

YOUTH AI SURVEY 2026

WORK, STUDY & LEISURE IN THE
AGE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

ZAMBIA

COUNTRY POLICY BRIEF

This policy brief presents country-specific findings from the Youth AI Survey 2026, a multi-country study examining how young people aged 18-35 use, experience, and think about artificial intelligence. Conducted globally by Restless Development, the University of Cambridge Centre for Human-Inspired Artificial Intelligence, and Makerere University, the survey collected 1,864 responses from young people, primarily in Africa and South Asia, with the United Kingdom serving as a high-income country comparator.

This brief is intended for national governments, in-country NGO partners, international funders, technology companies, and youth organisations working in Zambia. It draws on country-level data to surface actionable findings and recommendations within the Zambia context.

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Funded by: International Science Partnerships Fund (ISPF) / DSIT UK Government · European
Research Council (EQUATE)

Suggested citation: Restless Development, University of Cambridge CHAI, and Makerere University. (2026). Work, Study & Leisure in the Age of Artificial Intelligence: Youth AI Survey 2026 - Zambia Policy Brief. <https://doi.org/10.17863/CAM.130137>

1. INTRODUCTION & COUNTRY CONTEXT

Country Context

Zambia's young population presents a significant opportunity to harness artificial intelligence (AI) for economic growth, innovation, and social development. With a population of approximately 21.9 million in 2025 (United Nations, 2025), the country continues to expand digital connectivity through investments in mobile broadband and digital public infrastructure, although access remains uneven across rural and urban areas. Internet penetration reached 72.1% in 2025, while 4G mobile broadband coverage exceeded 90% of the population, reflecting significant progress in digital connectivity (International Telecommunication Union [ITU], 2025).

However, affordability, smartphone ownership, and digital skills remain important barriers, particularly for rural communities and low-income households. According to the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) and the Broadband Commission for Sustainable Development, affordable connectivity is defined as entry-level broadband costing less than 2% of monthly Gross National Income (GNI) per capita. In Zambia, the cost of an entry-level mobile broadband basket was estimated at 3.18% of monthly GNI per capita in 2025, indicating that internet access remains unaffordable for many young people despite improvements in network coverage (ITU, 2025). Mining, agriculture, services, and an expanding digital economy continue to underpin Zambia's economic development, with growing demand for digital and AI-related skills across sectors (ITU, 2025).

Recognising the strategic importance of emerging technologies, the Government of Zambia has accelerated its digital transformation agenda through the National Digital Transformation Strategy (2023-2027) and the National Artificial Intelligence Strategy (2024-2026) (Government of Zambia, 2023; Government of Zambia, 2024). These frameworks seek to strengthen digital infrastructure, improve public service delivery, promote innovation, and prepare citizens with the skills needed for an increasingly digital economy. At the same time, generative AI tools such as ChatGPT, Gemini, Microsoft Copilot, and Meta AI are becoming increasingly accessible to young people through smartphones and mobile internet, creating new opportunities for learning, entrepreneurship, and productivity.

This policy brief presents findings from 177 young people aged 18-35 surveyed in Zambia between 4 and 22 March 2026 as part of the Youth AI Survey 2026, a multi-country study led by Restless Development, the University of Cambridge Centre for Human-Inspired Artificial Intelligence, and Makerere University. By examining how young people use, perceive, and experience AI, the findings provide timely evidence to inform Zambia's digital transformation agenda and ensure that AI contributes to inclusive, youth-centred development.



"As a young person from Zambia, I believe AI has the power to transform our societies if it is developed and used inclusively. My hope is that AI will empower young people with knowledge, innovation, and opportunities rather than deepen inequalities or replace human potential."

24-YEAR-OLD, FEMALE, PERI-URBAN, ZAMBIA, VOLUNTEER.

2. ABOUT THE RESPONDENTS

The survey included 177 respondents, with a slightly higher proportion of females (52.5%) compared to males (47.5%).

