INSIGHTS ON AI POLICY DEVELOPMENT IN BENIN REPUBLIC

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Update on Benin's National Artificial
Intelligence Strategy
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The Benin Government

adopted a National Artificial Intelligence and Big Data Strategy in January 2023. As the first AI national strategy in a West Africa francophone country, this article overviews several key components of this policy. The policy is intended to guide government actions until
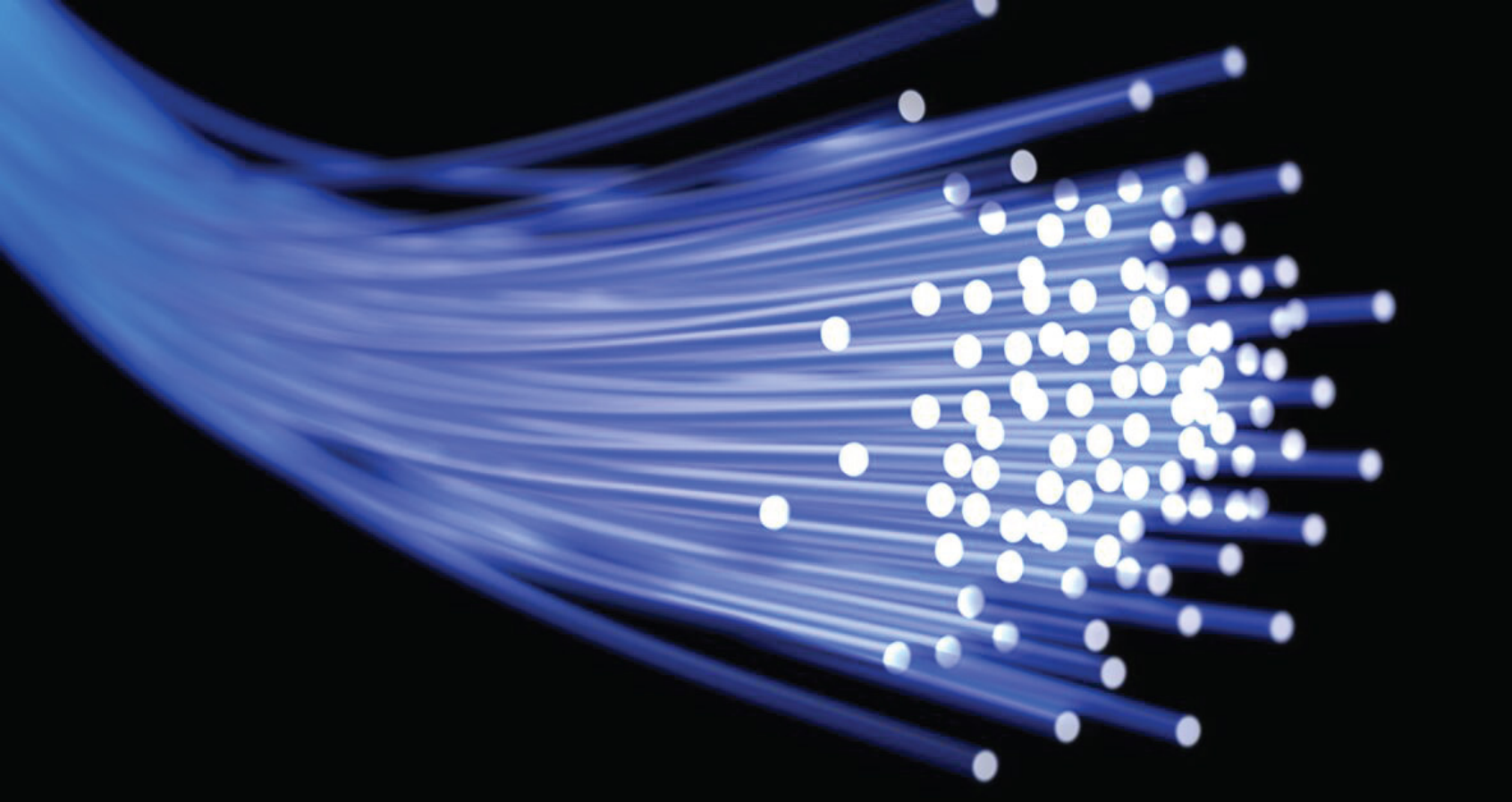
A bold and ambitious strategy

A key tool of defining the foundations for structuring the AI ecosystem in Benin, the National Strategy will enable technological solutions adapted to Benin's contemporary and future concerns in the fields of education, health, agriculture, environment, and touritsm. This is why the government insisted that all the stages of implementation be respected, from the prerequisites to its implementation, including the drafting of the document, its validation and its adoption in the Council of Ministers. Two important phases marked the national strategy's development :

the preliminary stage and
the development of the document.

