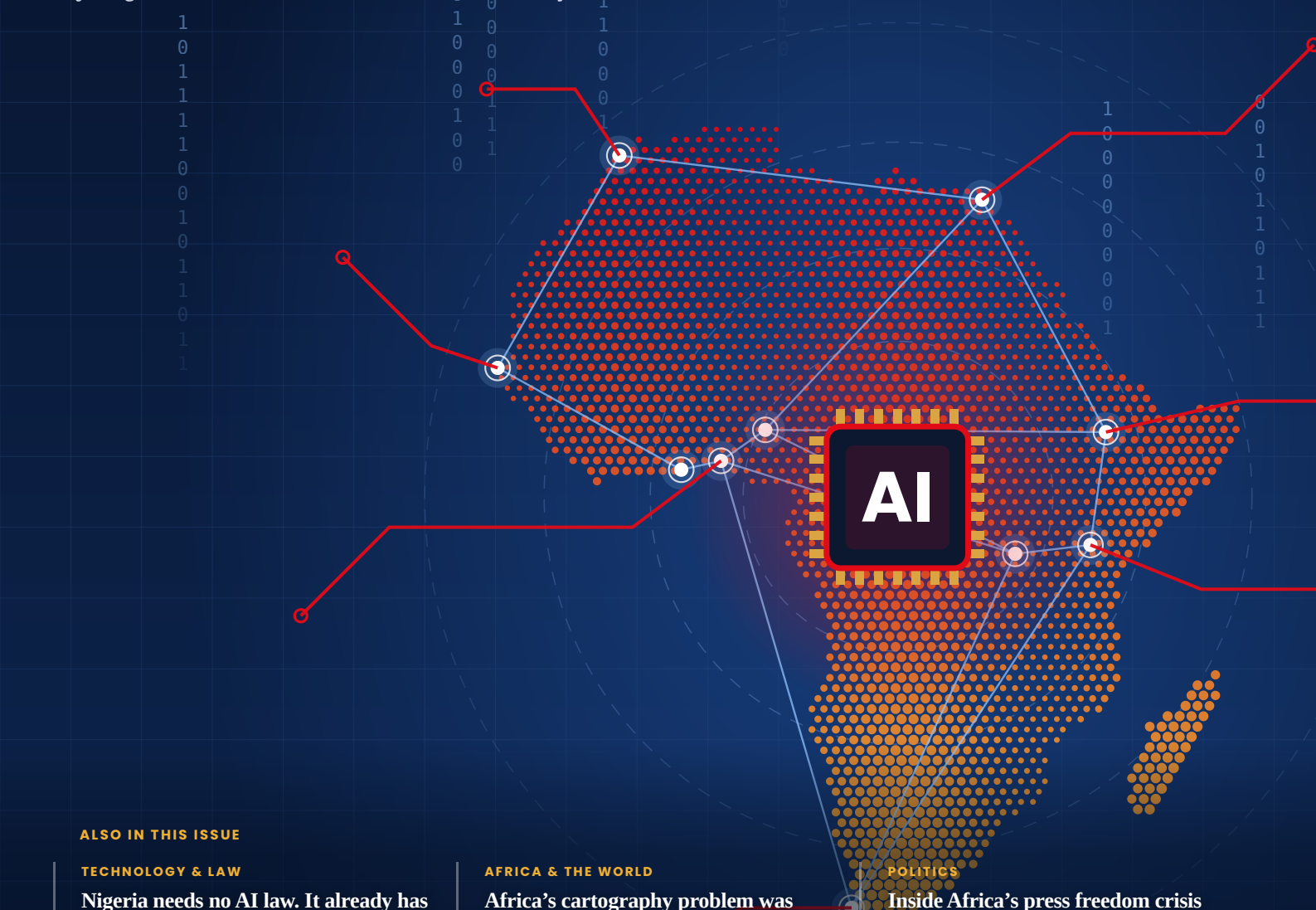
The Liberalist

ISSUE 2 · OCTOBER 2026 A PRO-FREEDOM MAGAZINE WWW.THELIBERALIST.ORG

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Regulate the harm, *not the fear*

The path to regulating artificial intelligence in Africa: why copying foreign laws could cost the continent its startups.



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EDITOR'S NOTE

"The bad economist confines himself to the visible effect; the good economist takes into account both the effect that can be seen and those effects that must be foreseen."

Frédéric Bastiat wrote those words in 1850. More than 170 years later, they still describe how many African governments operate. A leader bans something, promises a handout, or puts a visa process online. They celebrate the quick result and leave ordinary people to suffer the hidden consequences.

In our first issue, we asked: Is Africa poor because she is not free? In this issue, we looked at where that question is answered every day: government policy.

Everywhere we looked, we found the same pattern. A government banned raw shea exports to force local processing. Instead, prices crashed, and women collectors were left sitting on sacks they could not sell. A proposed cashew ban threatens to do the same to farmers. Politicians promise to restore fuel subsidies out of "care," but the benefit goes mostly to the rich. Modern e-visas look nice, until an African has to ask permission just to visit another African country. In our lead story, we saw governments rushing to pass technology laws copied from abroad, making it harder for local startups to survive. Meanwhile, global press freedom has fallen to a 25-year low, and African governments are using criminal law against reporters.

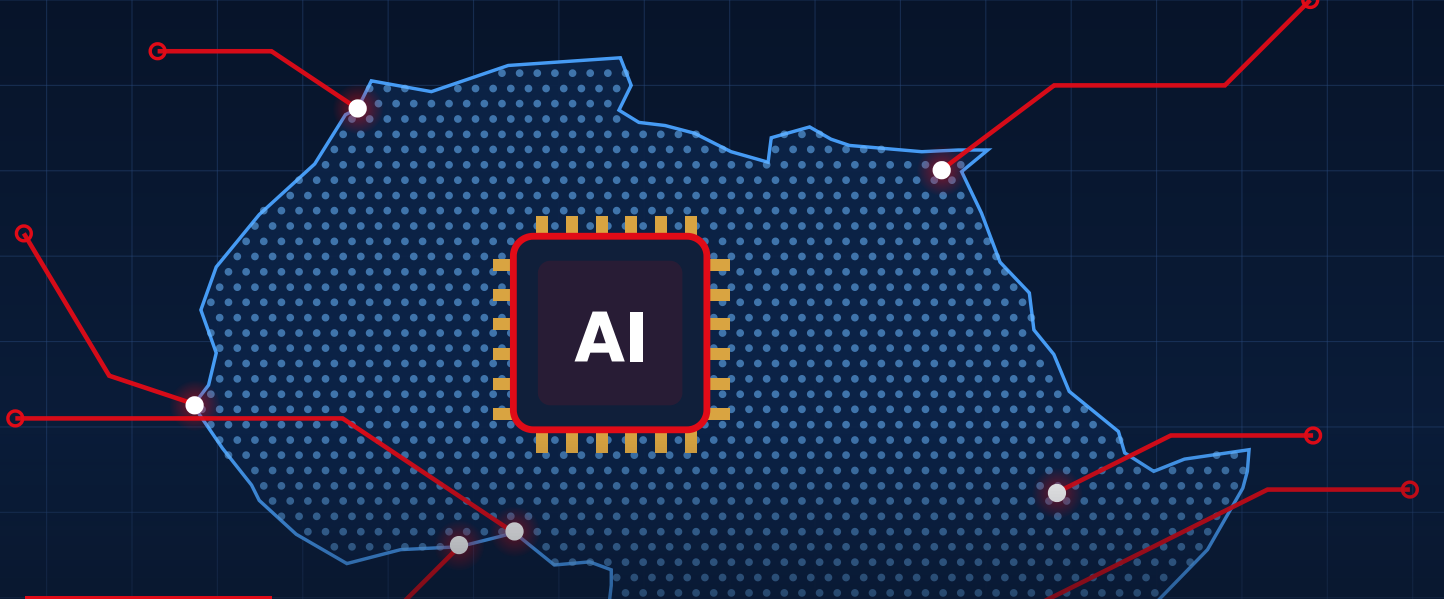
When leaders try to control everything, good intentions usually end up hurting the very people they were meant to help.

But we did not only look at what is broken. We also looked at what works. Morocco made it easier to build things, and now manufactures a million cars a year. Small private companies are bringing electricity to Nigerian villages the national grid never reached. Kenya opened its doors to almost all Africans and rose to third on the continent's visa openness ranking. The lesson in each success story is the same: when government steps back, people thrive.

We do not advocate freedom because it is fashionable or makes a catchy slogan. We advocate it because it is the difference between a law that works and one that fails.

If you have ever watched a good plan turn into a bad outcome, you already know how frustrating it is. I hope this issue helps you see why it keeps happening, and how much better things get when we simply let people be free.

Abdullah Tijani
EDITOR, THE LIBERALIST



TECHNOLOGY & LAW COVER STORY · ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

The Path to Regulating Artificial Intelligence in Africa

African leaders should recognise that adopting foreign legislation with complex, high-cost compliance can stifle local startups and risk missed opportunities for economic development.

BY ABDULLAH TIJANI

EVERY TIME A new technology or innovation arrives, the reflex in African policy circles is, "how can the government regulate this?" Then comes "which foreign framework should we model?" With data protection, it was the European Union's GDPR. Now, with artificial intelligence, the considerations are the European Union's AI Act, the executive orders coming from Washington, and a growing list of national strategies modelled on both.

The African Union's AI Strategy, to its credit, has resisted the urge. Adopted in 2024, the strategy takes a development-first approach by prioritising how countries can harness AI benefits. It is crucial this focus extends to legislation and prevents "responsible AI" language from pushing member states toward overly restrictive regulations.

