African Union

Understanding the African Civic Tech Ecosystem: Exploring the "Playing Field" and Evaluating Potential

CIVIC TECH INNOVATION NETWORK

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DEUTSCHE ZUSAMMENARBEIT

Implemented by
giz Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH

Ushahidi

Understanding the African Civic Tech Ecosystem: Exploring the "Playing Field" and Evaluating Potential

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CTIN, established in 2017, is a pan-African Community of Practice and action learning network interested and committed to leveraging the nexus between technology and civic activism. CTIN's community is made up of practitioners, leaders, activists, technologists, researchers, and public servants working in Africa, including those in the African diaspora working to promote and advocate African civic tech

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Disclaimer: This document has been produced by CTIN as an outcome of the African Union Civic Tech Fund (AUCTF) 2.0. programme. The Research describes and analyses the African civic tech ecosystem. The report accurately reflects our views which we believe are reliable and grounded in research. Whilst reasonable care has been taken in preparing this report, no responsibility or liability is accepted for any errors or views expressed resulting from the information provided herein.

This Research Report represents one of the project outcomes for the African Union Civic Tech Fund (AUCTF) 2.0 programme. The AUCTF is funded by the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) and anchored in the African Union Commission (AUC) Women Youth and Gender Directorate.

Executive Summary

In recent years, the African continent has witnessed a burgeoning interest in civic technology (civic tech), with numerous initiatives emerging across various countries. These initiatives encompass a wide range of digital tools and platforms aimed at enhancing civic engagement, promoting transparency and accountability, and fostering democratic participation. However, despite the growing importance of civic tech in Africa, there remains a lack of comprehensive understanding regarding the overall ecosystem, including the key players, challenges, and opportunities.

This research Report is one of the outcomes of the African Union Civic Tech Fund (AUCTF) 2.0, a programme that is anchored in the African Union Commission (AUC) Women, Gender and Youth Division, with financial and technical support from the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) that aims to strengthen the role of technology in improving governance and development across Africa. The research intends to support the AUCTF programme by identifying and analysing the key ecosystem players in the African civic tech sector and the broader digital innovation sector. As a baseline study for the AUCTF, this research report aims to map the African civic tech ecosystem to provide insights into the diverse landscape of initiatives, opportunities, and challenges. By doing so, the study seeks to enhance understanding of the "playing field" and identify areas for intervention and collaboration to further strengthen civic tech initiatives across Africa.

The research uses a mixed methods approach, drawing on data collected from CTIN's African Civic Tech Atlas that profiles African civic tech initiatives and case studies, and qualitative interviews with the AUCTF grantees. Key findings from the report highlight the importance of sustaining funding for civic tech, partnership building, collaboration with development partners, and digital skills training, alongside civic education (both online and offline) to support and sustain civic tech projects in the longer term. Further, institutional and policy support is crucial, where government actors see civic tech projects as complementary, rather than antagonistic. Civic tech in Africa shows potential to scale but this relies on strengthening the existing ecosystem and connecting civic tech innovators between regions and within existing regions. For the African civic tech sector to grow, the research findings illustrate that civic tech actors could benefit from building upon the existing foundation carved by prominent civic tech role players. Building on this foundation instead of building new frames was identified as a smart strategy to sustain the civic tech sector.

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Introduction

> "Although civic technology in Africa is limited because of the low access to the internet, it remains the best tool for democratic change. Civic tech has increased the power of citizens over political life and made governments more accessible, efficient, effective and accountable. Better yet, it has fostered inclusive and participatory governance of communities through the strong involvement of non-state actors such as civil society organisations."
>
> Tine and Bakari, 2022

Civic technology (civic tech) is an emerging field in Africa, after gaining momentum from 2010 onwards (Mia, 2022(a)). While the definitions of civic tech remain fuzzy, taking on different interpretations (Mia, 2022(a)), civic tech, is often described as technology that aims to bridge the gap between citizens and government by providing tools, platforms or civic engagement platforms that can increase transparency, accountability and the effectiveness of governance systems (Piexoto and Sifry, 2017), such as the access to public information and improved public service delivery. Civic tech innovation in Africa is growing steadily, with a concentration of initiatives based in more developed economies such as South Africa, Nigeria and Kenya (Mia, 2022(b); Karuri Sebina and Mutua, 2023). Despite an uneven concentration of civic tech initiatives (and actors) regionally, new projects and solutions are being developed in countries and regions that historically have not been present in the civic tech landscape. The African Union Civic Tech Fund (AUCTF), launched in 2021, has received attention and praise for supporting civic tech innovators to scale their solutions sustainably, through capacity development and mentorship. The AUCTF emphasises the importance of meaningful citizen participation, and supporting governance solutions that are transparent, accountable, and responsive to the needs of the people. Following the success of the first round of the programme, the AUCTF 2.0 was launched in 2024, with new implementation partners - the Civic Tech Innovation Network (CTIN) who would lead the administration and direction of research outputs, including the importance of ecosystem-mapping of the African civic tech sector; and Ushahidi that would drive the capacity development curriculum through targeted training sessions and ongoing mentoring.

