



## Backgrounder ATU Africa Innovation Challenge 2024

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

The 4<sup>th</sup> edition of the ATU Africa Innovation Challenge 2024, run by the African Telecommunications Union (ATU) is a competition dedicated to identifying and supporting young African innovators under the age of 35 who are developing groundbreaking Artificial Intelligence (AI) solutions. This competition is part of ATU's ongoing commitment to entrenching innovation in the continent, nurturing talent, and driving socio-economic development across.

The challenge was launched on 2<sup>nd</sup> October 2024, with submissions accepted until November 29<sup>th</sup>, 2024. In January 2025, the 10 best innovators will be announced as winners, and they will be rewarded with a fully sponsored trip to one of ATU's member states for an intensive 5-day AI training session facilitated by leading AI experts on the continent.

### 2. BACKGROUND

AI is increasingly recognized as a transformative force in Africa, with significant potential to drive economic growth, social development, and innovation. The continent's large and youthful population positions it uniquely to leverage AI for development, particularly through the involvement of young people in AI-related fields.

AI development in Africa has gained momentum over the past few years, driven by both public and private sector initiatives. Governments across the continent are beginning to recognize the strategic importance of AI and are working to create policies and frameworks to support its growth. For instance, the African Union<sup>1</sup> has adopted a landmark continental artificial intelligence strategy, which emphasizes the importance of investing in African youth, innovators, computer scientists, data experts, and AI researchers. This framework is seen as a critical step in paving the way for Africa's digital transformation.

The private sector has played a crucial role in advancing AI in Africa. Various organisations have been active in promoting AI education and training across the continent. These initiatives are designed to equip young Africans with the necessary skills to participate in the AI economy, addressing the talent gap in AI-related fields and creating job opportunities for the youth.

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<sup>1</sup> African Union. (2024). African Ministers Adopt Landmark Continental Artificial Intelligence Strategy. Retrieved from <https://au.int/en/pressreleases/20240617/african-ministers-adopt-landmark-continental-artificial-intelligence-strategy>

Despite these positive developments, Africa still faces significant challenges in realizing the full potential of AI. One of the most pressing issues is the digital divide, which limits access to the internet and digital tools for many Africans, particularly those in rural areas. This divide exacerbates existing inequalities and hinders the continent's ability to develop a robust AI ecosystem. Moreover, the low levels of infrastructure and investment in AI research and development remains a significant barrier to progress.

### 3. RATIONALE

The involvement of youth in AI development is seen as essential for several reasons. Africa's youth population is one of the largest in the world, with over 60% of the continent's population under the age of 25. This demographic represents a significant opportunity for AI development, as young people are more likely to adopt new technologies and drive innovation. Youth involvement in AI is not only crucial for addressing local challenges but also for ensuring that Africa can compete on the global stage. Young African innovators have the potential to create AI solutions that are tailored to the unique needs of the continent, such as improving healthcare access, enhancing agricultural productivity, and increasing educational opportunities.

However, for youth to play a meaningful role in AI development, they need access to quality education and training in AI-related fields. Currently, the number of African students studying AI or related subjects is relatively low<sup>2</sup>, highlighting the need for greater investment in education. Additionally, there is a need for more research and development initiatives that involve young people and provide them with the resources and support they need to succeed. The success of youth-driven AI initiatives will depend on the ability of African governments and institutions to create an enabling environment that fosters innovation and supports the growth of the AI ecosystem.

To address the ongoing need to fill existing knowledge gaps, the ATU Africa Innovation Challenge 2024 aims to serve as a platform that recognizes and supports the innovative potential of young Africans. This year's competition will not only acknowledge innovation but also offer winners the opportunity to further develop their skills through a comprehensive, world-class training program.

### 4. OBJECTIVES

The ATU Africa Innovation Challenge 2024 is designed to achieve the following objectives:

1. **To identify and map the most innovative AI solutions** developed by young Africans, enhancing their visibility and impact globally and promoting the continent as a hub for cutting-edge technological solutions.
2. **To provide advanced training and mentorship** to the top innovators on the continent, equipping them with the skills, knowledge, and networks necessary to scale their AI solutions.

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<sup>2</sup> Sally, K. (2024). The Future is Youth – Africa's Young Population In the Digital Future. Retrieved from <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/future-youth-africas-young-population-digital-tech-africa-news-s4wef>

- To build partnerships between young innovators and industry leaders, harnessing industry experience to ensure that innovations are both practical and sustainable.

## 5. ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA

The competition is open to all youth who meet the following criteria:

Criteria	Description	Verification Process	Outcome
Age	Under 35 years as of November 15, 2024	Submission of ID or passport copy	Confirmation of eligibility
Nationality and Residency	African citizenship and residence within African countries that are members of ATU	Submission of proof of residency	Confirmation of eligibility
Innovation Focus	AI-based solutions addressing a specific challenge in key sectors	Submission of concept note and supporting documents	Shortlisting based on relevance to competition themes
Originality and Impact	Original, innovative solutions with potential for significant impact and scalability	Review by expert panel	Shortlisting based on innovation and impact
Stage of Development	Solutions ranging from prototypes to fully developed products	Submission of proof of concept (prototype, demo, etc.)	Evaluation of feasibility and readiness

## 6. COMPETITION PHASES AND MILESTONES

The ATU Africa Innovation Challenge 2024 will be executed in the following phases:

Phase	Timeline	Activity	Outcome
Phase 1: Launch	October 2024	Official launch of the competition with an extensive publicity campaign targeting young African innovators.	Increased awareness and engagement across the continent
Phase 2: Submission	October - November 2024	Open submission period where participants submit their AI solutions through the official competition portal.	Collection of diverse and innovative AI solutions
Phase 3: Evaluation	November - December 2024	A panel of experts will review submissions based on predefined criteria, shortlisting the top 10 innovations.	Identification of the most promising AI solutions
Phase 4: Announcement	January 2025	Public announcement of the 10 winners, who will then prepare	Recognition of top innovators and

Phase	Timeline	Activity	Outcome
		for the physical training programme.	preparation for training
<b>Phase 5: Training Programme</b>	February 2025	A 5-day intensive training session, facilitated by leading AI experts	Enhanced skills and knowledge for the top 10 innovators

## 7. PRIZE STRUCTURE

The 10 selected winners of the ATU Africa Innovation Challenge 2024 will receive the following:

Prize Component	Description	Outcome
Fully Sponsored Trip	All expenses covered for travel, accommodation, and meals during the 5-day training session.	Participation in the training program
Advanced AI Training	Intensive training program with AI experts covering advanced AI concepts, practical applications, and industry insights.	Enhanced skills and knowledge
Global Recognition	Feature on ATU and partner platforms, with opportunities for media coverage and investor engagement.	Potential partnerships and investments
Networking Opportunities	Exclusive networking events with industry leaders, potential investors, and fellow innovators.	Collaboration and future opportunities

## 8. CONCLUSION

The ATU Africa Innovation Challenge 2024 represents a strategic effort to elevate Africa's position in the global AI landscape by empowering young innovators. Through the combination of competition, training, and partnerships with industry leaders, ATU aims to create a platform that not only recognizes innovation but also ensures that these innovations have the support and resources necessary to scale and succeed.