The sample was predominantly young adults, with the largest age group aged 24-29 years (48.3%). This was followed by respondents aged 18-23 years (34.5%), while 15.8% were 30-35 years. A small proportion (1.7%) did not specify their age.

Respondents were largely based in urban settings (59.3%). Rural residents accounted for 25.4%, while 14.1% lived in peri-urban locations. A small proportion (1.1%) did not specify their residence.

In terms of education, the sample reflects relatively high educational attainment. Just under half (40.7%) reported high school as their highest level of education. A further 30.5% had attained a bachelor's degree or postgraduate qualification, while 11.9% held a diploma or advanced diploma. Smaller proportions had completed a graduate diploma or certificate (9%), vocational or technical training (6.2%), or primary education (1.1%). A very small proportion (0.6%) did not specify their education level.

Half of the respondents (54.2%) were either studying, employed, or both. Full-time employment accounted for 16.4%, students for 13%, those actively seeking work for 11.3%, and self-employment for 4%. Volunteering was also prominent across responses, either as a primary or additional activity, reflecting the blended nature of youth engagement in education, work, and civic participation.

Overall, the sample reflects a predominantly urban and relatively well-educated youth population, largely concentrated in the 24-29 age bracket, and actively engaged across education, employment, job-seeking, and volunteering pathways.

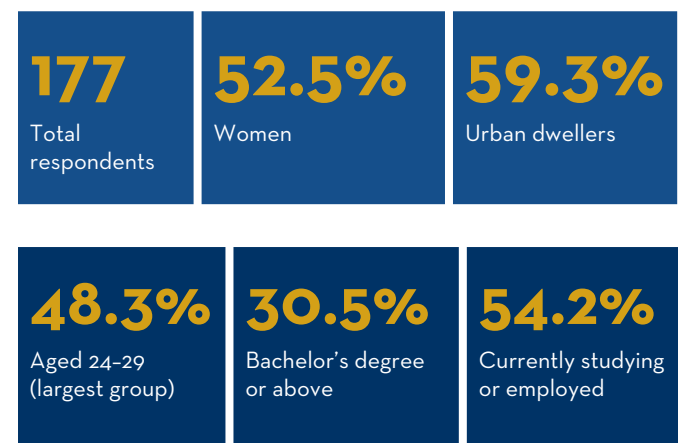
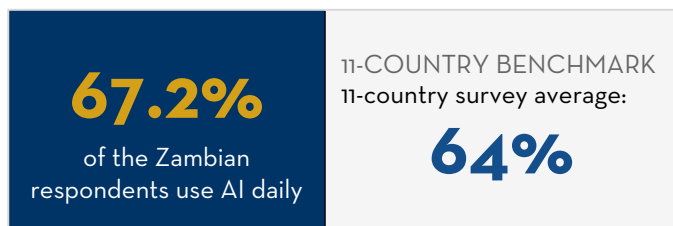


Figure 1.1 Our respondents at a glance



3. HOW YOUNG PEOPLE IN ZAMBIA USE AI



Key Findings: AI Use Patterns

Primary use: AI is primarily used for learning and productivity.

AI use among young people in Zambia is strongly centred on education and work. The most common use is education and learning (61.6%), followed by work-related tasks (54.2%). AI is also widely used for social media (44.6%), while health information (27.1%) and entertainment (25.4%) are less common applications. Overall, the findings suggest that young people see AI primarily as a practical tool to support learning, productivity and everyday tasks rather than entertainment alone.

Income gap: AI use has not yet translated into widespread income generation.

Despite high levels of engagement with AI for learning and work, only 10.7% of respondents report using AI to generate income, below the 11-country average of 14%. This suggests that although AI is becoming integrated into education and productivity, relatively few young people are currently converting these skills into direct economic opportunities.

Rural lag: AI use is more concentrated in urban areas.

A geographical divide is evident in AI engagement. All respondents who reported never using AI were from rural areas, while no urban or peri-urban respondents reported non-use. Urban respondents also account for the largest share of daily AI users (62.2%), compared with 22.7% from rural areas and 15.1% from peri-urban areas. This pattern suggests that frequent AI use is more concentrated in urban settings, reflecting differences in digital access and opportunities.