Consider what the EU's AI Act actually costs the businesses subject to it. Independent analyses of the AI Act's high-risk obligations compiled by the Cloud Security Alliance (CSA) put initial compliance for a mid-size firm between $2 million and $5 million, with large enterprises facing $8 million to $15 million. Even ongoing annual costs can run into millions more. Other studies indicate that even a small startup deploying a single high-risk system can expect to spend €50,000 to €150,000 to conform with the Act. A macroeconomic study from the Centre for Data Innovation (CDI) shows that a total compliance framework, encompassing the quality management system (QMS), technical documentation, and external conformity assessments, can run past €400,000 for an SME. The Centre for European Policy Studies' (CEPS) official regulatory impact assessments confirm this overhead cost, putting the AI Act's cumulative administrative burden at roughly 17 percent on top of whatever a company was already spending to build the AI.

$2–5m
EU AI Act compliance, mid-size firm (CSA)

€50k–150k
for one high-risk system at a startup

17%
added administrative burden (CEPS)

African leaders should recognise that adopting foreign legislation with high costs can stifle local startups and risk missed opportunities for economic development. This warning is not based on hypothetical worry about some future AI legislation in Africa. It is already shaping some national regulations, even well-intentioned ones. For instance, Nigeria's National AI Strategy, released by the Ministry of Communications, Innovation and Digital Economy in August 2024, is in most respects a sensible document built around infrastructure and responsible AI governance, and it explicitly aims to position Nigeria as a continental leader in AI adoption. But the effect of strategies like this depend on what their implementing regulations eventually say.

The first major statutory attempt to introduce explicit AI compliance rules was the National Digital Economy and E-Governance

Bill. In its early draft, this bill established a risk-based classification system modeled after international frameworks like the European Union's AI Act. The tiered framework focused its regulatory mechanisms on high-risk AI systems deployed in sectors capable of directly affecting a citizen's access to essential services. Under this classification, the most critical parts of the growing tech ecosystem were swept in, including financial services and fintech credit scoring, employment and human resources hiring tools, healthcare and medical diagnostics, public administration, and surveillance and biometrics software. Any AI system falling into these designated high-risk sectors faced massive pre-deployment compliance, including compulsory annual algorithmic audits, mandatory registration with the National Information Technology Development Agency (NITDA), extensive technical logging, and a requirement to maintain human-in-the-loop oversight to ensure automated decisions could always be challenged by a person.

> *"Regulate what you have evidence of harm from.*

However, before the Bill passed third reading and advanced to presidential assent, the lawmakers already removed the AI-specific regulatory provisions from the text to allow the Act focused strictly on digital infrastructure, e-governance frameworks, and general digital economy operations. While those strict provisions on AI compliance were excised from the final e-governance law, they left behind a clear footprint of the federal government's regulatory intentions and a clear blueprint of the direction the country's AI legislation is going.

Now, the core of Nigeria's AI regulatory ambitions has been explicitly rechanneled into a dedicated, standalone legislation titled the National Artificial Intelligence Commission (Establishment) Bill which already passed first reading before the Senate.

Lessons from the Past

Another African country has already run the experiment of emerging technology regulation once—and better—and it is worth remembering how it turned out. When Safaricom launched M-Pesa in Kenya in 2007, the Central Bank of Kenya (CBK) resisted heavy pressure from commercial banks to shut it down. Instead of forcing the pilot project to meet rigid capital and licensing standards written for commercial banks, the CBK issued a "Letter of No Objection", classifying it as a retail payment service and not a bank. For four years, the regulator observed how Kenyans actually used the platform, using this observation period to conduct risk audits. Only in 2011, after the system had matured to over 14 million users, did the CBK formally codify its oversight through the National Payment System Act. This regulatory patience is a large part of why East Africa became the epicentre of mobile money.

Licences issued: South Africa v Nigeria

Crypto-asset service providers, latest figures cited



Source: figures cited in the article. Chart: The Liberalist.

Meanwhile, AI is a more complex, and in some respects riskier, technology than mobile money, and nobody seriously argues that fraud, deepfake abuse, or algorithmic discrimination should go unaddressed. But the lesson from Kenyan mobile money was not "regulate less". It was "regulate what you have evidence of harm from."

Nigeria does not need a hypothetical case to see where this leads, because it has already run the pilot in two sectors. The Nigeria Data Protection Act of 2023 requires any data controller or processor of "major importance" to appoint a data protection officer and file annual compliance audits which cost between ₦1 million and ₦1.5 million. That audit cannot even be self-filed. The Act requires any organisation of major importance to route its annual Compliance Audit Return through a Data Protection Compliance Organisation (DPCO) licensed by the Commission. DPCO licensing alone runs to roughly ₦3 million, and a business engaging one for its own audit should budget between ₦500,000 and ₦4 million a year depending on size, on top of the salary of the dedicated data protection officer the law separately requires all major-importance controllers and processors to retain. The burden is the mandatory, expensive market for compliance professionals that the legislation itself created, and that every regulated business must pay into every year, whether or not it has ever mishandled any data.

> *"Nigeria built the toughest entry price in Africa and is now watching founders and capital go elsewhere.*

On virtual assets, the SEC's licensing regime under the Investments and Securities Act (ISA) 2025 established heavy entry bars for capital market participation. Following the SEC's revised capital directives, Digital Asset Intermediaries (DAIs) and Digital Asset Platform Operators (DAPOs) are required to hold a minimum paid-up capital of ₦500 million. For larger structural entities, such as Real-World Asset Tokenisation Platforms (RATOP) and full-scale exchanges, thresholds have soared to ₦1 billion and ₦2 billion respectively. Industry analysts warned that regional peers were pulling ahead in crypto and digital-asset innovation due to significantly lower cost barriers to market entry.

South Africa's Financial Sector Conduct Authority (FSCA), by contrast, imposes no fixed minimum share capital threshold for Crypto Asset Service Providers (CASPs); instead, it evaluates an applicant's financial integrity and operational resources relative to the actual scale and risk profile of its operations. This South African risk-proportionate strategy enabled it to process over 530 applications and issue more than 300 licenses, while Nigeria's Securities and Exchange Commission has only admitted or provisionally approved 10 entities under its Accelerated Regulatory Incubation Programme (ARIP) and digital asset framework.

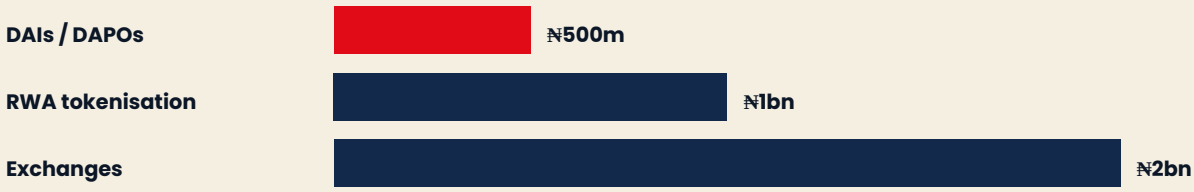
Nigeria built the toughest entry price in Africa and is now watching founders and capital go elsewhere. That looks like the trajectory AI governance is on if regulators reach for the same playbook, where capital requirements and audit regimes designed for a fully capitalised European market are bolted onto companies still raising their first seed funding.

Africa's AI Legislations

As of last year, 13 African countries had adopted or drafted AI strategies of their own. Multiply a compliance bill across that many jurisdictions, each with its own registration regime and its own definition of "high-risk", and you have not built continent-wide AI governance, but 55 reasons never to launch a product on the continent.

Minimum paid-up capital, Nigeria

SEC digital-asset thresholds, ₦ million



Source: figures cited in the article. Chart: The Liberalist.

This is not an argument against governance as such. It is an argument for governance that is sequenced correctly and reasonably.

Look across the globe, and the danger of getting this sequence wrong becomes obvious. In the United States, the absence of a unified federal statute on privacy has spawned a chaotic patchwork of fifty distinct state-level regulatory regimes. That legal fragmentation is projected to drain over $1 trillion from the U.S. economy over a decade, with young startups bearing the brunt of multi-jurisdictional compliance.

Meanwhile, the European Union's AI Act showcases the immense power of a harmonised framework. After enacting a single binding regulation for all 27 member states, Brussels created a seamless digital single market of roughly 450 million consumers. An AI startup in Tallinn or Lisbon can design a tool once, pass a single set of standardised criteria, and immediately scale across the entire bloc without re-architecting its software or renegotiating entry in 27 different countries.

Asia offers another practical precedent. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) eschewed rigid top-down mandates in favor of a joint Guide on AI Governance and Ethics. A common definition, common risk baselines, and cross-border interoperability goals across its ten member states, allowed economies like Singapore, Indonesia, and Vietnam to domesticate rules on their own timetables.

