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## **Empowering Africa's Digital Future: Advancing Data Literacy and Sovereignty in Rural and Peri-Rural Communities**

In the 21st century, data literacy is no longer a specialist skill, it is a foundational competency essential for all individuals, governments, and institutions participating in the digital economy. It encompasses the ability to read, interpret, create, and communicate data effectively to inform decisions and drive innovation. Alongside this, data sovereignty is based on the principle that data should be governed by the laws of the country in which it is generated. This has emerged as a cornerstone of Africa's digital independence and economic self-determination.

Despite this, widespread data illiteracy persists across rural and peri-rural African communities. Users often lack the skills to interpret data critically, evaluate sources, or engage with digital tools in a meaningful way. Furthermore, there is a significant gap in understanding the implications of data sovereignty, leaving many African users unaware of how their data is collected, used, or protected. These limitations stifle local innovation and reinforce digital dependency on external platforms and narratives.

This study draws on qualitative data collected during industry hackathons, workshops, and engagements with African researchers. These participatory settings revealed systemic deficiencies in data awareness and interpretation across multiple demographics, including students, developers, and civil society actors.

We argue that bridging Africa's data divide requires more than technical access it demands culturally relevant, multilingual education, inclusive data governance frameworks, and community-level empowerment strategies to foster both data literacy and sovereignty across the continent. By identifying critical gaps and proposing actionable solutions, this study contributes to building a more digitally autonomous and innovative African future.

**Keywords:** Data sovereignty, data literacy, digital future, data divide, data governance

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