Gender gap: Gender differences in AI use are modest.

Gender differences in AI use are relatively small. Females were slightly more likely to report education-focused AI use, with 16.1% reporting education as a primary use compared to 13.1% of males. Conversely, men were marginally more likely to report work-focused AI use (6.0%) than females (5.4%). Overall, the differences across AI use patterns are modest, suggesting that AI adoption and application are broadly similar among females and males in Zambia.

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"AI has become part of how I learn every day. It helps me understand difficult concepts faster, improve my assignments, and build skills I can apply beyond the classroom."

25-YEAR-OLD FEMALE, URBAN AREA, STUDENT



Table 1: How Young People in Zambia Are Engaging with AI: Key Patterns and Gaps

Indicator	Zambia Finding	11-Country Benchmark	Key Insight
Daily AI use	67.20%	64.40%	Above the 11-country average despite high data costs being the leading barrier (61.9% cite them). Young Zambians are absorbing cost pressures to maintain daily access, treating AI as essential rather than optional.
Primary use: Education & learning	61.60%	Males 75% Females 66%	Learning and education is the dominant use case in Zambia consistent with the 11-country pattern. In a labour market with high youth underemployment and limited formal training, AI is functioning as an informal skills development platform.
Primary use: Work-related tasks	54.20%	Males 50% Females 42%	Above both 11-country gender figures. In Zambia's largely informal economy, where many young people juggle multiple livelihood activities, AI is being actively integrated into day-to-day work though this has not yet translated into direct income generation at scale.
AI for social media use	44.60%	Males 47% Females 48%	Close to the 11-country figures, suggesting AI-powered social media features are as embedded in Zambia as elsewhere in the survey. This also means AI is reaching many young Zambians through familiar platforms before they intentionally seek it out.
AI for health information	27.10%	Males 22% Females 24%	Above both 11-country gender figures. This likely reflects gaps in physical healthcare access: where formal services are difficult or costly to reach, AI is filling an information deficit, a significant public health dimension of AI use in Zambia.
AI for entertainment	25.40%	Males 24% Females 24%	Virtually identical to the 11-country average. Entertainment is not a primary driver of AI adoption in Zambia use is predominantly purposive, centred on learning, work, and information.
AI for income generation	10.70%	14% overall Males 18% Females 11%	Below the 11-country overall average and in striking contrast to the 61.6% who use AI for learning. This translation gap is the defining challenge: AI is being used intensively for skills and employment preparation but is not yet converting into economic returns at scale.

4. WHO BENEFITS, WHO DOESN'T?

Key Findings: AI Use Patterns



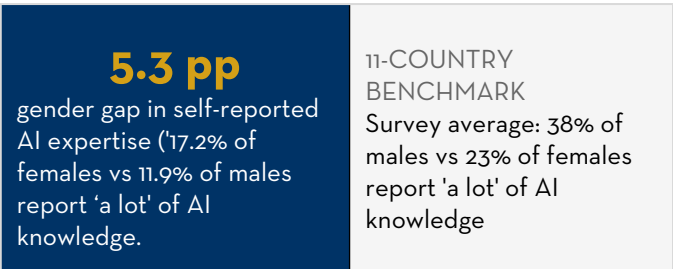
Young people's access to AI in Zambia is shaped primarily by affordability rather than technology itself. The most commonly reported barrier is high data costs (61.9%), followed by fear of scams (39.0%), weak internet connectivity (33.9%), and low digital skills (18.6%). Smaller proportions cite other barriers (12.7%) and harassment (6.8%).

Cost is the defining challenge. Nearly two in three respondents identify mobile data costs as a barrier to AI use, making affordability the single greatest obstacle to equitable access. Fear of scams ranks second, ahead of weak connectivity, suggesting that trust is almost as important as infrastructure in determining whether young people feel confident using AI. While unreliable internet remains a significant challenge, the findings indicate that many young Zambians are more constrained by the cost of getting online than by the availability of a network connection.