This research report is the first output from the AUCTF 2.0. programme and serves as a baseline study on the African civic tech ecosystem. Firstly, we describe and contextualise the AUCTF programme. Secondly, we define the research objectives, and more specifically the research questions and methods, followed by the scope and limitations. Thirdly, we describe the nature of the African civic tech landscape based on a literature review and an overall profile of civic tech innovators. Thereafter, we present and analyse key findings from the research that speak to regional and local opportunities and challenges, as well as common issues facing the sector. Finally, we provide recommendations - both for further research and ideas around how to

advocate for institutional buy-in, alongside policy alignment and partnership-building within and beyond country borders. The report concludes with an overall assessment of the African civic tech ecosystem, pointing to ways in which the sector can be strengthened and supported.

Background and Context

As Africa works toward the goals outlined in the African Union (AU) Agenda 2063, the AUCTF offers valuable support for promoting citizen engagement, participation, and activism. Anchored in the AUC Women, Youth and Gender Directorate, with support from the GIZ this initiative aims to strengthen the role of technology in improving governance and development across the continent. AUCTF 2.0[1] follows the success of its first round, offering a 12-month program that supports African organisations, initiatives, and projects. Contextually, the continental policy framework of the AU Agenda 2063 that is shaping the development agenda is an important contextual driver of working towards sustainable and equitable socio-economic development and innovation in Africa. AU Agenda 2063 is the African Union's long-term plan for transforming Africa into a global powerhouse of the future. It was launched in 2013 to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Organization of African Unity (OAU), now the AU. The agenda outlines Africa's development goals and aspirations over a 50-year period (2013–2063) and is based on the vision of a prosperous, peaceful, and integrated continent. 8 goals complement the AU 2063 vision. In particular, goal 3: **Governance and Human Rights**: seeking to promote democracy, respect for human rights, the rule of law, and accountable governance); goal 6: **Environmental Sustainability**: supporting sustainable development solutions, and protecting ecosystems, and goal 8: **Youth and Women's Empowerment**: placing a strong emphasis on empowering women and youth, recognizing their critical role in Africa's future development). Overall, Agenda 2063 is viewed as the AU's roadmap to success with technological innovation representing a potential catalyst for increased development and prosperity.

The African Union Commission (AUC) is the executive arm of the AU, responsible for implementing its policies, promoting regional integration, ensuring peace and security, advancing economic and social development, and representing Africa on the global stage. The AUCTF programme sits within the Women, Youth and Gender Directorate at the AUC. By linking the AUCTF programme to the Directorate, the goal is to support youth and women empowerment through technology innovation and greater citizen engagement and participation. Young people in Africa make up a predominant percentage of the population and in the future, Africa's youth population is projected to become the highest in the world. Young people, particularly marginalised people need support and technology is already playing a role to connect and educate citizens about their rights and their agency. Given the AUCTF's alignment with the AU, the ultimate goal is to support longer-term policy implementation to support African civic tech solutions to both scale but to also demonstrate to government departments and other

[1] **Although the programme is in its second iteration, the Report hereafter refers to the programme as AUCTF.*

stakeholders that collaboration is possible and the development of civic tech solutions does not always need to be viewed as antagonistic but can complement government service delivery.

Fig. 1: *AUCTF Grantees showing their host countries (Source: CTIN, 2024)*

To date, the AUCTF has enabled 15 innovators from 11 countries to develop and expand their civic tech solutions that can drive citizen-led action. The focus is on using technology to increase citizen participation in governance, address pressing development challenges, and create more inclusive decision-making processes. From this year's cohort, the diversity of grantee profiles and projects was seen as beneficial, with each project receiving 15,000 Euros to scale and further develop their projects. The focus is on using technology to increase citizen

participation in governance, address pressing development challenges, and create more inclusive decision-making processes. From this year's cohort, the diversity of grantee profiles and projects was seen as beneficial.

