

Challenges and opportunities of artificial intelligence in African health space

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Muslim A. Alaran¹ , Salim Kamaludeen Lawal², Mustapha Hussein Jiya³,
Saliu Alhassan Egiya³, Mohamed Mustaf Ahmed⁴ ,
Abdullateef Abdulsalam⁵, Usman Abubakar Haruna⁵,
Muhammad Kabir Musa⁵ and Don Eliseo Lucero-Prisno III^{6,7,8}

Abstract

The application of artificial intelligence (AI) to healthcare in Africa has the potential to transform productivity, diagnosis, disease surveillance, and resource allocation by improving accuracy and efficiency. However, to fully realize its benefits, it is necessary to consider issues concerning data privacy, equity, infrastructure integration, and ethical policy development. The use of these tools may improve the detection of diseases, the distribution of resources, and the continuity of care. The use of AI allows for the development of policies that are tailored to address health disparities based on evidence. While AI may increase accessibility and affordability through telehealth, remote monitoring, and cost reductions, significant barriers remain. Ethical guidelines are needed to ensure AI decisions align with medical standards and patient autonomy. Strict privacy and security controls are crucial to protecting sensitive health data. This article evaluates the current and potential roles of AI in the African health sector. It identifies opportunities to address challenges through tailored interventions and an AI framework to simulate policy impacts.

Keywords

Artificial intelligence, healthcare, Africa, challenges, opportunities

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Introduction

The artificial intelligence (AI) era is rapidly reshaping numerous sectors including, education, agriculture, health-care, and medicine. The application of deep learning algorithms, in AI is significantly enhancing the efficiency, diagnosis, and speed of treatment.^{1,2} The high-income countries (HICs) and upper middle-income countries (UMICs) are adopting and making investments in further unleashing and optimizing the application of AI in several sectors such as wearable devices, telemedicine, precision medicine, genetic-based solutions, and drug discovery and development; all of which are aimed at building a robust approach to patient care worldwide. The World Health Organization's (WHO), Global Strategy on Digital Health recommended cross-country collaboration, to ensure equity, access, and affordability of improved medical care

¹Department of Robotics, Nazarbayev University School of Engineering and Digital Sciences (NU SEDS), Astana, Kazakhstan

²Department of Computer Engineering, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, Nigeria

³Department of Clinical Pharmacy and Pharmacy Practice, Faculty of Pharmaceutical Science, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, Nigeria

⁴Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences, SIMAD University, Mogadishu, Somalia

⁵Department of Biomedical Sciences, Nazarbayev University School of Medicine (NUSOM), Astana, Kazakhstan

⁶Department of Global Health and Development, Faculty of Public Health and Policy, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, London, UK

⁷Office for Research, Innovation and Extension Services, Southern Leyte State University, Sogod, Philippines

⁸Center for University Research, University of Makati, Makati City, Philippines

Corresponding author:

Mohamed Mustaf Ahmed, Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences, SIMAD University, Mogadishu, Somalia.

Email: momustafahmed@outlook.com



services and universal health coverage with a target year of between 2020 and 2025.³

However, despite all of the promising potential and impact, as demonstrated and continued to evolve in most of the HICs and UMICs, AI has yet to unleash its full potential in Africa's healthcare space. Many of the concerns are associated with algorithmic bias, health data poverty, and foreign dominations (digital colonization).^{4,5} Also, the lack of proper use of human resources, bureaucratic administrative processing, extensive urban–rural divide, inequity in access to healthcare, and challenges of policy implementation by the government may be associated with difficulty in having a coordinated solution to addressing emerging problems in Africa's digital health.^{6–8} Furthermore, the African population continues to grow with the youth accounting for the majority which presents both challenges and opportunities. If the political leadership harnesses the potential of the population and implements effective policies, technological startups can be used to tackle local health issues thereby improving healthcare across the continent.⁹ Therefore, AI tools can be tailored to enhance governmental functions, at the same time ensuring an intersection of ethics, privacy, automation, bias, and transparency of AI tools in optimizing health outcomes in Africa. In this commentary, we aim to evaluate current and potential roles in which AI can be applied in the African health sector, identify opportunities, and address challenges impeding its implementation through tailored interventions and an AI framework to simulate effective policy development.