> *"A healthcare tool built in Nairobi or a fintech model trained in Lagos meets equivalent safety floors in Accra or Kigali.*

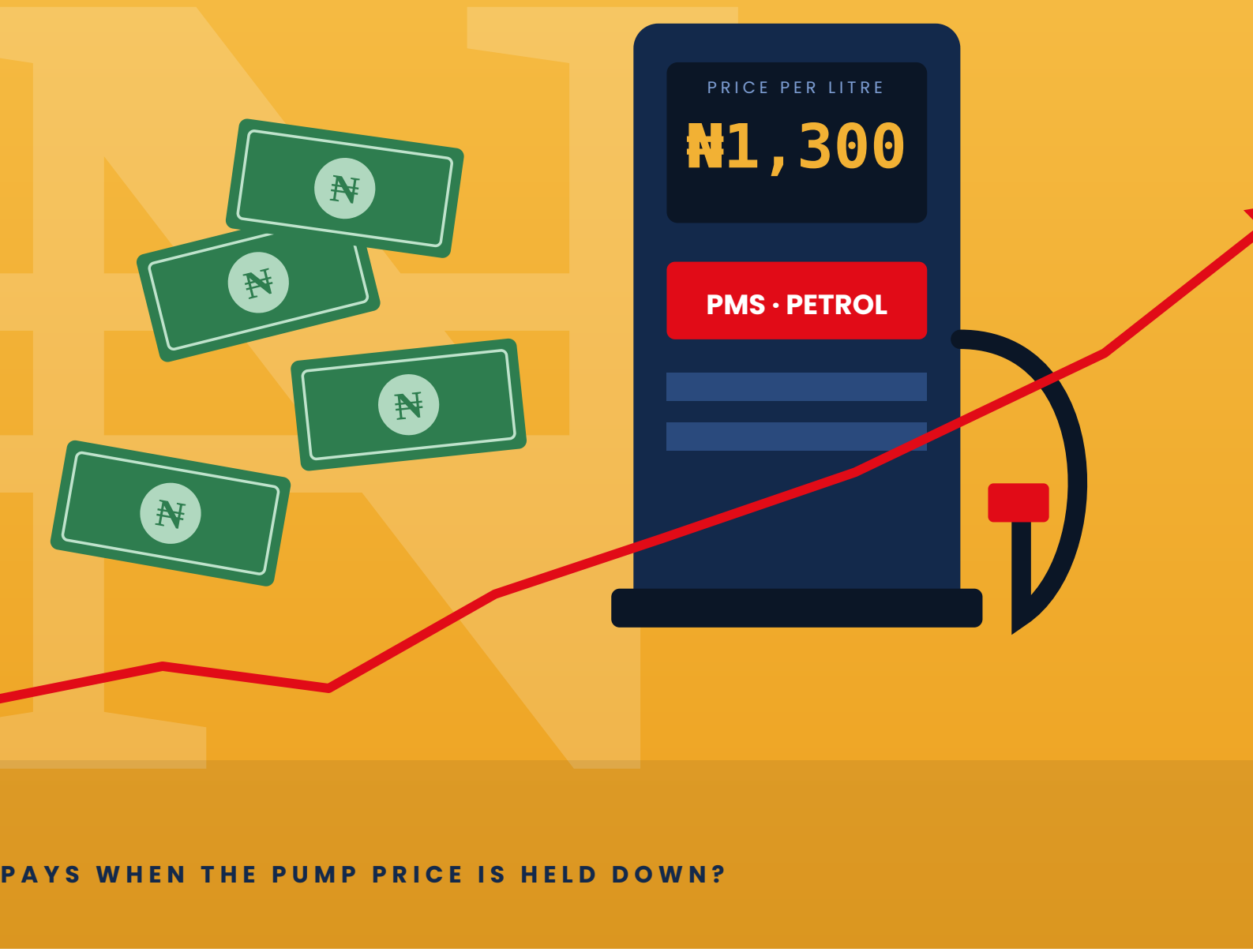
That is the exact model AI governance in Africa should borrow. A continental AI framework, anchored to the AfCFTA Digital Trade Protocol, agreed once at the AU level and then domesticated by each member state, would give founders one set of definitions to build for all 55 nations. It ensures that a healthcare tool built in Nairobi or a fintech model trained in Lagos meets equivalent safety floors in Accra or Kigali, allowing African innovation to scale easily across borders.

Every AU member state currently drafting an AI bill should be asked if they want compliance easy and cost-effective for their founders and if they want their founders to build for one nation or the 55 AU member states. That question, asked frankly, could dictate whether regulations will make or mar the emergence and progress of AI technology in the continent.

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PAYS WHEN THE PUMP PRICE IS HELD DOWN?

ECONOMY ENERGY & PUBLIC FINANCE

Can Nigeria Survive Fuel Subsidy Reversal?

Restoring the petrol subsidy would strain public finances and mostly benefit the better-off, while removal is already paying out.

BY HAFSAT SALIHU

ATIKU ABUBAKAR, THE ADC's presidential candidate, says he will restore the petrol subsidy if he wins in 2027. It may be campaign rhetoric, but bringing it back would strain government finances and pull huge sums away from critical sectors. The subsidy was already a heavy burden before Tinubu removed it in 2023, with billions of naira spent every month holding pump prices below market cost. The World Bank estimated that removal would save about ₦2 trillion that year, or 0.9 percent of GDP, and over ₦11 trillion cumulatively by the end of 2025. Zacch Adedeji, chairman of the Nigeria Revenue Service, says the bill today would have been ₦53 trillion.

₦2tn
saved in 2023, or 0.9% of GDP

92%
of petrol now supplied by Dangote

₦53tn
what the bill would have been

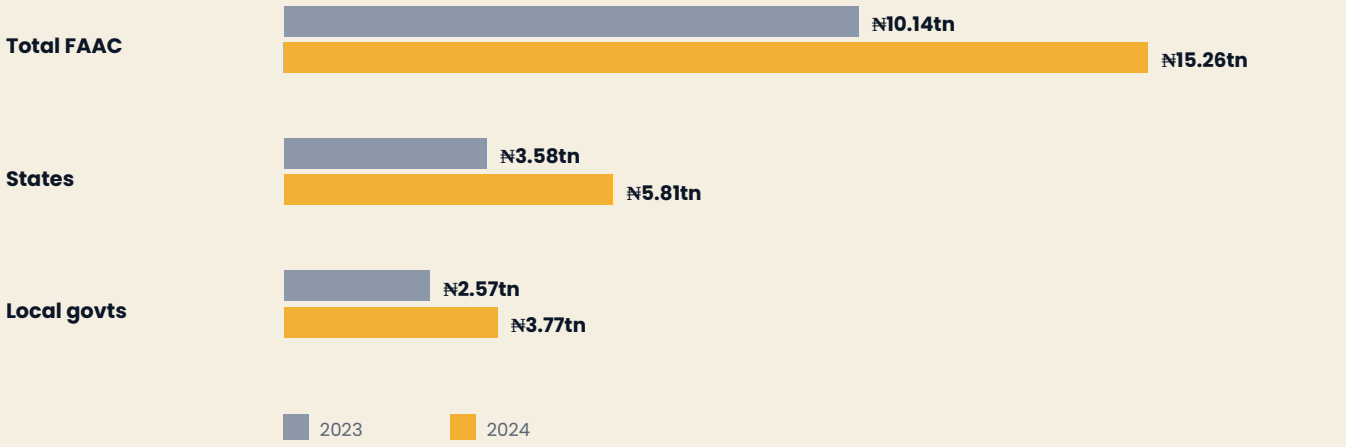
The case for the subsidy is that cheap petrol is visible at the pump while the government quietly pays the difference, money that could have gone to health and education. But the subsidy is a clumsy way to help the poor. The benefit scales with consumption, so households and businesses that burn more fuel get more. The richest 20 percent of households captured several times what the poorest 20 percent did. Atiku and the subsidy's defenders are selling a poverty programme that mostly pays the rich.

> *"Atiku and the subsidy's defenders are selling a poverty programme that mostly pays the rich.*

The price gap also made smuggling profitable. Petrol crossed the borders to be sold at higher prices in neighbouring countries, so Nigerian taxpayers were partly funding someone else's margin. Removal narrowed the gap and the incentive. Finance Minister Taiwo Oyedele has said plainly that the subsidy distorted the economy by holding petrol below its true cost, and that letting the market set prices was the necessary correction.

What the tiers received from FAAC

Average annual disbursements, ₦ trillion



Source: figures cited in the article. Chart: The Liberalist.

Removal has also paid out. FAAC disbursements rose from an average of ₦10.14 trillion in 2023 to ₦15.26 trillion in 2024. State allocations climbed from ₦3.58 trillion to ₦5.81 trillion and local governments from ₦2.57 trillion to ₦3.77 trillion, giving the tiers closest to citizens more money to work with. It has coincided with a domestic refining boom too. By February 2026, the Dangote refinery supplied about 92 percent of Nigeria's petrol and imports had fallen sharply. Local refiners can now compete on supply and efficiency instead of against an artificially cheap import.

That is why a restoration would take far more than a presidential announcement. This is not the fuel market of 2023, and the petroleum sector has changed legally and structurally since. Any revived support would have to fit a deregulated downstream and answer who funds it, who administers it and who monitors it. Adedeji with Nigeria's ₦68 trillion budget, an unsustainable subsidy would be swallowing over 76 percent of it.

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TECHNOLOGY & LAW DATA & AI

Nigeria Needs No AI Law. It Already Has One

Section 37 of the NDPA already guards against automated decisions, and the regulator has already shown it will act. What is missing is guidance, not law.

BY ABDULLAH TIJANI

A LOAN APPLICATION in Lagos is decided in under two seconds. An algorithm weighs her repayment history, her phone metadata, even the creditworthiness of the people in her contacts. Low earners get a rejection and high earners get an approval, with no humans in the loop. Nigeria doesn't need a future law to address this, because Section 37 of the NDPA 2023 already gives every Nigerian the right not to be subjected to a decision based solely on automated processing with significant effects. Most companies building AI here either don't know it exists or don't think it applies.

The public debate runs on two scripts: rules must come before responsible development, and a dedicated AI law is on its way. Both ignore that a working framework exists and the NDPC has already used it. Fidelity Bank paid ₦555.8 million over consent and vendor failures. MultiChoice paid ₦766.2 million for invalid consent and unsafe data transfers. Meta paid $32.8 million for behavioural advertising without explicit consent. Behavioural advertising is algorithmic profiling, and the Commission punished it as plain data protection failure.