The second round of AUCTF presents a significant opportunity for grantees to tackle governance and development issues using data and digital technologies. The fund emphasises the importance of meaningful citizen participation, ensuring that governance structures are transparent, accountable, and responsive to the needs of the people. By supporting projects that foster better communication and data-driven decision-making, the AUCTF programme contributes to building a more engaged and empowered citizenry.

Research Objectives and Methods

This research aims to map the African civic tech ecosystem to provide insights into the diverse landscape of initiatives, stakeholders, and regional challenges. By doing so, the study seeks to enhance understanding of the "playing field" and identify areas for intervention and collaboration to further strengthen civic tech initiatives across Africa. The research question and subquestions are:

- What is the role and function of the African civic tech ecosystem?
    - What are the key characteristics of African civic tech actors (innovators and interested stakeholders)?
    - What are some of the emerging opportunities and challenges facing African civic tech actors?
    - How do geographical, political, social, and cultural contexts impact the rate of civic tech adoption?

The research uses a mixed-methods approach. Firstly, by drawing on CTIN's African Civic Tech Atlas, a database of civic tech initiatives and case studies in Africa. Currently, there are over 290 civic tech initiatives (also referred to as projects) in the Atlas, with over 60 in-depth case studies of civic tech being applied across African countires. CTIN's role as a knowledge hub and network of civic tech innovators and practitioners is also influential as the organisation has documented the extent of the African civic tech ecosystem in Sub-Saharan Africa in a previous project[2]. In this process, a list of relevant stakeholders in the civic tech space was collected, categorising the different organisation's key aims, objectives and areas of expertise. This stakeholder list will be used in this research to analyse the current roleplayers in the African context. Secondly, the research draws on qualitative interviews with AUCTF grantees, allowing for a depth of insights to be collected from participants. The research relied on purposeful

[2] In 2024, CTIN collaborated with OpenUp on a Regional Co-Design project, funded by CIVICUS, that delivered preliminary user research to support CIVICUS's Digital Democracy Initiative's Enable and Amplify project. To view the full report, visit:

sampling because of the research's relation to the AUCTF programme. The interviews were scheduled as group interviews to maximise time and to allow for participants to reflect both individually, and collectively, on issues facing their respective geographical regions. As such, interviews were grouped into three parts: the first interview was conducted with participants from North, Central, and Southern Africa; the second with participants from East Africa and the third with participants from West Africa. Participants that could not make the interview agreed to respond to the interview questions in writing. Participation in the interviews was voluntary, with most of the AUCTF grantees participating in the process. Participants were informed in advance of the nature and purpose of the interviews and how the results from the interviews would be used in this research output. To accommodate participants' informed consent, the CTIN team asked participants to sign a form.

Scope and Limitations

The choice of qualitative research methods and the relatively small sample size can be viewed as a research limitation. However, the quality of the data collected from the interviews allows for a rich and first-hand interpretation of civic tech innovators' current experiences, perspectives and lessons. Another challenge related to the full participation of grantees in the interviews was the language barrier between French-speaking participants and the research team who only could lead interviews in English. As a way to overcome this challenge, French grantees were invited to respond to questions in written format, with the research team using the Google Translate tool. Therefore, we were able to mitigate language barriers. Although this is not an ideal scenario towards meaningful and equal participation of all grantees, we hope to address this challenge in future by getting assistance from French translators who can act as a bridge between grantees and the rest of the cohort and programme team for future research outputs that are planned throughout the AUCTF grant period. Seeing that the research focuses on a selection of civic tech innovators working in Africa, the research findings cannot generalise the African civic tech ecosystem and cannot definitively identify all the opportunities and challenges facing the sector. The nature of this research is exploratory and aims to start a conversation on the status quo of the African civic tech landscape - and what the potential for growth and support may reveal. The next section discusses the role of the African civic tech ecosystem based on a critical appraisal of literature in the field.