Application in health

Health data management and analysis

The versatility and strength of AI technology present numerous possibilities for its use in clinical and public health settings, with the potential to transform healthcare service provision and governmental functions.¹⁰ AI has tremendously transformed the healthcare industry, involving and ensuring data are reliable, traceable, and updated timely, particularly its ability to analyze big data and uncover previously undetected patterns of disease development in the population. This has led to remarkable advancements in the fields of genomics, biomolecular medicines, and drug discovery. Also, AI enabled the development of diagnostic tools and personalized treatment plans for patients.¹¹ In predictive disease surveillance, AI analyzes population demographics, travel history, and environmental conditions to figure out patterns and trends of disease. This provides valuable insight for early outbreak detection, potential emerging infection, and disease dynamics. For example, the relevance of AI in predictive surveillance was instrumental during the COVID-19 pandemic as it showed via data sources combining the environmental

data and geospatial information, that AI enhanced the accuracy and timeliness of early outbreak detection, genome sequencing and tracking viral variants.^{12,13}

Real-time monitoring of public health indicators

In the field of healthcare, cutting-edge AI-powered systems are being utilized to monitor crucial public health indicators, including hospital admissions, emergency room visits, social media trends, electronic health records, syndromic surveillance systems, and mobile health applications.¹⁰ These sources yield vast amounts of real-time data, making it possible to detect disease outbreaks early and maintain continuous monitoring.¹⁴ With the help of robust technologies, healthcare institutions can swiftly detect potential health threats, allocate resources efficiently, and implement timely interventions to mitigate risks and safeguard public health.¹¹ Inpatient treatment and advanced technologies are increasingly supporting medical staff in virtually every aspect. For instance, research has been conducted on how to treat patients with high blood pressure and lung disease more accurately by using an AI-assisted magnetic resonance imaging (MRI)-based algorithm that analyzes cardiac motion.¹⁵ This research was conducted by Dawes et al.¹⁵ in 2017.

Additionally, the use of AI in genomic medicine is a noteworthy development, especially in determining genetic susceptibilities to diseases common in Africa. This is particularly important because there is a knowledge gap in genomic medicine in LMIC as a result of the majority of genomic medicine research taking place in higher-income countries, hence, the AI-powered tools can scan large genomic datasets more quickly,¹⁶ which makes it possible to identify distinct genetic markers and develop tailored treatments for diseases like cancer, sickle cell anemia, and infectious diseases like malaria in African populations. These advancements can facilitate targeted treatment plans, improving patient outcomes and decreasing the burden of these diseases on patients.¹⁷

Forecasting and allocating healthcare resources

AI has been instrumental in enhancing healthcare and streamlining resource allocation with great efficacy and efficiency. It has effectively tackled the problem of imbalanced distribution of healthcare resources, which has been a significant contributor to health disparities and political discord.¹⁸ For instance, predictive analytics can help forecast disease outbreaks, enabling proactive measures to be taken, such as stockpiling necessary medications and deploying healthcare workers to high-risk areas. AI is also capable of analyzing a vast range of data about healthcare supply chain logistics, usage patterns, and external factors like weather and economic conditions. The resulting models trained on these data can be used to predict potential

shortages of medical supplies and equipment, thereby empowering healthcare organizations to take preemptive measures to mitigate the impact of these shortages and ensure continuity of care for their patients. Such measures may include adjusting procurement strategies, ordering additional supplies well in advance, or implementing conservation measures. Traditionally, the allocation of healthcare resources is determined by the supply-demand equation, logistics, and governance structure.¹⁹ Using the COVID-19 response as an example, the severity of the pandemic can determine the healthcare resources required in each location, but the resources might not be distributed according to need.²⁰ In such cases, AI can be utilized to study supply-demand, logistics, and patient characteristics. Moreover, AI can facilitate better financial resource allocation by identifying cost-effective interventions and reducing waste. For example, by analyzing the outcomes of various treatment protocols, AI can help healthcare providers choose the most effective and efficient options, ultimately reducing healthcare costs and improving patient outcomes.² This is particularly important in resource-limited settings, where the efficient use of funds can make a significant difference in the quality and accessibility of healthcare services.