> *"The gap was never law. It's guidance.*

The GAID goes further and names AI outright. Article 28 makes DPIAs mandatory for profiling and automated decisions. Article 18(1)(f) demands consent for solely automated decisions. Article 43 forces anyone deploying AI to document, test for disparate outcomes, retool, or discard the system if the risk can't be reduced. Article 41 bans discriminatory profiling. This is the current regulatory text.

Some claim data protection law and AI can't coexist, such is a lazy assumption. Section 24 demands that you justify why each category of data is necessary. A credit model trained on relevant repayment records passes, and one that harvests phone contacts because they were available fails. Consent buried in terms of service doesn't rescue anyone, because no one can consent to a use the company hasn't yet defined. The EU's SCHUFA ruling, which treated a credit score as an automated decision, will likely shape how Nigerian regulators read Section 37.

So the fix isn't a new law or a second regulator with overlapping powers. The NDPC should issue one guidance document turning Article 43 into steps a compliance team can follow, using the Fidelity, MultiChoice and Meta cases as worked examples. It should amend the NDPA if AI-specific provisions are needed, and release free DPIA templates for startups that can't afford compliance staff. The gap was never law. It's guidance, and the NDPC has already shown three times that it will act.

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How Proposed Cashew Export Ban Threatens Livelihoods in Rural Areas

Farmers warn that a proposed export ban would leave most of the harvest with nowhere to go.

BY SHEREEFDEEN AHMAD



WHEN NEWS OF a planned ban on raw cashew exports landed on Nurudeen Bare's phone, the 27-year-old Kwara farmer felt his heart jump. Harvest is weeks away, and his household's 140-plus bags are meant to pay labourers, school fees and herbicide for the next season. Cashew is the one crop that settles those bills, because you can't store and eat it like maize or yams. He has seen this before. When Benin buyers stayed away a few years back, a basin that sold for ₦40,000 fell to ₦10,000. "It will significantly cripple our livelihood," he says, "because there will be a surplus that local processors alone cannot buy."

> ***"It will significantly cripple our livelihood, because there will be a surplus that local processors alone cannot buy.***

580,000t	55,750t	95%
grown a year	processing capacity of 15 plants	left to rot, say dealers

The push comes from the Cashew Processors and Packagers Association of Nigeria, which says foreign buyers dominate the farm gate and starve local factories of nuts. Nigeria grows about 580,000 tonnes a year. Its 15 active plants can handle roughly 55,750 tonnes, with another 8,500 tonnes of capacity idle. That is under 10 percent of output. Alhaji Makama Ademu of the Kogi Cashew Dealers association puts it bluntly: ban exports and 95 percent of what farmers grow is left to rot, taking down sub-buyers, licensed agents and merchants with it.

Farmers, the National Cashew Association of Nigeria and economists are lining up against it. Dr Bello Audu of Usmanu Danfodiyo University says a ban contradicts free-market principles and that the government should ask hard questions before restricting exports when the country has no processing capacity. Cash crops are meant for export and earn foreign exchange because the world wants them. Farmers don't oppose processing. They want factories built first in Oyo, Kwara, Kogi and the other growing states, with the market following.

Nigeria has run this experiment. The six-month shea ban of August 2025 left exporters facing contract defaults and legal exposure, shook investor confidence, crashed prices and cut the incomes of the mostly female collectors it was meant to help. Repeated rice import bans and border closures didn't lower prices either. They pushed prices up, sent traders to smuggle through Benin, drained official revenue and hurt consumers. Each time, the stated goal was one thing and the result was the opposite.

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ENERGY OFF-GRID POWER

The Private Solar Microgrids Illuminating Rural Nigeria After Decades in Darkness

Where the national grid never came, private microgrids are changing life for clinics, shops and families.

BY SHEREEFDEEN AHMAD

FOR YEARS, ATTAHIRU Bala, a health worker in Bwen, in northern Nigeria's Baruten region, started each day by charging his headlamps and floor lamps in case an emergency came at night. One night he forgot. A woman needed delivering, and he held his phone in his mouth for light until it fell and shattered. He did the delivery anyway. Then a solar microgrid arrived some years later, with a panel array, batteries, and a local distribution network. "We now have a reliable electricity supply," he says. In a country with one of the world's highest maternal mortality rates, that matters.

86.8m
Nigerians living without power

24%
rural grid access, against 55% nationally

70%+
fall in panel prices in under three years

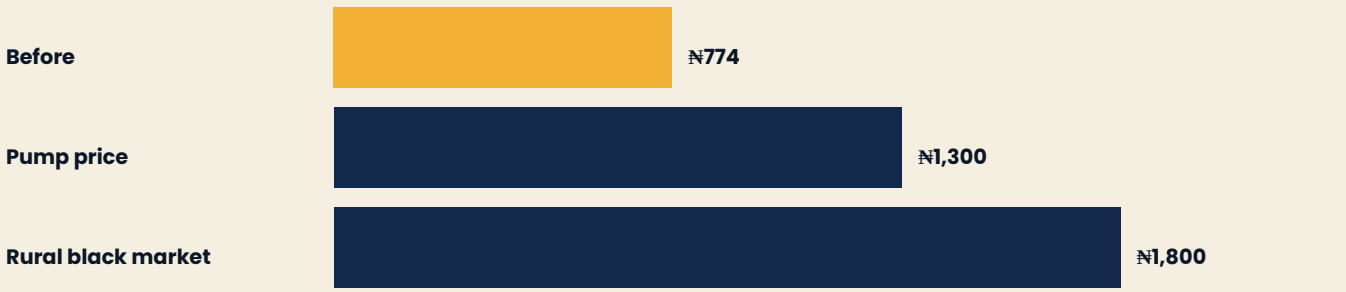
Bwen's story is Nigeria's story at large. Nigeria leads the world in electricity access deficit, with 86.8 million people, nearly 40 percent of the population, living without power. National grid access is 55 percent, but only 24 percent in rural areas, and there are villages where no one has seen a power pole in decades. About 40 percent of Nigeria's primary healthcare centres have no electricity, which means no incubators, no ventilators and no light for childbirth. Across the continent the solar response is accelerating. Africa installed about 4.5 GW of new capacity in 2025, up 54 percent from 2024, helped by panel prices that fell more than 70 percent in under three years.

> *"These communities are not in a temporary situation. They are already living in the energy future the rest of Nigeria is still chasing.*

Fuel prices have done the rest. With Iran's blockade of the Strait of Hormuz, a litre of petrol has gone from ₦774 to ₦1,300, and on the rural black market it reaches ₦1,800. In Gwane, shopkeeper Yunusa Ope used to spend over ₦5,000 on generator fuel for about three hours of power. Now he recharges his prepaid meter for ₦2,000 and runs a fridge for nearly three days. His daily income has gone from roughly ₦15,000 to over ₦100,000, and his shop is the busiest place in the village at iftar. In Bwen, a pharmacist stores vaccines properly and stays open until 11 p.m. Meanwhile more than 80 percent of Nigerian SMEs close within five years, and poor power costs the economy an estimated ₦40 trillion a year.

Price of a litre of petrol

Naira per litre



Source: figures cited in the article. Chart: The Liberalist.

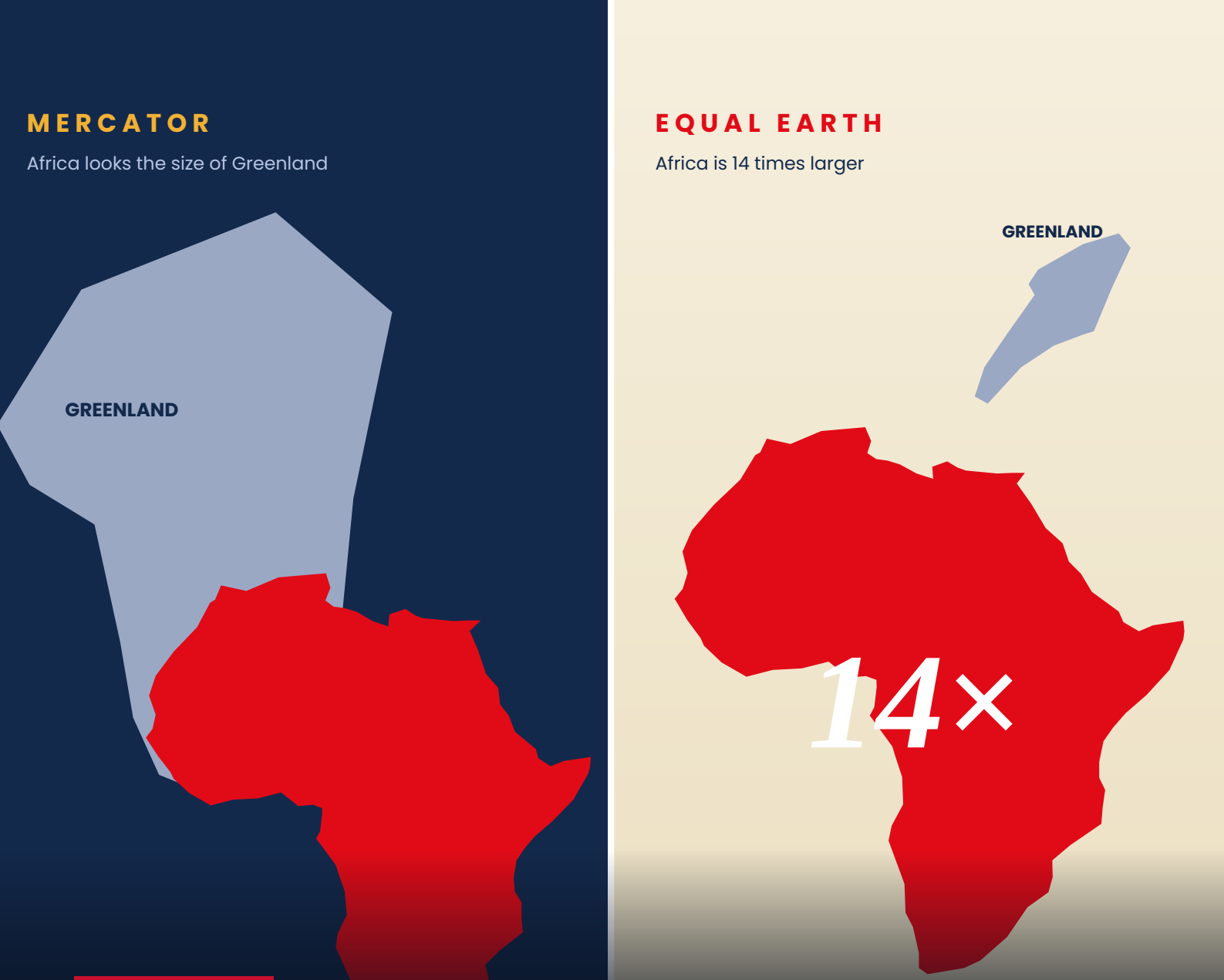
The model works because it doesn't wait on the state. Energy consultant Omono Okonkwo says microgrids treat rural Nigerians as paying customers with real needs, not as a welfare problem, and they can be running in weeks. Havenhill Synergy, PowerGen and Hardrock are already building them, and the Rural Electrification Agency wants to reach 300,000 households and 30,000 businesses. The national grid, built around plans that may never be funded, has never offered these communities anything comparable.