Understanding the African Civic Tech Ecosystem

The African civic tech sector in Africa is slowly gaining traction after first emerging in 2007 when the open-source crowdsourcing platform to report and monitor post-election violence was developed by Ushahidi in Kenya (Couve, *et al*. 2018). Since then, other events such as the Arab Spring in Tunisia, Morocco and Egypt foregrounded the power of widely used digital platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook and Twitter to organise pro-democracy protests, to fight against the threats of authoritarian government regimes. In this way, civic tech served as a conduit of

information and resistance and supported advocacy efforts amongst civil society groups and everyday citizens (Democracy Works Foundation, 2021). In the decade that preceded the Arab Spring movement, civic tech initiatives have continued to emerge in other parts of Africa. Many of these initiatives are started organically and generally respond to a vacuum left by governments related to meeting their mandate to deliver public services and act in the best interests of citizens and the public good. The civic tech landscape in Africa continues to grow and evolve, although the growth of new projects tends to be distributed unevenly per country, with regional dominance in Southern, West and East Africa (Karuri-Sebina and Mutua, 2023). From CTIN's Civic Tech Atlas, the highest number of civic tech organisations (and projects) are found in South Africa, Kenya, Nigeria, Uganda and Tanzania.

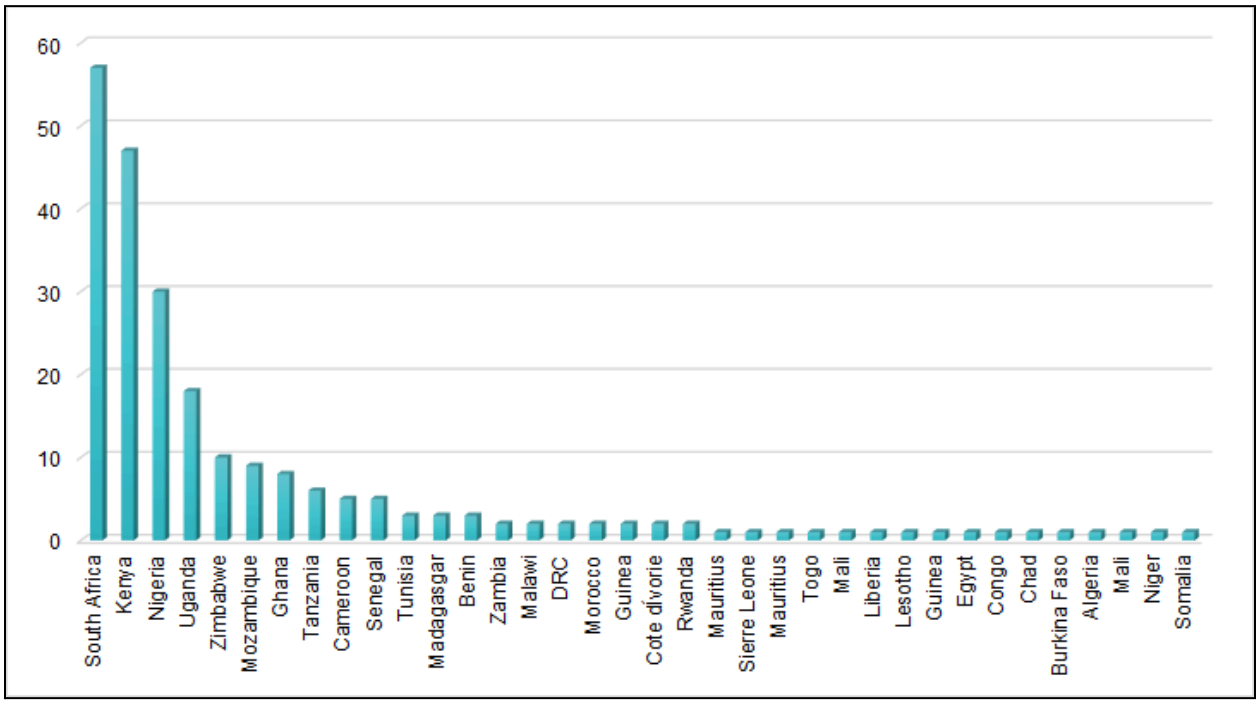

Fig. 2: *Number of Civic Tech Projects per African Country (Source: analysis from CTIN African Civic Tech Atlas: https://https://civictech.africa/databases/)*

Correspondingly, the highest number of civic tech organisations (and projects) are found in South Africa, Kenya, Nigeria, Uganda and Tanzania. CTIN has profiled over 240 civic tech initiatives on the African continent, with new projects being added to our database every year. Regarding the sector/thematic distribution of civic tech projects, over 60% of all initiatives fall into the democracy and governance category (Mia, 2022(a); Karuri-Sebina, 2023; Iyer, 2024). It is interesting to see a new shift in the scope of newer civic tech innovations that have been birthed during the COVID-19 pandemic (see Zisengwe, 2021). These civic tech projects have moved beyond strict democracy and governance aims, moving away from watchdogging initiatives to more tangible solutions such as supporting more efficient and safe public services, mobilising public safety initiatives to reduce gender-based violence, mobile health (mHealth) services,

Educational Technology (EdTech), youth empowerment, and agri-tech. Table 1 provides some examples of newer civic tech projects that are emerging within these sectors.