Preliminaries

In the preliminary stage, the government passed a Digital Code Law and constructed 2,500 kilometers of optical fiber to strengthen public confidence. To densify the AI ecosystem, a national data center and a national administration network were also built. The latter has 187 sites. The information and data systems interoperability platform and the implementation of intelligent administration are all favorable assets for the advent of AI in Benin.

A consensual document for AI

The Ministry of Digital and Digitalization requested the expertise of the Antah firm, which worked with a multi-sectoral steering committee on the inventory of the AI sector in Benin. The subsequent document takes account of vital areas, namely: research, development and innovation, applications, marketing and intersectoral distribution, support and supervision of deployment. Coming from government sector departments as well as the private sector and associative or academic organizations,

the participants were divided into six groups. These were services, data and infrastructures, ecosystem, institutional, legal and regulatory framework, awareness of AI and development of human capital. The ambition of the latter is to have a national strategy to manage and highlight the massive data resulting from the execution of several projects in the digital sector. The strategy is made up of four programs that can be broken down into three phases for five years, with a portfolio containing one hundred and twenty-three actions impacting the public and private sectors.

Programmatic Framework

This national strategy sets out the implementation principles, axes and objectives that will enable the successful integration of AI in public administration, the private sector and society in general. It thus declines four implementation programs and ten objectives, grouped under four strategic axes, which will guide the implementation of artificial intelligence as a whole :

Programs	Global objectives	Specific objectives
Program 1 : Development and implementation of high-impact AI solutions	Implement use cases and high impact initiatives and scale, associated prototypes	- Set up in the datacenter the following components: Data Lake As A service, ML As A Service, etc ; - Implement AI solutions (Qualification and planning, development of specifications, selection of service providers, implementation, change management and deployment)
Program 2 : Strengthening the human capacities of actors in AI professions and jobs	Build human capacity on AI and big data management	- Build human capacity on AI and big data management.
Program 3 : Support for training, research, innovation, the private sector and cooperation	Provide better support to research, innovation, the private sector and cooperation in the field of AI	- Support training and research; - Develop sustainable funding mechanisms for research and innovation; - Strengthen sub-regional and international cooperation. - Create "local champions" in AI
Program 4 : Implementation of the AI governance framework and big data management	Update the legal and regulatory framework for AI and big data management	- Adopt a text governing AI in Benin; - Establish a controlled environment for the development of AI initiatives; - Define and deploy a management model (process, organization, governance and tools) for big data.

Financing mechanism

Over the period 2023-2027, the financing of the strategy is estimated at approximately 4.68 billion FCFA (USD$7,8 millions). The financing mechanism and the mobilization of financial resources are fundamental and condition the successful implementation of the Artificial Intelligence strategy. As the investments required are considerable, the financing strategy is based on the mobilization of resources, both internal and external. The main objective is to provide adequate and sustainable financial mechanisms and resources to initiate the Artificial Intelligence revolution in Benin.

The establishment of adequate consultative structures and the development of strategies will encourage massive financial support from development partners. External resources are decisive for financing the implementation of the national strategy, but the mobilization of internal financial resources remains necessary.

The following measures will greatly contribute to adequate management of the financing issue :

- Call for national funding from both the state and the private sector;
- Appeal for bilateral and multilateral external aid;
- Call for foreign private capital within the framework of a Public-Private Partnership;
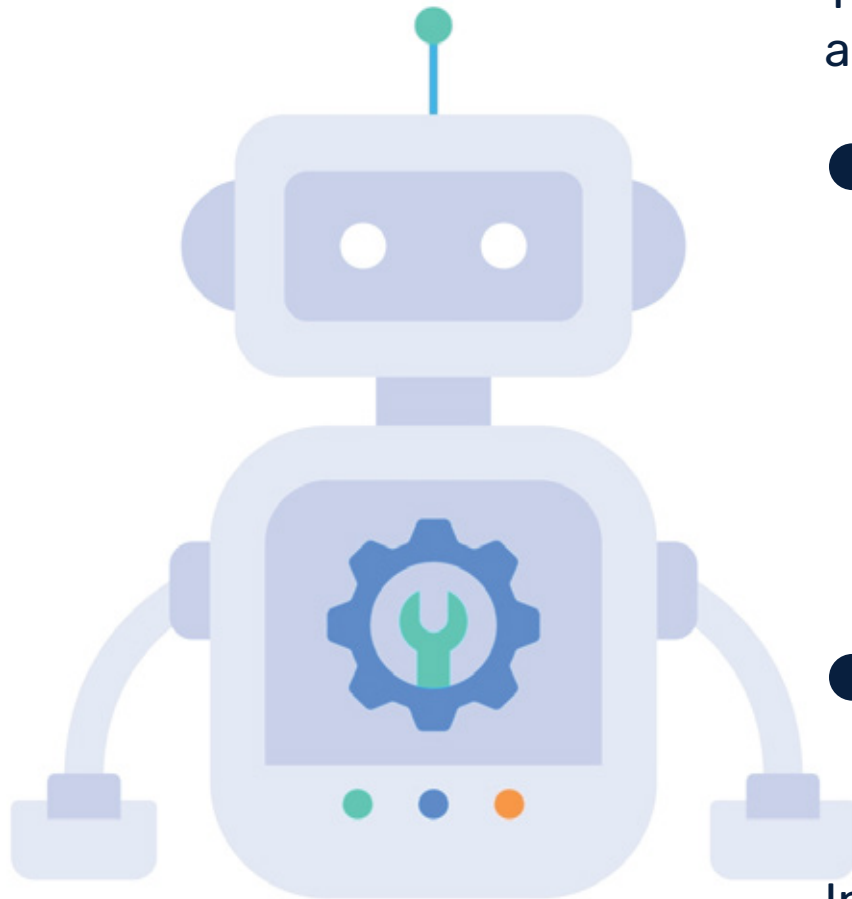- Mobilization of national savings.