But the success is not without a challenge. In Bukuro, residents say panels and batteries can't keep up as more people join and the hours of usable power are shrinking. Havenhill hasn't answered questions about it. Okonkwo says there is a need to treat microgrids as permanent infrastructure, with regulatory clarity and investment protection. These communities are not in a temporary situation. They are already living in the energy future the rest of Nigeria is still chasing.

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AFRICA & THE WORLD · PERCEPTION & POLITICS

Africa's Cartography Problem Was Never Its Biggest One

A UN vote has corrected the map. The continent's real problems are poverty, trade barriers and visas.

BY ABDULLAH TIJANI

FOR FOUR CENTURIES, cartographers have shrunk Africa. On a Mercator map it looks the size of Greenland, though it is 14 times larger. In September, the UN General Assembly voted 164 to one to nudge the world toward the Equal Earth projection. It's a nice win, but it does nothing for anyone trying to earn a living, and the theory behind the celebration doesn't hold. The theory says Africa is underestimated because it's drawn too small. That is testable, and it fails.

14×
Africa's size against Greenland

51%
intra-African travel needing a visa in advance

14–15%
of Africa's trade is with itself

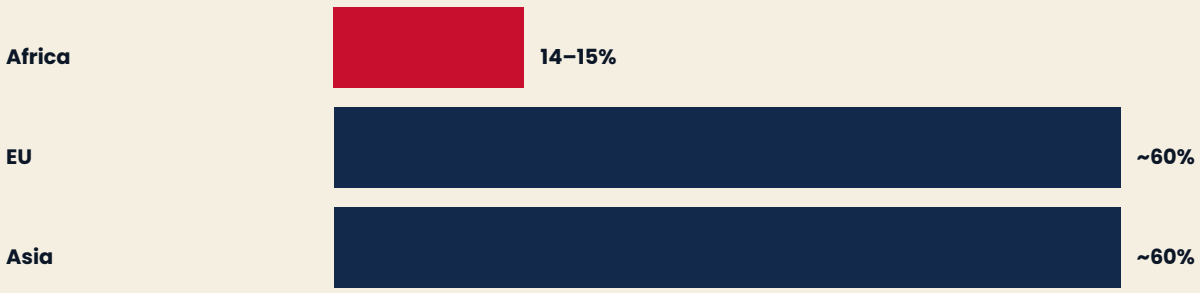
Look at poverty in Africa. About 830 million people live in extreme poverty. A decade ago four in ten of them were African, and today it's seven in ten. Rural sub-Saharan Africa holds a tenth of humanity and over half its extreme poor. Now set that against the continent's minerals. Africa holds roughly 30 percent of the world's proven reserves of energy-transition metals, Congo mines over 70 percent of the world's cobalt, and Guinea sits on a quarter of its bauxite. A continent this endowed should be rich, and the failure is in political economics, not geography.

> *"The world has agreed that Africa is bigger than it looks. Whether Africa acts like it is a giant is a matter of visas and tariffs.*

Then there's the trade Africa isn't doing with itself. Intra-African trade is 14–15 percent of the total, against about 60 percent in the EU and in Asia. Fifty-four countries sit side by side and sell past each other to Europe, China and the Gulf. The AU's free movement protocol has four ratifications and needs 15 for the implementation to take off. The share of intra-African travel requiring a visa in advance has climbed to 51 percent, and Nigeria swapped visa-on-arrival for an e-visa that still demands approval before departure.

Trade within the region, share of total

Intra-regional trade, per cent



Source: figures cited in the article. Chart: The Liberalist.

> *"A continent this endowed should be rich, and the failure is in political economics, not geography.*

Kenya shows the alternative. It sat near the bottom of the visa rankings in 2024, scrapped visas for almost every African in 2025, and jumped to third. It needed no bigger map, just a government willing to open a border. Full AfCFTA implementation could lift exports by almost 29 percent and pull 30 million people out of extreme poverty by 2035, but none of that will happen if the trucks sit idle for want of a visa. The world has agreed that Africa is bigger than it looks. Whether Africa acts like it is a giant is a matter of visas and tariffs, and none of that shows up on any map.

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ENERGY OIL & GAS

The New Regulations Fuelling Growth in Nigeria's Petroleum Industry

Faster approvals and clearer rules are bringing investors back, and output with them.

BY USMAN YAKUBU USMAN

OLIVER QUINN, CEO of Meren Energy, said recently that Nigeria's reforms have restored his confidence. His company has put about $11 billion into the country's oil sector over two decades and is now expanding. That is what predictable regulation looks like when it starts to work. In March, the NUPRC cut the time to revive a dormant oil well from two to six weeks of paperwork down to a few hours. For an industry that has long been held back by administrative bottlenecks, that is a real shift, and it arrives with crude nearing $100 a barrel.

$11bn	15 days	+40%
invested by Meren over two decades	contract approval timeline	rise in output since 2025

The reforms go further. Regulators have updated the upstream measurement rules, the significant discoveries regulations and the gas flaring regulations, and introduced the Financial Approval Threshold. The 2024 Presidential Directive on Petroleum Sector Reform compressed contract approvals at NNPC and NUIMS, with a 15-day timeline from submission across pre-qualification, technical, commercial and final stages. Investors no longer have to wait out an open-ended process.

> *"That is what predictable regulation looks like when it starts to work.*

The payoff has followed. In April, the sector secured a $10 million investment commitment. NUPRC chief Oritsemeyiwa Eyesan says predictable rules cut investment risk and helped partners reach multi-billion-dollar final investment decisions. Analysts credit the commission's light-touch approach, which trades bureaucratic burden for long-term growth.

The framework also protects what investors build. The Domestic Gas Delivery Regulations set clear obligations for the domestic market. The significant discoveries regulations let licensees hold areas of major discovery for a set period under section 78 of the Act, so they can explore and develop them properly instead of racing against a clock.

Before this, the industry was bleeding from oil theft, vandalism and, above all, little investor interest. Output fell to 1.58 million barrels a day in 2025. Under the new rules it has climbed to 1.84 million in 2026, a rise of over 40 percent.

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INFRASTRUCTURE PRIVATISATION

How Nigeria Is Turning to Privatisation to Improve Airports

With only three of 22 federal airports paying their way, the government is turning to private capital.

BY HAFSAT SALIHU



NIGERIA IS HANDING its airports to private investors. Enugu's Akanu Ibiam International is being concessioned, and proposals exist for Lagos, Abuja, Port Harcourt and Kano. Aviation Minister Festus Keyamo says the government keeps ownership while private partners provide long-term financing, technical expertise and commercial management. The state can't afford to keep doing it alone. FAAN manages 22 federal airports and only three earn enough to sustain themselves. The rest wait on annual budget allocations, which means upgrades hinge on whatever politics leaves over.

The country has done this before, and it worked. The 1988 Privatisation and Commercialisation Act began the shift, and after 1999 more than 140 state enterprises were sold or concessioned. Telecoms is the best proof. Before GSM arrived in 2001, Nigeria had fewer than 500,000 working lines for over 120 million people, and NITEL was unreliable, costly and out of reach. After the NCC auctioned licences at $285 million each, the country now has over 170 million subscriptions, and telecoms contribute 13 to 14 percent of GDP, with fintech, digital banking and millions of jobs behind it.

> *"Private operators answer to customers and contracts in a way a budget line never does.*

On the Nigerian ports, the 2006 landlord model kept infrastructure public and gave terminal operations to private concessionaires, who brought cargo equipment, expanded terminals and technology. Congestion, bad access roads and customs delays persist, but productivity jumped. Aviation has its own precedent. After fire destroyed the old domestic terminal in 2003, Bi-Courtney built Murtala Muhammed Airport's Terminal Two under a Build-Operate-Transfer deal. Nearly two decades of litigation followed, yet the terminal kept running, and the recent settlement helps restore investor confidence.