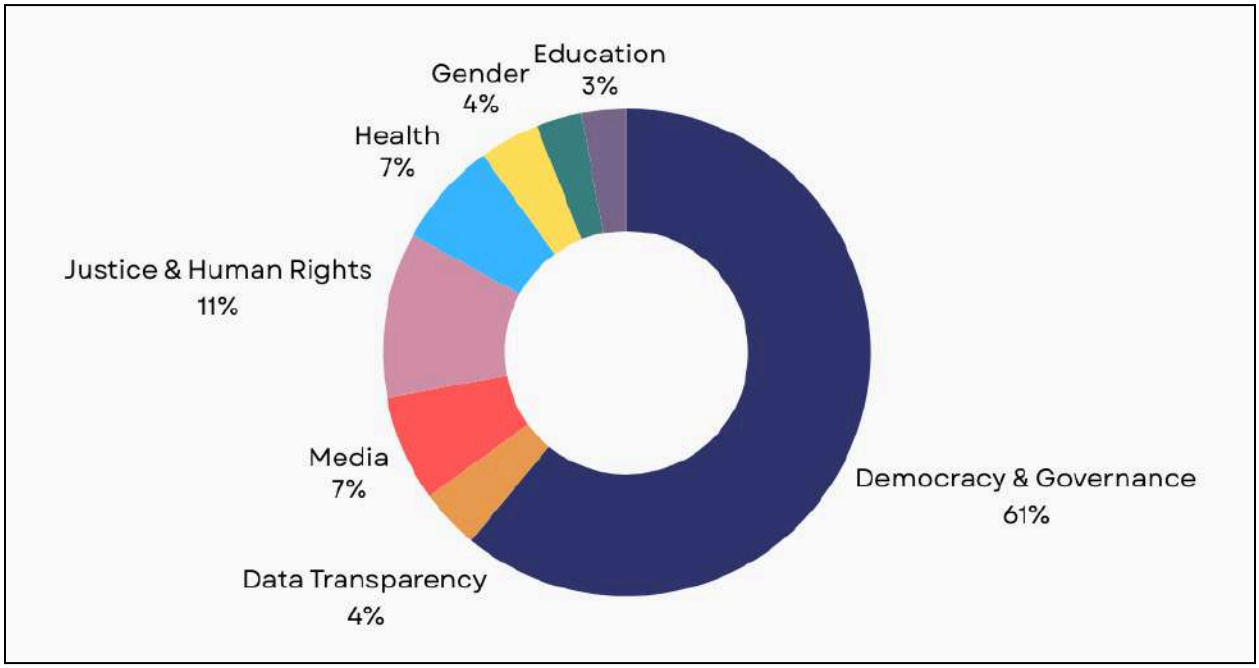

Fig. 3: *Civic Tech Project Sectors in Africa (Author, adapted from CTIN African Civic Tech Atlas , 2024)*

Table 1: *Examples of civic tech initiatives from emerging sectors (Source: CTIN African Civic Tech Atlas)*

Name of civic tech initiative	Sector	Key Aim	Country	Start date
TALKAM	Human-rights abuse reporting	TALKAM Human Rights App is a civic tech tool dedicated to addressing human rights abuses, promoting and protecting human rights and stimulating reportage and actions among citizens, agencies and organisations. The goal is to use technology to disrupt human rights abuses, ensuring that victims become victors.	Nigeria	2019
Kwanele	Gender-based violence prevention and reporting	Kwanele is designed to help victims of gender-based violence with the ability to alert officials of any threat to their safety through a mobile app. The app also provides resources in the form of a database to support survivors.	South Africa	2021