Low digital skills affect fewer respondents than cost or connectivity, but they remain an important barrier for almost one in five young people. Together, these findings suggest that expanding equitable AI access in Zambia will require a combination of affordable internet access, improved digital literacy, and greater trust in AI technologies.

Unlike the broader 11-country survey, Zambia does not show a pronounced gender gap in self-reported AI knowledge. Instead, females report slightly higher levels of AI knowledge than males. 17.2% of females say they know "a lot" about AI compared with 11.9% of males, while females are also more likely to report knowing "some" about AI (59.1% vs 45.2%). Males, by contrast, are more likely to report knowing "nothing" about AI (39.3% vs 23.7%).

Gender Gaps in AI Knowledge & Economic Impact



This contrasts with the overall survey pattern, where males consistently report higher AI knowledge than females. Zambia therefore appears to have a more balanced gender profile in AI knowledge, although the survey cannot determine whether these differences reflect actual knowledge or differences in confidence when self-assessing digital skills.

Expectations about AI's impact on employment are generally positive. Overall, 50.3% of respondents believe AI will improve employment and economic opportunities over the next five years, while 23.7% expect employment prospects to worsen and 21.5% expect no change. Daily AI users are slightly more cautious than weekly users, with 27.7% expecting AI to negatively affect employment compared with 14.3% of weekly users, suggesting that greater exposure to AI may bring a more balanced understanding of both its opportunities and potential labour market risks.

English is overwhelmingly the language through which young Zambians access AI. 93.2% of respondents report using AI in English, while 3.4% use a combination of English and a local language.

When asked what language they would like AI to support, 77.4% chose English, reflecting its central role in education and employment. However, there is also clear demand for greater local language support. 10.2% would like AI to be available in both English and their mother tongue, while 5.6% would prefer AI in a local language only. Together, this means 15.8% of respondents want stronger support for Zambia's local languages.

These findings suggest that language is not currently a major barrier to AI access for most young Zambians. However, expanding high-quality AI tools in local languages could improve inclusion for young people with lower English proficiency, particularly in rural communities, while complementing English as the country's primary language for digital services.



"AI has a lot of potential, but many young people cannot fully benefit because data is expensive. Making AI more affordable and accessible would allow more people to learn, work and innovate."

FEMALE, 28, RURAL ZAMBIA, SELF-EMPLOYED)

5. YOUNG PEOPLE'S AI CONCERNS

Zambia shows consistently high concern across the five AI concern domains: ownership, power of AI companies, environmental impact, working conditions for AI data workers, and mental health & wellbeing. The highest concern is about data ownership (58.8%), followed by the power of AI companies (53.7% reporting “a lot” of concern). Mental health and wellbeing show comparatively lower levels of concern, with 34.5% reporting “a lot” of concern and 38.4% reporting “a little” concern. Overall, concern in Zambia is concentrated on systems and governance issues such as corporate power, data control, and regulation, rather than on purely individual well-being impacts.

Across the five domains, concern is consistently highest around data ownership and the power of AI companies, while mental health and wellbeing registers comparatively lower intensity. This suggests that young people in Zambia tend to frame AI-related risks primarily in terms of the structural and institutional dimensions of governance. In this framing, individual-level concerns such as mental health and wellbeing may be understood as interconnected with broader systemic conditions, rather than as standalone issues.

Gender differences are present but generally modest across domains. On mental health and wellbeing, concern is similar between females (36.6% “a lot”) and males (39.3% “a lot”). Regarding working conditions for AI data workers, males report higher concern (39.3%) than females (25.8%). For environmental impact, males also show slightly higher concern (32.1% vs 28.0% “a lot” for females). For the power of AI companies, concern is broadly similar (25.0% males vs 23.7% females reporting “a lot”). For data ownership, both groups show high concern, with 55.9% of females and 61.9% of males reporting high concern. Overall, Zambia does not show a strong gender-differentiated pattern, as concern is relatively evenly distributed across genders with only minor variations by domain.

