

AI for Foundational Learning in Africa

From Promise to Practice at Scale

Working Group Recommendations

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Our context is different

Some countries are pulling AI out of schools - concerned about screen time and effects on critical thinking.

In Africa, the use cases are not the same. We are not replacing teachers with screens.

We are talking about a chatbot that helps a teacher pronounce sounds in Wolof. About accelerating the production of teaching materials that don't exist yet. In the context of reforms like MOHEBS in Senegal, where new resources need to be produced at scale, AI is not a luxury - it's a tool to meet an urgent need.

Recommendation 1

Start from the classroom - design with teachers

The most convincing tools solved real problems - not the most sophisticated ones.

Before asking "What can AI do?", ask "What do teachers and children actually need?"

In Rwanda, a minister was asked how to introduce AI in classrooms. She said: my opinion doesn't matter - have you spoken to teachers?

In Senegal, teachers told us they feel confident using a tool when the content is validated by the Ministry. Without teacher trust, nothing scales.

Recommendation 2

Design for equity - reach those who need it most

AI should not reinforce existing inequalities. It should help reduce them.

A concern was raised during our discussions: some tools may benefit children who are already doing well, while leaving those in difficulty further behind. That is the opposite of what we need.

AI should give every child a chance. That means designing for out-of-school children who need catch-up. For languages beyond the most documented ones. For contexts where access is hardest.

If AI widens the gap instead of closing it, we will have missed the point.

Recommendation 3

Invest in African languages

AI will only be relevant for foundational learning if it works in the languages children actually speak.

Today, African languages are poorly documented digitally. The data is not there.

As one panelist said: we missed the bus with the last wave of technology. We cannot afford to miss it again with AI.

Our call to funders and governments: invest in building the linguistic infrastructure that AI needs. For multilingual foundational learning, this is a prerequisite.

Recommendation 4

Governments must lead - sovereignty and safeguards

When it comes to AI in education, governments must be in the driver's seat.

That means setting clear rules on what data can be used, where it is stored, and who controls it. As one panelist said: a government should be able to say that all data will be governed under its own rules, on its own infrastructure.

Content must be validated. Quality must be guaranteed. We must avoid dependence on commercial solutions that are not grounded in our contexts.

Instead: invest in locally designed, locally governed solutions that countries can own and sustain.

Recommendation 5

Quality before scale - and be honest about costs

Scaling a tool that hasn't been properly tested is not just ineffective - it's risky.

Tools must be easy to use, contextually relevant, high quality, and validated.

Building and testing good AI tools is expensive. The question is not just "Does it work?" but "Can we afford to do it well?" If we can't, the answer should be: not yet.

The end goal

Impact on learning

Behind all of these recommendations, one question we must never lose sight of: does it improve learning?

Not engagement. Not usage. Not downloads. Learning.

There are four levels of evaluation (Agency Funds):: does the model work? Does the product engage users? Does it change behavior? And ultimately - does it improve learning outcomes?

We must keep pushing toward that top level. If an AI tool doesn't improve learning, it doesn't matter how innovative it is.

Five recommendations

1. Start from the classroom - design with teachers
2. Design for equity - reach those who need it most
3. Invest urgently in African languages
4. Governments must lead - sovereignty and safeguards
5. Quality before scale - be honest about costs

All in service of one goal: better learning for children.