Evaluation mechanism

To assess the performance obtained in the implementation of this strategy and in accordance with the principle of accountability and the "iterative and incremental" principle, an annual evaluation is prescribed.

This provision makes it possible to measure and evaluate the level of achievement of the objectives to:

- Support the management of the strategy by providing timely information on the progress made through strategic initiatives (programmes, projects and actions implemented) and take the necessary corrective actions in the event of a breach;

- Confirm and adjust the scopes of the work packages to be undertaken in the next phase;

- Carry out periodic evaluations to check if the strategy is working effectively and to promote knowledge sharing and learning among the parties involved;

- Promote accountability and the obligation to render accounts to the actors involved.
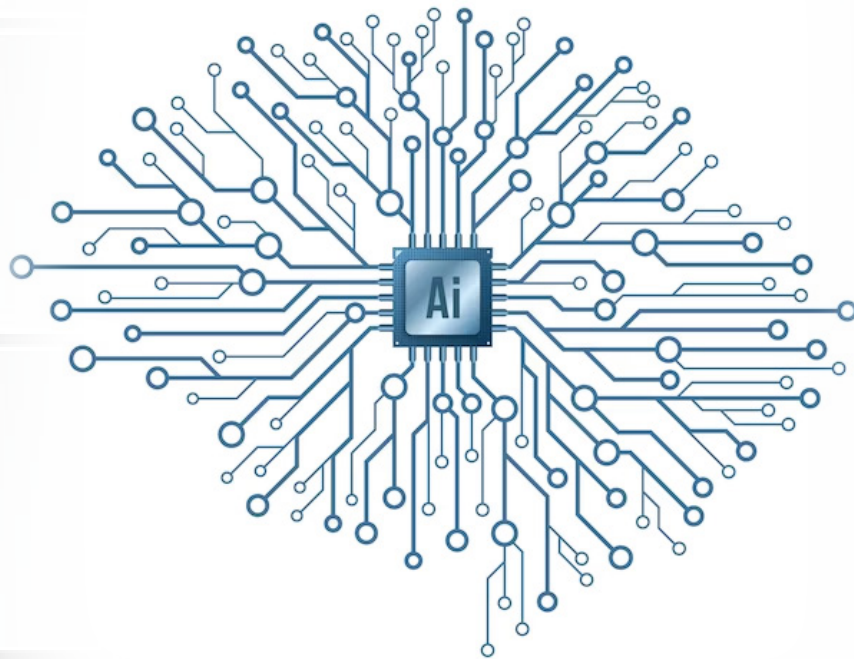
Implementation mechanism

The cross-cutting nature of this strategy will require an implementation mechanism at two levels :

- A transversal level that will allow the management and coordination of the overall implementation of the strategy. This level will be supported by the Ministry of Digital and Digitalization. This coordination body will work by involving the conference of Chief Information Officers and all the stakeholders (universities, startups, AI partners, etc.) in the ecosystem.

- A sectoral level that will allow the management of the implementation of the AI projects of the ministries concerned (which lead their projects).

In addition to these two levels, a public investment management framework is put in place.

Focus on implementation

The course is now set on the dissemination and implementation of the national strategy. With a projected cost of 4.68 billion FCFA (USD$7.8 millions) over five years, the implementation of this strategy offers the opportunity to exploit AI in the target areas of development to position Benin as a major player in AI in West Africa. The main actions of the strategy will be rapidly implemented in a public-private partnership, at the national level by targeting areas of development. Meanwhile, the hatching of an AI ecosystem is a long-term one and this strategy has put in place the foundations to allow this hatching.