The airport problem is the one that has dogged state-run infrastructure for decades. Depend on unpredictable budgets and inability to meet international standards. Private operators answer to customers and contracts in a way a budget line never does.

Workers are nervous, and Keyamo has tried to reassure them. "It will no longer be business as usual," he says. The airport will be privately managed with a focus on efficiency, accountability and service, and those who do their jobs diligently "have nothing to fear." The test is whether the concessions are clean and the disputes don't drag on for another twenty years.

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ECONOMY TOURISM & INVESTMENT

Nigeria Is Missing Out on Tourism, Investment with Restrictive Visa Policy

Nigeria is Africa's most populous nation and makes entry hard, costing it visitors and investment.

BY HAUWA NDAFOGI TAUHID

NIGERIA IS AFRICA'S most populous nation, and it makes entry hard. President Tinubu announced in Kigali that Rwandans would get 30-day visa-free entry for tourism, business and official visits. It sounds progressive, but it removes one country from a long list. ECOWAS citizens have always come in freely, though that comes from decades-old regional agreements, not a commitment to continental free movement. Everyone else must use the e-visa system, which was meant to simplify things and has become a source of frustration.

$50–150
advertised e-visa fee, before add-ons

$170
visa-on-arrival biometric fee since 2023

3.6%
tourism's share of Nigeria's GDP

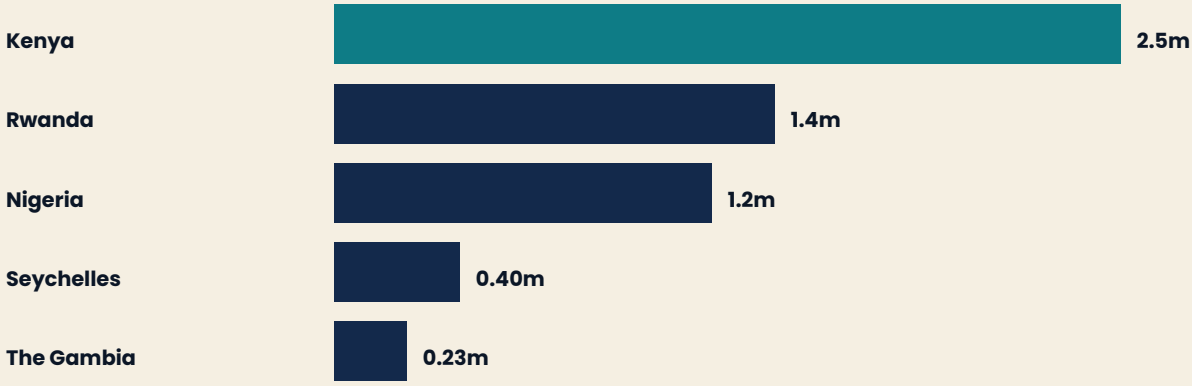
A German consultant who asked not to be named applied well ahead of his trip to a Lagos conference. Weeks of silence followed, emails went unanswered and the listed phone number never connected. When a reply came, his travel date had passed.

> *"It sounds progressive, but it removes one country from a long list.*

The price compounds it. The advertised fees of $50 to $150 are only base charges, with processing, biometric and government fees added on, often varying by nationality. The Africa Visa Openness Index warns against treating visas as "an income stream for national accounts." Nigeria's e-visa reforms lifted it to 6th in 2024, but it doubled its visa-on-arrival biometric fee to $170 in 2023, and it has since slid down the rankings.

Visitor arrivals, millions

Latest figures cited



Source: figures cited in the article. Chart: The Liberalist.

In comparison, Rwanda, which opened to all Africans, welcomed over 1.4 million visitors and earned more than $620 million. Seychelles drew about 398,000 arrivals and over $1.2 billion in 2025. Kenya earned roughly $3.8 billion and The Gambia hosted about 230,000 visitors. Nigeria recorded around 1.2 million arrivals, up 20 percent, but Kenya drew about 2.5 million. Tourism supplies about 3.6 percent of Nigeria's GDP, against 46 percent in Seychelles.

Trade Minister Jumoke Oduwole criticised border restrictions at the Biashara Afrika Forum in Lomé, and within 24 hours Togo opened to all Africans. Interior Minister Olubunmi Tunji-Ojo defends visas as security, pointing to Interpol watchlist hits at entry points. But IATA says restrictive visas suppress air demand and weaken regional connectivity, and a country that wants to be Africa's commercial hub pays for that most when it bars business travellers.

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AGRICULTURE INVESTIGATION

How Nigeria's Shea Export Ban Tore Away Rural Women's Livelihoods

A six-month export ban was meant to force local processing. It has crashed prices and hit women collectors hardest.

BY ABDULLAH TIJANI

BEFORE SUNRISE, AISHA Abubakar used to leave her home in Okuta, Kwara state, with an empty sack and a sense of certainty. Shea season meant school fees paid, medical bills settled, and a few months each year when women like her earned money of their own. Then, in August 2025, the government banned raw shea nut exports for six months, saying it would force local processing and lift industry earnings from $65 million to $300 million. Across the shea belt, the ban has driven prices down, scattered buyers and left women collectors and small traders to absorb the loss. "The season was everything for us," Aisha says. "Now, it's no longer the case."

40%
of the world's shea grows in Nigeria

33%
price fall within weeks

18%
of harvested nuts processed at home

The policy ran ahead of reality. Nigeria grows roughly 40 percent of the world's shea, about 500,000 tonnes a year, yet captures under 1 percent of the global products market. But local processors run at only 35 to 50 percent of installed capacity, and just 18 percent of harvested nuts are processed at home. Even Africa's largest shea plant, in Mokwa, with 30,000 tonnes of annual capacity, can swallow less than 10 percent of national output. Cut off the exporters and the surplus has nowhere to go. Prices fell about 33 percent within weeks. In Okuta, a basin that fetched ₦50,000 in 2024 now goes for about ₦18,000.

> *"Shea was our own money. Money we didn't have to beg our husbands for. Now, we are husband-dependent again.*

Over 90 percent of shea pickers are women, and the crash moves down the chain until it lands on them. Benin-bound buyers vanished and Yoruba traders pay less. Aggregators like Mufeed Alade bought high, stored, and sold at a loss before quitting. Isma'il Biliaminu put his national service savings into nuts hoping to fund a master's degree and now sits on unsold sacks. Processor Mohammad Jagaba says export orders paid two to three times the domestic price, and bags that once cost ₦60,000 now sell for ₦20,000 to ₦25,000. Women like Safiyat Jibril hold four 100-kilogram sacks at home, waiting for a price that may never return. "If there is no food in the house, you must sell at a loss," Jagaba says.

A basin of shea nuts in Okuta

Price per basin, naira



Source: figures cited in the article. Chart: The Liberalist.

Economist Farouk Bibi-Farouk says moving up the value chain is the right goal, and a government that wants it has the right instinct. But markets don't run on instinct. Value addition can't be forced by restriction. Build strong local demand and decent margins, and processors will absorb the raw material without a ban, leaving nothing to export. Nigeria reversed the sequence, banned first and built capacity never. And if foreign buyers settle on other suppliers, the damage outlasts the ban.

What women lose is more than income. "Shea was our own money," Safiyat says. "Money we didn't have to beg our husbands for. Now, we are husband-dependent again." Gender expert Alu Mary Ojima says independent income is bargaining power at home, and that no one weighed gender impact in designing the policy, though Nigeria's own National Gender Policy requires an assessment where women dominate a sector. The question is whether reform expands women's livelihoods or quietly erases them in the name of value addition. The Agriculture Ministry did not respond to The Liberalist's questions.

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86.8m

Nigerians living without electricity

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₦18,000

a basin of shea nuts now, down from ₦50,000

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1.84m

barrels a day in 2026, up from 1.58m

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94 of 180

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$59.55bn

Africa's trade deficit with China in eight months

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cars built by Morocco in 2025

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₦766.2m

paid by MultiChoice to the data regulator

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580,000t

of cashew grown in Nigeria a year

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$2–5m

what EU AI Act compliance costs a mid-size firm

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TRADE INDUSTRIAL POLICY

How Morocco's Free Market Policies Fuel Its Automotive Boom

Low taxes, free-trade zones and open doors helped Morocco overtake South Africa as the continent's car maker.

BY USMAN YAKUBU USMAN

MOROCCO IS NOW Africa's leading car maker, and it took the crown from South Africa. In 2025 it built one million cars, up about 79 percent from 559,645 in 2024. "We didn't export one car 15 years ago," says Industry Minister Ryad Mezzour. "Now it's the first exporting sector in the country." Low taxes on manufacturers and an open door for foreign capital built it.

1m	90%	180,000
cars built in 2025, up 79%	of Renaults made are exported	jobs in the sector

The 2014-2020 Acceleration Plan performed the magic. It created automotive free trade zones, including Tangier Automotive City, and Renault and Stellantis moved in. Manufacturers were exempted from tax and customs duties, and Morocco signed free trade agreements with Europe, the United States, Turkey and the UAE, so its cars reach big markets cheaply. The state also built vocational training institutes in Casablanca, Kenitra and Tangier and donated land to the sector. Every piece points the same way. Today Morocco exports 90 percent of the Renaults it makes, to more than 68 countries.