AI Concern Domain	% A lot of concern
Data ownership	58.8
Power of AI companies	53.7
Environmental impact	41.8
Working conditions (AI data workers)	37.9
Mental health & wellbeing	34.5

THE PARADOX FINDING

Daily AI users are more concerned about AI risks than non-users, especially on data ownership (58% vs 37%). Across all domains, concern remains highest among frequent users, showing that greater use does not reduce perceived risk.

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Across the 11-country dataset, daily AI users are the most concerned about AI risks. This is most evident in data ownership, where 58% of daily users report high concern compared to 37% of non-users (a 21 percentage point gap). Overall, concern remains consistently high among users, with no evidence that increased familiarity reduces perceived risk.

In Zambia, this pattern is reinforced through both high adoption and sustained concern-linked behaviour. With 67.2% of respondents using AI daily, engagement with AI is the dominant norm. Yet even among this group, 42.9% report that safety concerns limit their use of AI, while only 1.7% report no safety-related limitation at all, showing that concern is widespread and actively shapes behaviour even among frequent users.

A clear and steep gradient emerges across usage levels. Among weekly users, 47.6% report that safety concerns limit their use of AI, rising dramatically to 77.8% among occasional users (once a month or less). This indicates that lower-frequency users are nearly twice as likely to be constrained by safety concerns as weekly users, and almost twice as likely as daily users.

Taken together, the Zambia data shows a dual reality: high AI adoption (67.2% daily use) coexists with high and persistent safety concerns (45.2% overall reporting limitations). Rather than diminishing with experience, concern remains embedded across all user groups, while its behavioural impact is most acute among lower-frequency users.

Misinformation & Safety

66.1%

concerned about
AI misinformation

45.2%

say safety
concerns limit their
AI use

64.4%

want stronger laws
on AI

Zambia shows very high concern about AI-related misinformation, with 66.1% of respondents reporting concern, 8.5% reporting “sometimes”, and 24.3% reporting “no” concern. This highlights misinformation as one of the most widely recognised AI risks among young people.

Safety concerns also have a strong behavioural impact: 45.2% report that safety concerns limit their use of AI, while 31.6% report this happens “sometimes”, and 20.9% report no limitation. This confirms that concerns are not only perceptual but also shape actual AI usage.

In addition, Zambia’s forward-looking data shows that 39.0% expect online safety to worsen, making it the most negatively perceived future domain. This is reinforced by 33.9% citing fear of scams as a barrier to AI use, indicating that concerns about fraud, misinformation, and digital safety are already shaping both behaviour and expectations.

What Would Make AI Safer?

Young people in Zambia show a clear preference for system-level interventions combining regulation, accountability, and public capacity building. The most frequently identified priority is stronger laws and regulation, which consistently appears across response combinations and forms the central pillar of AI safety expectations. This is followed by platform accountability, digital literacy training, community awareness campaigns, and better reporting systems, which frequently appear together, indicating that respondents view AI safety as a multi-layered system requiring coordinated action rather than a single intervention.

Stronger laws emerge as the dominant standalone priority, while digital literacy and community awareness are frequently co-selected, reflecting strong demand for both enforcement and user empowerment. Platform accountability is also prominent, highlighting expectations that technology companies must take responsibility for preventing and mitigating harm. AI design that considers females appears less frequently, suggesting it is a secondary concern relative to governance, education, and accountability measures.

Overall, young people in Zambia prioritise regulation (laws), accountability (platforms), and education / awareness (digital literacy and community engagement) as the most important pathways to improving AI safety. A smaller but important cross-cutting theme is affordability and infrastructure (10.2%), linking safety concerns not only to governance but also to digital inclusion and access conditions.

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"AI is very useful for learning and making work easier, but there is still a need for stronger laws and better awareness so that people are not misled or exposed to scams."