Villgro Kenya	mHealth	Villgro Kenya addresses the lack of access to quality and affordable health services & technologies in Africa by investing in innovations with the potential for scalable and sustainable business models and by offering technical assistance to entrepreneurs.	Kenya	2022
Kukua	EdTech	Kukua is an educational entertainment company and the creator of 'Super Sema'. Its mission is to give 21st-century children the skills and capacity to dream beyond what they think is possible and to imagine and create a better world. The platform aims to empower today's generation of children through entertainment.	Kenya	
YoMobi	Youth empowerment	YoMobi is a digital tool suite that can help to address multifaceted challenges related to youth development, unemployment, and bridging the digital divide for civil society organizations. One of its core functions is enhancing access to suitable technologies and resources, empowering civil society organizations to provide impactful youth development programs	South Africa	2022
Agro Supply	Agritech	Agro Supply aims to end poverty in Africa through an agricultural technology approach. This is a layaway technology that allows farmers to use a USSD code to access their mobile micro-savings. Through the save-to-buy layaway menu, farmers can scratch card and access mobile money for micro-savings	Uganda	2022

The examples of civic tech referenced in Table 1 reflect similar patterns of the overall sector, where the countries in which civic tech projects dominate include: South Africa, Kenya, Nigeria, and Uganda. Civic tech projects in these countries benefit from a network of civic tech (and civil society) actors that arguably may support greater innovation and entrepreneurship. Similarly, funding for such projects could be influenced by a healthy regional civic tech ecosystem, where previous civically driven organisations demonstrate tangible impacts with their civic tech tools or platforms. The next section aims to characterise the existing African civic tech landscape - highlighting the key role players in the ecosystem and regional “champions” or anchor organisations.

African Civic Tech Trends: Dynamic and Emerging

The state of the African civic tech space reflects similar trends found in the Global South, with successful case studies from parts of Africa and Latin America (Brazil) and Asia (India) that are using digital tools and applications to support citizen engagement, empowerment, democracy and governance (Piexto and Sifry, 2017). Regarding government responsiveness to civic tech projects in Africa, previous studies have found that civic tech projects and associated organisations that drive them, are less likely to be accepted by government actors. This is contrasted by a generally more positive government sentiment in countries in the United Kingdom and across various states of North America. CTIN has been profiling African civic tech initiatives and case studies as a way to better understand the nature and growth of the civic tech space overall. Some observations that we have made in the past four years since beginning this exploration is that the civic tech space is healthy and continues to grow and evolve, based on the importance of civic tech tools to support citizen engagement and empowerment, often in countries that face multiple challenges such as high levels of corruption, a lack of accountable governance systems and inadequate basic services delivery. In these contexts, civic tech aims to plug these governance holes by bringing information and services to citizens that can help them have a sense of agency through direct participation, either between each other or between groups and governments. Dabo and Pouyé (2022) note that the best chance for collaboration of civic tech initiators with government actors is at the local level, where government officials may be more willing and open to support emergent forms of civic participation and deliberative democracy, based on the efficiency of civic tech platforms - and the increased levels of adoption and usefulness of civic tech platforms by users (citizens). Dabo and Pouyé (2022:4) further characterise civic tech by its aim of being citizen-centric and "involv[ing] digital activists, data scientists, bloggers, and influencers - among others - who are using technologies to bring the masses to the centre of democratic governance." African civic tech projects use a range of technologies ranging from lower tech applications such as SMS/USSD and basic web applications to more advanced tools such as mobile applications and chatbots, social media platforms and tools, open source software and platforms, and finally to very advanced tools such as blockchain, Artificial Intelligence and Machine Learning applications that use big datasets and require more capital to sustain, more time and labour to clean and manage datasets.

Summary of Opportunities and Challenges

Africa's civic tech ecosystem is expanding, driven by growing internet access, widespread mobile phone use, and a young, tech-savvy population. However, fully harnessing its potential requires overcoming several challenges and leveraging key opportunities. Today, over 40% of Africans have access to the internet, and mobile phones are common, even in remote areas (Gillwald and Mothobi, 2019). This digital growth allows people to participate more in governance, hold leaders accountable, and push for transparency through various tech tools and platforms. However, there are challenges. While urban areas benefit from good digital

infrastructure, other areas, especially rural regions, still struggle with poor internet access, high data costs, and unreliable electricity. In many parts of rural regions across Africa, internet connectivity remains spotty, limiting the reach of civic tech initiatives. Additionally, the rules governing digital activities across African countries are still developing and can sometimes restrict innovation. For instance, internet shutdowns or restrictive cybersecurity laws in countries like Ethiopia, Uganda and Tunisia can hinder the work of civic tech organisations. The ultimate goal of a vibrant and functioning civic tech ecosystem is the ability to sustain itself, to serve its beneficiaries (in most cases citizens) - and to adapt to changes. The categories below summarise key components to supporting an active and healthy civic tech ecosystem. Each component should be viewed as a part of the whole, being able to complement other components. Within each of these components, we will address challenges that may hinder civic tech development and adoption - as well as some of the opportunities or solutions that can overcome these challenges.