> *"We didn't export one car 15 years ago.*

South Africa is a cautionary comparison. It sold 596,818 vehicles in 2025, roughly half Morocco's output. Infrastructure decay, high vehicle taxes and customs duties, thin government support and dependence on a few markets like the US, which then imposed heavy tariffs, all hurt. Justin Barnes of GIBS says South Africa's domestic market is now smaller than it was in 2006, and its infrastructure has deteriorated just as other emerging regions improved.

The result for Morocco is jobs, with over 180,000 people employed in the sector and Renault targeting 7,500 more by 2030. Foreign exchange comes with it. Moroccan policy shows that a country doesn't need to protect an industry into existence. It can lower the cost of building one and let investors do the rest.

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TRADE AFRICA & CHINA

What China's Zero-Tariff Policy Means for African Nations

Beijing has scrapped tariffs for 53 African countries. What the continent sells will decide who gains.

BY SHEREEFDEEN AHMAD

CHINA HAS SCRAPPED import tariffs for 53 African countries. Xi Jinping announced it at the African Union summit in Ethiopia, and the framework was meant to start on 1 May. Only Eswatini is left out, because it recognises Taiwan. Xi says it will "provide new opportunities for African development." China forgoes about $1.4 billion in tariff revenue, and it buys itself a great deal of goodwill.

53
African countries get zero tariffs

$59.55bn
Africa's deficit in eight months

$1.4bn
tariff revenue China forgoes

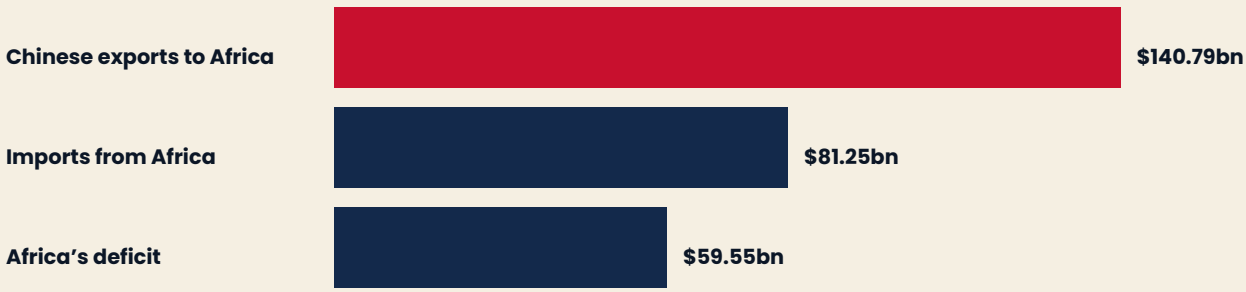
The trade is badly lopsided. Between January and August 2025, China-Africa trade topped $222 billion. Chinese exports to Africa jumped about 24 percent to $140.79 billion, while imports from Africa crept up two percent to $81.25 billion. Africa's deficit with China hit $59.55 billion in eight months, nearly the full-year 2024 figure of $61.93 billion. Africa sells crude, copper, cobalt and iron ore and buys manufactured goods. Duty-free access already covered 33 least developed countries, but the new scheme extends it nearly continent-wide.

> *"Zero tariffs matter only if Africa has something to sell.*

Zero tariffs matter only if Africa has something to sell. Cheaper entry makes exporters more competitive, lets them win new buyers and take market share from rivals still paying duties. Yun Sun of the Global Economy and Development programme says firms may set up processing in Africa to enter the Chinese market cheaply, bringing investment and skills training. That is the real prize. If the continent keeps shipping raw material, the deficit will barely move.

China–Africa trade, January–August 2025

US$ billion



Source: figures cited in the article. Chart: The Liberalist.

The timing is no accident. Trump's global tariffs sent African governments looking for other partners, and the lapse of AGOA in September hurt exporters like Kenya, which had already struck its own deal sending 98 percent of its goods to China duty-free. Trump has since signed a retroactive AGOA renewal, but many see Beijing's offer as the steadier one. China is already Nigeria's largest trading partner, with trade above ₦17 trillion in 2024.

> *"If the continent keeps shipping raw material, the deficit will barely move.*

António Guterres, the Secretary General of the United Nations, says Africa cannot be penalised with restrictive trade policies while it struggles with enormous economic difficulties. Tariff cuts are a door. Whether Africa walks through with finished goods or with more ore is up to African governments and the businesses they let operate.

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AFRICA & THE WORLD FREE MOVEMENT

The Hope of Visa-Free Africa Meets New Obstacles

Africa is more open than a decade ago, but e-visas are quietly rebuilding borders online.

BY SHEREEFDEEN AHMAD

AFRICA HASN'T GIVEN up on a visa-free continent, but the road just got harder. The 2025 Africa Visa Openness Index shows the continent opening its borders and then undoing its own progress. Of 54 countries, only 11 improved their scores, nine slipped, and 34 changed nothing. Rwanda and The Gambia remain the most open countries. Kenya jumped to third by dropping ETA requirements for citizens of 52 African countries. Benin fell from first to fourth after imposing visas on five African nationalities. Seychelles plunged from second to 53rd after introducing an ETA.

51%
of intra-African trips need a visa in advance

28.2%
now visa-free, up from 20% in 2016

57%
of countries run e-visa platforms

The culprit is technology. Governments are replacing visa-on-arrival with e-visas and electronic travel authorisations, which feel modern but still demand approval before departure, and the Index scores them as visas. So Africans now

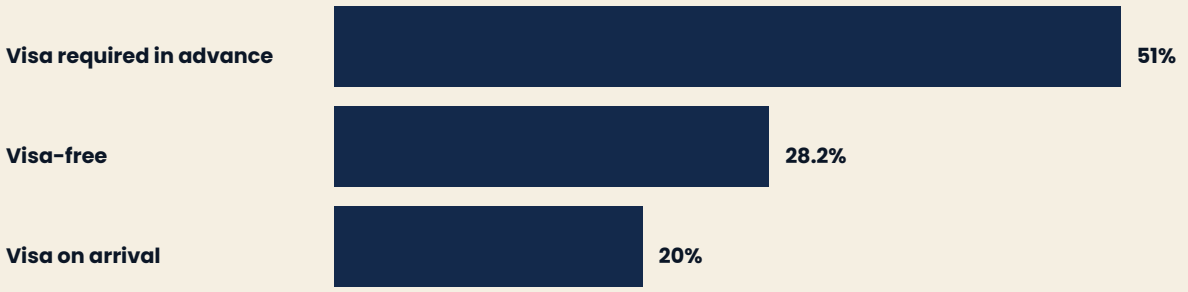
need a visa in advance in 51 percent of intra-African travel scenarios, up from 47 percent, while visa-on-arrival has dropped to 20 percent, its lowest since the Index began. Guinea-Bissau, Mauritania, Nigeria and Somalia all made the switch in 2025, affecting 162 routes. Nigeria fell from 6th to 32nd because it replaced visa-on-arrival with e-visa.

> “
>
> ***Full of promise but in need of accelerated action.***

But it’s not all gory, especially if we consider where we’re coming from. Over ten years, 39 countries have improved, and visa-free travel now makes up 28.2 percent of intra-African travels, up from 20 percent in 2016, a 40 percent gain. Benin climbed from 31st in 2016 to become one of the continent’s liberal destinations, and The Gambia, Rwanda and Kenya have become the leaders. Kenya’s reversal is the year’s best lesson. It fell to 46th in 2024 when its ETA was classed as an e-visa, then exempted nearly every African and rocketed to third.

How Africans travel within Africa

Share of intra-African travel scenarios, per cent



Source: figures cited in the article. Chart: The Liberalist.

The risk is that digital systems become a new border. Thirty-one countries, 57 percent of the continent, now run e-visa platforms, up from nine in 2016. They cut paperwork and help security screening, but badly designed ones bring internet access problems, delays, fraud, and extra costs. E-visas can be a stepping stone to genuine visa-free travel, but only if governments keep walking.

> “
>
> ***Unless it complements liberalisation rather than replacing it, Africa trades physical borders for digital ones.***

Africa is more open than it was a decade ago and has never had more visa-free travel than today. But technology alone cannot deliver the African Union’s vision of free movement. Unless it complements liberalisation rather than replacing it, Africa trades physical borders for digital ones. Dr Joy Kategekwa of the African Development Bank describes ten years of the Index as “full of promise but in need of accelerated action.”

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POLITICS PRESS FREEDOM

Inside Africa's Press Freedom Crisis

Global press freedom is at a 25-year low, and African governments are using criminal law to silence reporters.

BY ABDULLATEEF SEBIOTIMO

AFRICA IS A hard place to be a journalist, and getting harder. RSF's 2026 World Press Freedom Index shows global press freedom at a 25-year low, with 94 of 180 countries in the "difficult" or "very serious" categories for the first time. South Africa and Namibia still lead the continent, but the broader trend is repression. The legal indicator fell furthest, with 60 percent of countries seeing their legal environment worsen. African governments now use criminal charges, cybercrime acts and anti-terrorism laws to jail reporters and bankrupt newsrooms. In Kenya, abuse of court processes accounts for 24 percent of the tactics used against journalists, and vague, overbroad legislation for 29 percent.