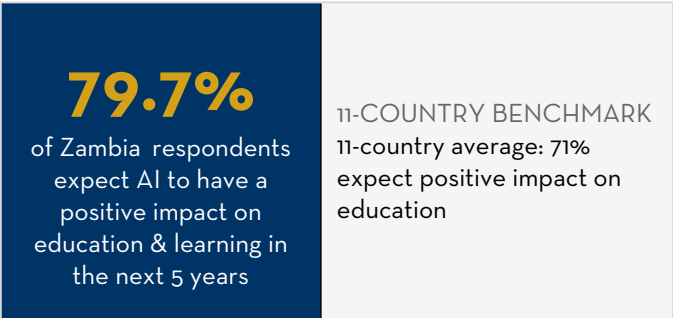
MALE AGED 24, URBAN, EMPLOYED FULL-TIME



6. EMPLOYMENT, FUTURES & SENTIMENT

Zambia shows a broadly optimistic outlook on AI, with the strongest confidence expressed in the education domain. 79.7% expect AI to improve education and learning over the next five years. This is notably higher than the 11-country average (71%) and represents Zambia’s most positive result across all future-oriented domains. It suggests that young people primarily associate AI with learning support and skills development, which aligns with usage patterns where academic assistance and learning-related tasks are among the most common applications.

Views on AI and income are mixed. 22% of respondents are very worried that AI will affect their income sources, 16% are a little worried, 17% are neutral, 5% are not worried at all, 18% are optimistic, and 23% are unsure. The largest single category is “not sure” (23%), indicating considerable uncertainty about AI’s economic implications. This does not signal strong pessimism, but rather reflects unclear or emerging understanding of how AI will shape livelihoods in the Zambian labour context.



Across the full five-year outlook, education remains the most positive domain (79.7% better, 5.6% no change, 8.5% worse). Employment and economic opportunities are more evenly distributed, with 50.3% expecting improvement, 21.5% no change, and 23.7% expecting a worsening. Mental wellbeing and online safety show more concern overall, particularly online safety, where 39.0% expect conditions to worsen compared to 28.2% who expect improvement. This makes online safety the most negative-leaning domain in Zambia’s outlook and highlights a key area for policy and programming attention.

Sentiment analysis further reinforces a generally positive orientation towards AI and work. Zambia ranks second only to Tanzania in positive workplace sentiment, with scores nearly aligned between female respondents (approximately +0.30) and male respondents (approximately +0.29). This close alignment is notable, as many other countries exhibit more pronounced gender gaps in AI-related workplace sentiment. In Zambia, positive expectations about AI and work appear broadly shared across genders rather than concentrated within one group.

Within the broader cross-country spectrum, Zambia sits closer to the “optimistic/leapfrogging” end of the scale, alongside countries such as Uganda and Tanzania, where AI is largely seen as an opportunity for economic advancement. This contrasts with contexts like the UK, where sentiment is more negative and shaped by stronger concerns around job displacement and institutional disruption. Zambia’s position reflects cautious optimism: strong expectations of benefit in education and moderate optimism in employment, alongside clear uncertainty in how AI will ultimately affect income security.

7. CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings position Zambia among the more optimistic countries in the Youth AI Survey. AI has already become part of young people's daily lives, with more than two-thirds of respondents using it daily and primarily for learning, education, and work. Rather than viewing AI as a distant technology, young people are integrating it into their study, skill-building, problem-solving, and productivity. Expectations for AI's contribution to education are particularly strong, exceeding the 11-country average and highlighting AI's growing role in expanding access to knowledge and future opportunities.

However, the benefits of AI are unequal. The survey reveals a persistent access divide driven by high data costs, unreliable internet connectivity, and lower levels of AI engagement in rural and other non-urban areas. While young people are enthusiastic adopters of AI, they also express high levels of concern about misinformation, online safety, corporate power, and data ownership. This combination of high adoption and high concern suggests that Zambia's AI future will depend on ensuring AI's affordability, trustworthiness, inclusiveness, and governability in ways that protect young people while enabling innovation.