Healthcare facilities and personnel deployment

AI technology can analyze various medical data such as patient demographics, medical history, and geographic distribution. With this information, healthcare facilities and personnel can be optimally deployed to meet the needs of the population. This includes taking into consideration factors such as disease prevalence, population density, and resource availability to distribute healthcare services efficiently.¹⁸ For instance, AI can assist in identifying underserved areas and populations that are in dire need of healthcare services. By using geospatial analysis and data on health indicators, AI can pinpoint locations where new clinics or mobile health units would have the greatest impact. Furthermore, AI can help in workforce planning by predicting future demand for healthcare professionals in different regions, ensuring that training and recruitment efforts are aligned with actual needs.

In emergencies, such as natural disasters or disease outbreaks, AI can provide real-time data to support rapid decision-making and resource deployment. AI systems can analyze the flow of patients, availability of hospital beds, and supply levels to dynamically allocate resources where they are needed most. This not only enhances the responsiveness of the healthcare system but also helps in minimizing the impact of crises on public health.

Enhancing healthcare accessibility and affordability

The use of AI in healthcare has the potential to transform healthcare services, making them more accessible and cost-

effective for African populations. Telehealth is crucial in regions that have limited access to medical facilities. AI-enabled telehealth extends beyond traditional telemedicine by integrating AI tools into diagnosis, treatment planning, and patient monitoring. In Africa, where the healthcare infrastructure may not be as advanced, AI-enabled telehealth can provide remote consultations, diagnostic services, and continuous patient monitoring without requiring physical presence at a healthcare facility.²¹ Remote monitoring solutions empowered by AI can track a patient's vital signs and other health indicators in real-time, allowing for timely interventions and reducing the need for frequent hospital visits. This is particularly beneficial for managing chronic diseases for which consistent monitoring is necessary. AI algorithms can analyze data collected from wearable devices and other monitoring equipment to detect anomalies and predict potential health issues before they become critical, thus enabling a proactive approach to healthcare.²² The implementation of AI in healthcare also presents significant opportunities for cost reductions. AI systems can optimize resource allocation by predicting patient inflows and identifying the most efficient use of medical personnel and facilities. For example, AI can forecast disease outbreaks and help plan the distribution of vaccines and medical supplies, ensuring that they are directed where they are most needed. AI can streamline administrative processes by automating tasks, such as appointment scheduling, billing, and the processing of insurance claims. Although the benefits of AI in enhancing healthcare accessibility and affordability are clear, some challenges and considerations must be addressed. These challenges such as the careful planning, investment, and integration of AI technologies with the existing healthcare infrastructure²³ and others are detailed in the last section. In addition, the ethical implications of using AI in policy making which remain an important issue is addressed in a later section.

Policy potentials, development, and implementation

Evidence-based decision-making

Evidence-based decision-making in healthcare has been significantly enhanced by AI, showcasing remarkable capabilities in disease diagnosis, classification, and patient health insights.²⁴ Empirical data underscores the potential of knowledge-based computerized decision support systems, particularly in improving practitioner performance.²⁵ Medical imaging applications have also seen a lot of progress, with AI detecting mitosis in breast cancer histology images,²⁶ achieving dermatologist-level accuracy in classifying skin cancer,²⁷ diagnosing diabetic retinopathy from retinal photographs,²⁸ and predicting cardiovascular risk factors from retinal images.²⁹ These advancements

highlight the role of AI in assisting healthcare providers with enhanced diagnosis, prognosis, and tailored information. Furthermore, AI systems have demonstrated reliability in predicting suicide attempts³⁰ and estimating the likelihood of patients developing serious conditions or requiring palliative care,³¹ contributing significantly to addressing healthcare challenges.

Despite these advancements, evidence-based decision-making can be further enhanced through AI-driven insights. In Africa, traditional data collection methods are faced with several challenges including incomplete records, human error, and logistical constraints.^{32,33} Through natural language processing and machine learning, these challenges can be solved by automating data collection and ensuring a comprehensive dataset. This improved data accuracy and accessibility can provide a robust foundation for evidence-based decision-making. In addition, since AI can predict potential outbreaks and health crises and allocate resources effectively as previously explained, results and outcomes obtained from such predictions can foster proactive policy formulation. This can even be properly harnessed and allow for the customization of health policies to cater to the specific needs of different populations.