94 of 180
countries "difficult" or worse

60%
saw their legal environment worsen

180th
Eritrea, for the third year

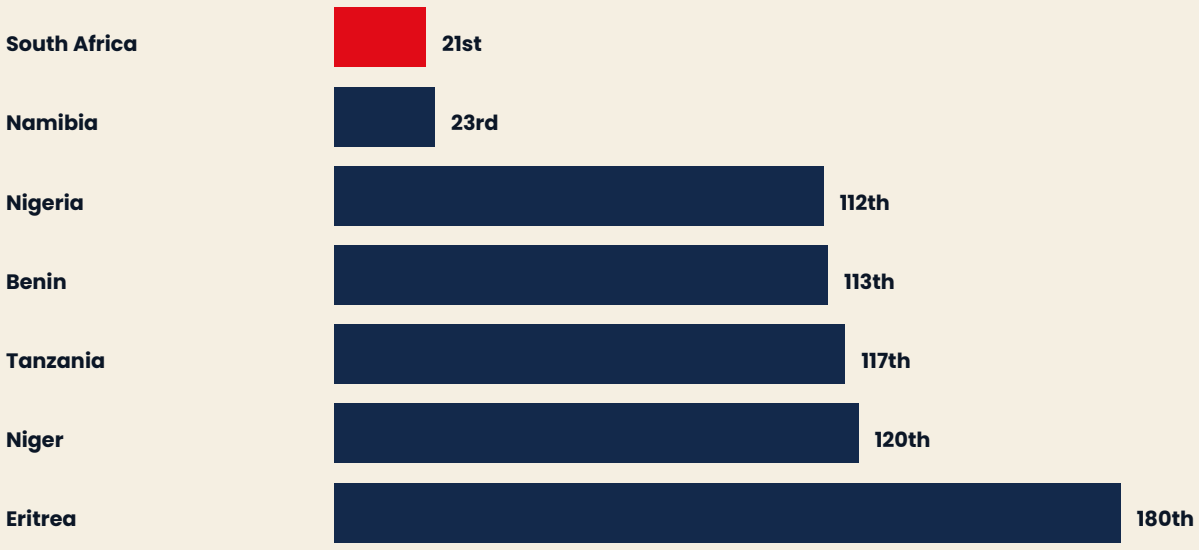
> *"A restricted press does not enhance security, it conceals insecurity.*

Eritrea is the worst place at 180th for the third consecutive year and holds the continent's largest prison for journalists. It has banned independent media since 2001, and Eri-TV is a propaganda arm of the government. In the Sahel, Niger fell from 83rd to 120th after a coup. The junta suspended Canal 3 TV for airing a show that rated ministers' performance, then arrested editor-in-chief Seyni Amadou for disturbing public order.

Even supposed democracies are bending the law. Benin dropped from 92nd to 113th under its Digital Code and the heavy hand of the regulator, which suspended Bénin Web TV and Crystal News. Tanzania fell from 95th to 117th, and police arrested reporters Mariam Shaban and Jenifer Gilla for documenting a banned opposition protest. Nigeria climbed from 122nd to 112th, but RSF still calls it one of West Africa's most dangerous countries for journalists, who are regularly monitored, attacked and arbitrarily arrested.

RSF 2026 rank, of 180

Lower is better



Source: figures cited in the article. Chart: The Liberalist.

South Africa (21st) and Namibia (23rd) show what works. South Africa's Constitutional Court ordered changes in 2021 to the law on intercepting communications to protect journalists' phone conversations and sources. Namibia passed an access to information law meant to enable investigative reporting. Free presses survive where courts and statutes protect them from the state.

Dr Gbemiga Bamidele, convener of the Society for Journalism Enhancement Initiative, has urged governments to stop hiding behind national security. "A restricted press does not enhance security, it conceals insecurity," he says.

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POLITICS DEMOCRACY

Freedom Is Fading Fast Across Africa

From Sudan's war to Tanzania's tainted election, political rights and civil liberties are declining across Africa.

BY SHEREEFDEEN AHMAD

FREEDOM HOUSE'S 2026 report finds global freedom fell for the twentieth consecutive year in 2025, and Africa shows it from both ends: states that have collapsed, and democracies quietly eroding. Sudan scores 1 out of 100. War between rival armed factions has killed civilians, displaced millions and gutted state institutions, and it is Africa's deadliest place for journalists, with nine media workers killed in 2025, according to CPJ.

20th
straight year of global decline

1/100
Sudan's score

−8
Guinea-Bissau, the steepest drop anywhere

Coups have turned into long-term rule. Burkina Faso lost five more points under military rule since 2022, as security forces and allied militias committed mass violence. Mali, once a democratic success story, has had multiple coups and indefinitely postponed elections, and now ranks among the world's worst. Guinea-Bissau fell eight points, the largest single-year drop anywhere, after a coup disrupted its election and ballots were destroyed. In the Sahel, insecurity feeds coups and coups feed repression.

> *Africa's free societies can't count on being rescued, and they'll have to defend freedom themselves.*

Tanzania lost seven points and remained "Not Free" after an election that excluded opposition candidates, restricted media coverage and met protesters with violence. The UN says hundreds were killed around last October's vote. The government kept the formal machinery of elections while draining it of competition. Kenya's press freedom is also under pressure, with the law increasingly weaponised against public-interest reporting. In Nigeria, 86 attacks on press freedom were recorded in 2025, and not one was investigated or prosecuted.

Change in Freedom House score

Points, 2025



Source: figures cited in the article. Chart: The Liberalist.

There are bright spots. Malawi moved from "Partly Free" to "Free" on credible elections, more efficient judicial independence and a peaceful transfer of power. Gabon gained points after political changes brought modest reforms, though it remains "Not Free." Progress is possible where leaders commit to the rule of law. Meanwhile, censorship, legal harassment, surveillance and politically motivated prosecutions have driven the steepest declines in media freedom, expression and due process over two decades.

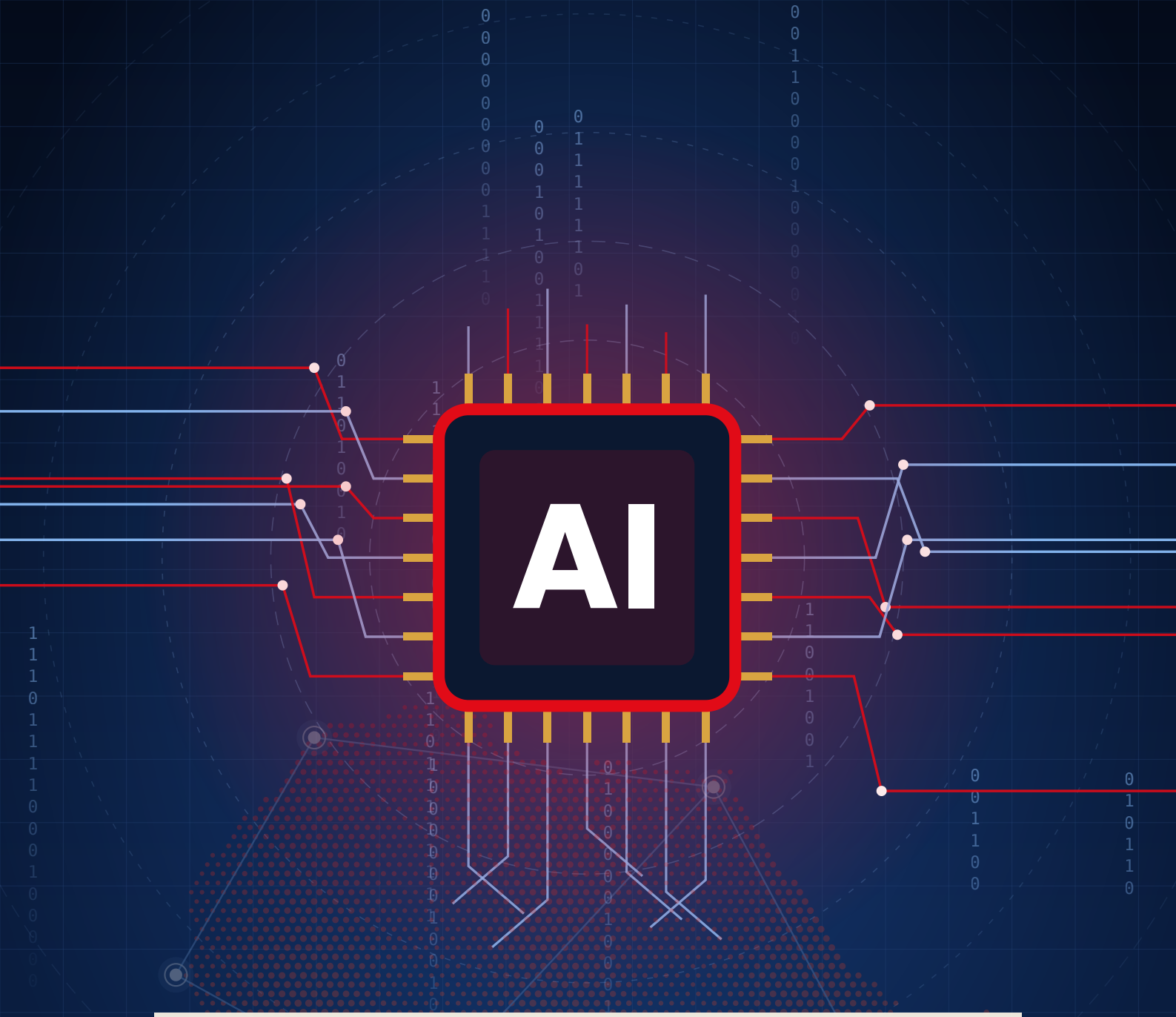
> *The government kept the formal machinery of elections while draining it of competition.*

The money is drying up as well. Democracies have cut support for civil society and independent media through foreign aid cuts, weakening watchdogs in countries where such backing mattered. The report's warning is that democratic resilience will depend on stronger coordination among free countries, as authoritarian states deepen their own cooperation. Africa's free societies can't count on being rescued, and they'll have to defend freedom themselves.

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