Zambia therefore stands at an important moment in its digital transformation. The country already has a generation of young people ready to adopt AI, but unlocking its full development potential will require coordinated investment in digital infrastructure, AI literacy, responsible governance, and youth-centred innovation. If these challenges are addressed, AI has the potential to accelerate progress towards improved education outcomes, more productive employment, entrepreneurship, and inclusive economic growth.

FOR THE GOVERNMENT OF ZAMBIA

- Embed AI within Zambia's National Digital Transformation Strategy and forthcoming AI governance agenda by developing a national AI policy that promotes innovation while establishing clear standards for transparency, accountability, consumer protection, and responsible AI use.
- Support inclusive AI innovation by investing in research, local language AI technologies, and youth-led digital entrepreneurship through innovation grants, university partnerships, and technology incubation programmes.

- Reduce the affordability gap that limits AI adoption by expanding broadband infrastructure, accelerating rural connectivity programmes, and working with regulators and mobile network operators to lower data costs for educational and productivity-focused digital services. Policy and regulatory measures should prioritise achieving the ITU and Broadband Commission affordability target of entry-level broadband costing less than 2% of monthly Gross National Income (GNI) per capita, ensuring that connectivity is both accessible and affordable for all young people.
- Integrate AI literacy into the national education and skills ecosystem, including secondary schools, TVET institutions, universities, and youth skills programmes, ensuring young people develop practical AI competencies alongside digital ethics, critical thinking, and online safety.

FOR TECHNOLOGY COMPANIES

- Design AI products for low-resource environments by improving offline functionality, reducing data consumption, and optimising AI tools for low-bandwidth networks common across Zambia.
- Expand the local relevance and inclusivity of AI by supporting major Zambian languages, such as Bemba, Nyanja, and Tonga, and incorporating local knowledge systems and context-specific content into AI applications. This will improve accessibility and usability for young people who are not primarily English speakers.
- Strengthen user trust by investing in stronger safeguards against scams, misinformation, harmful AI-generated content, and privacy violations, while making AI systems more transparent and easier for young people to understand.
- Partner with education providers and youth organisations to provide free or subsidised AI learning resources, certification opportunities, and practical training that prepares young people for AI-enabled labour markets.

FOR ALL SECTORS (GOVERNMENT, CIVIL SOCIETY, FUNDERS, ACADEMIA)

- Establish a national multi-stakeholder AI coalition that brings together government, academia, technology companies, youth organisations, and civil society to coordinate AI policy, research, and responsible innovation.
- Prioritise investment in digital inclusion, particularly for rural communities, young females, and disadvantaged groups, ensuring that AI adoption does not reinforce existing inequalities.
- Generate ongoing evidence on AI's social and economic impacts through longitudinal research on employment, education, wellbeing, governance, and digital rights to inform adaptive policymaking.
- Institutionalise youth participation in AI governance by ensuring young people contribute meaningfully to AI policy design, regulatory consultations, and technology development processes.

FOR RESTLESS DEVELOPMENT & NGO PARTNERS

- Scale youth-led AI literacy programmes that combine practical AI skills with digital rights, online safety, critical thinking, and responsible AI use, building on Restless Development's existing youth leadership and civic participation programmes.
- Integrate AI across youth livelihoods programming by equipping young entrepreneurs, job seekers, and community volunteers with practical AI skills that improve employability, enterprise development, research, advocacy, and service delivery.
- Champion youth voices in national AI governance by creating structured platforms that enable young people to shape emerging AI policies, standards, and ethical frameworks.
- Expand community-based digital inclusion initiatives that specifically target rural communities and young females through peer learning, mentorship, and locally relevant AI awareness campaigns, ensuring that access to AI is both equitable and meaningful.



"AI for me is not here to replace the potential of young people, it is here to unlock it. If every young person in Zambia can access AI fairly, we can learn faster, create more opportunities, and solve problems that have held our communities back for years."

24-YEAR-OLD FEMALE, PERI-URBAN ZAMBIA, VOLUNTEER

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