After health policies are implemented and deployed, AI can still be used to improve evidence-based decision-making. Through real-time data analysis, AI systems can assess the impact of health interventions and policies, providing immediate feedback to policymakers. This continuous evaluation of strategies will foster a more adaptive and responsive health policy environment. Furthermore, such AI-based platforms can improve cooperation between various stakeholders, including government agencies and non-governmental organizations. By providing a unified data-sharing and analysis platform, AI fosters collaboration, ensuring that health policies are cohesive and comprehensive. This integrated approach can help address complex health challenges that cross-regional and national boundaries in Africa.

Tailoring policies and health equity

The health disparities in many African countries are deeply rooted in their historical backgrounds, including recent colonization and ongoing socioeconomic and political instabilities.³⁴ These factors contribute to complex ethnic stratification and changing migration patterns, making it challenging to develop effective public policies. Tailored interventions based on population-specific needs could offer solutions, but there is a lack of research on how to implement policies addressing broader social and economic determinants of health in African nations.⁶ Also, an AI framework to simulate policy options and their potential health impacts could provide valuable information to African policymakers.³⁵ Furthermore, it would start with a broad epidemiologic analysis of specific health disparities

for any country in Africa. Additionally, this involves synthesizing existing public health data or in some cases requires new data collection for precision decisions. Through this process, the key determinants of the health disparity would then be identified.

Ethical implications of using AI in policy making in the African health space

The integration of AI into policy-making processes, particularly in the African health sector, holds significant promise for improving healthcare outcomes. However, it also raises various ethical concerns that need to be carefully considered to ensure that the benefits of AI are maximized while minimizing potential harms. Based on the previous works,^{36–39} issues related to equity, privacy, accountability, and the socio-cultural impact are considered in this section.

1. *Equity and Access*: One of the foremost ethical concerns is the potential for AI to exacerbate existing inequities in healthcare. AI systems require large datasets to function effectively, and these datasets often come from regions with better-developed healthcare infrastructures, typically urban areas. As a result, AI-driven health policies might neglect the needs of rural and underserved communities, widening the healthcare gap between different population groups.
2. *Data Privacy and Security*: AI systems rely heavily on the collection and analysis of vast amounts of personal health data. In many African countries, the regulatory frameworks for data protection are still developing. This raises significant concerns about the potential misuse of personal health information, including unauthorized access, data breaches, and the violation of individuals' privacy rights. Robust encryption, access controls, and regular audits are indispensable for maintaining the integrity and confidentiality of medical data and preventing unauthorized access or breaches. Moreover, ensuring equitable access to AI-powered healthcare solutions is vital for addressing disparities in healthcare delivery. Efforts to bridge the gap in accessibility should focus on providing services in rural or underserved areas, addressing language and cultural barriers, and catering to the needs of vulnerable populations, such as the elderly or individuals with disabilities.
3. *Accountability and Transparency*: The decision-making processes of AI systems can be opaque, often referred to as the "black box" problem. This lack of transparency makes it difficult to hold AI accountable for its decisions. In the context of health policy, this could lead to situations where harmful policies are implemented without a clear understanding of how and why certain decisions were made. Ensuring that AI systems are

transparent and that there is a clear line of accountability is crucial for ethical policy making.

4. *Socio-Cultural Impact:* AI systems are typically developed using data and assumptions that may not align with the socio-cultural contexts of African communities. This misalignment can lead to policies that are culturally insensitive or that fail to address the unique health needs and preferences of these communities. It is essential to incorporate local knowledge and expertise into the development and implementation of AI-driven health policies to ensure they are culturally appropriate and effective.
5. *Ethical Frameworks and Governance:* Developing robust ethical frameworks and governance structures is critical to address the ethical implications of AI in health policy making. These frameworks should be inclusive, involving stakeholders from diverse backgrounds, including patients, healthcare providers, and ethicists. They should also be adaptable to the rapid advancements in AI technology, ensuring that ethical considerations keep pace with technological developments.

The ethical and regulatory considerations surrounding AI implementation in healthcare are multifaceted and critical for ensuring the integrity and efficacy of medical practices. Establishing clear guidelines and regulations is paramount to guarantee that AI-driven decisions adhere to ethical principles and medical standards. Transparency in algorithmic processes, patient autonomy, and informed consent are foundational principles that must be upheld to maintain trust and accountability. Furthermore, mitigating biases and discrimination within AI systems is imperative to ensure fair and equitable treatment for all patients. Accountability mechanisms should be established to hold both developers and users responsible for the outcomes of AI-driven decisions, fostering a culture of accountability and trust within the healthcare community.

Challenges and considerations

The advancements in computer vision, natural language processing, and hardware capabilities such as graphical processing units have positioned AI as a transformative force across multiple sectors, including healthcare. Therefore, AI-based systems encompass various applications such as chatbots for medical assistance and patient care, trained models for early diagnosis and test analysis, generative AI for drug discovery and precision medicine, and assistive technologies.^{40–42} However, for successful implementation and adaptation to the African environment, substantial challenges must be addressed. These include ethical and regulatory considerations related to AI implementation previously discussed, and the effective integration of AI technologies with existing healthcare infrastructures.

Asides addressing the challenges of the ethical implications of implementing AI in the African healthcare space, integration with existing healthcare infrastructure is crucial for the successful implementation of AI systems. Compatibility with electronic health record systems, interoperability between different healthcare platforms, and adequate training for healthcare professionals are essential components of seamless integration. It is vital to ensure that AI technologies complement and enhance human decision-making rather than replace it entirely, fostering trust and acceptance within the healthcare community. By addressing these ethical, regulatory, privacy, accessibility, and integration challenges, AI has the potential to revolutionize healthcare delivery, improve patient outcomes, and enhance the overall quality of care.

Conclusion

The application of AI in the African healthcare sector holds immense promise, yet it also presents significant challenges that must be carefully navigated. This commentary has highlighted the transformative potential of AI in improving healthcare productivity, accuracy, and efficiency through enhanced data management, real-time monitoring, resource allocation, and healthcare accessibility. By leveraging the power of AI, African nations can make substantial strides in addressing critical healthcare issues such as disease surveillance, genetic-based solutions, and equitable resource distribution. AI-enabled telehealth and remote patient monitoring can extend the reach of healthcare services, particularly in underserved communities. Moreover, AI-driven forecasting and resource allocation models can optimize the supply chain and mitigate shortages, ensuring the continuous and efficient delivery of essential medical supplies.

However, the successful integration of AI in the African healthcare landscape requires a multifaceted approach that addresses ethical, regulatory, and infrastructure-related challenges. Safeguarding data privacy, ensuring algorithmic transparency and accountability, and promoting equitable access to AI-powered healthcare solutions are paramount. Developing tailored, evidence-based policies that cater to the unique needs of diverse African populations, while harnessing the power of AI to simulate policy impacts, can lead to more effective and inclusive healthcare interventions.

As the African continent continues to embrace the digital revolution, the potential for AI to transform healthcare is immense. By addressing the identified challenges and leveraging the opportunities presented, African nations can harness the transformative potential of AI to improve health outcomes, reduce disparities, and build resilient, future-ready healthcare systems. Going forward, a concerted effort involving policymakers, healthcare professionals, technology experts, and community stakeholders will be crucial in shaping the responsible and impactful integration of AI in the African healthcare landscape.

Future research should explore the development of comprehensive AI readiness frameworks that can serve as benchmarking tools for African countries, guiding their implementation strategies and ensuring the ethical and equitable deployment of AI-powered healthcare solutions. Additionally, in-depth case studies on successful AI integration in specific African healthcare settings can provide valuable insights and best practices for replication and scaling across the continent. By addressing the challenges and seizing the opportunities presented by AI, Africa can pave the way for a healthier, more inclusive, and technologically-empowered future.

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ORCID iDs: Muslim A. Alaran  <https://orcid.org/0009-0004-9534-7599>

Mohamed Mustaf Ahmed  <https://orcid.org/0009-0006-5991-4052>

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