- **Scaling Civic Tech – Sustainable Funding & Financing Pathways**: One of the biggest challenges is ensuring that civic tech projects can grow and sustain themselves over time. This challenge is not unique to Africa. Many civic tech initiatives rely on short-term grants, making it difficult for them to scale or continue their work. For African civic tech innovators, there needs to be a focus on developing sustainable financing models, such as impact investment or social enterprise approaches, and planning for different or alternate scenarios which can help civic tech organisations become more self-reliant and resilient (see Mia, 2022(b); Razzanno et al., 2022).

- **Human Resources, Human-Centered Design & Leadership**: A strong civic tech ecosystem requires skilled human resources and leadership that understands the importance of human-centred design (HCD). This means developing tech solutions that are not only effective but also meet the actual needs of the people they are designed to serve. Investing in training and leadership development is crucial to building capabilities that can drive innovation, ensuring civic tech solutions are user-friendly and accessible (see Iyer, 2024).

- **Partnership Building**: As Dabo and Pouyé (2022) assert, collaboration is key to the success of civic tech initiatives. Building partnerships with other organizations, both within the civic tech space and across different sectors, can help share resources, knowledge, and expertise. For example, partnerships between tech startups, NGOs, and universities can create more comprehensive solutions that address complex social issues. Additionally, international partnerships can provide access to new funding sources, technology, and best practices.

- **Relationship to/with Government**: Civic tech projects often interact with governments, which can be both a challenge and an opportunity. Engaging positively with government authorities can help civic tech initiatives gain support, scale their impact, and even influence policy changes. However, navigating this relationship requires a careful

approach, especially in regions where governments may be resistant to transparency or critical civic engagement. For instance, projects focused on improving public services or fighting corruption need to balance advocacy with collaboration to avoid potential pushback. Supporting initiatives like the Open Government Partnership is a start in the right direction (Dabo and Souye, 2022).

- **Political and Socio-Economic Conditions**: The broader political and socio-economic environment plays a significant role in shaping the success of civic tech initiatives. Stable political conditions and supportive economic policies can create an enabling environment for these projects to thrive. Conversely, instability, restrictive laws, or economic challenges can hinder their effectiveness. In terms of digital infrastructure and capacity, while internet and mobile access are improving, disparities still exist, particularly in rural areas. Addressing these gaps is essential for ensuring that civic tech tools reach and benefit all segments of society (Tine and Bakari, 2021).
- **End User Engagement & Acceptance – (Degree of) Public Participation and Inclusion**: Ultimately, the success of civic tech depends on its ability to engage end-users—ordinary citizens. Ensuring that everyone can participate equally, regardless of their background, is crucial. This means providing access to technology *and* ensuring that civic tech solutions are inclusive and designed with the needs of diverse communities in mind. For example, initiatives should consider language barriers, accessibility for people with disabilities, and ways to engage older populations who may be less familiar with digital tools. Encouraging broad public participation can help ensure that civic tech truly serves the public good and contributes to more inclusive and equitable governance across Africa (see Mia, 2022(a) and Iyer, 2024).

By focusing on these areas, Africa's civic tech ecosystem can overcome its challenges and unlock the full potential of technology to improve governance, promote social accountability, and drive inclusive development. Getting appropriate policy and institutional support is crucial to support civic tech innovation in the long term. This is why advocating for government support and positive responses through partnerships and advocacy programmes would be a meaningful approach to pursue. The next section unpacks the research findings from qualitative interviews with AUCTF awardees. The discussion is framed and analysed within the emerging debates in the African civic tech literature about the characteristics and the status quo of the ecosystem.

Key Findings

The findings presented in this section offer a consolidated analysis of the African civic tech ecosystem's role, characteristics, and potential to scale. The viewpoints and insights were collected and analysed using a qualitative research approach and method. The insights gained from this exploration provide a nuanced understanding of the opportunities and challenges within the sector, offering a foundation for strategic interventions and a call for efforts to

strengthen and sustain the ecosystem. The findings are presented in three sections, starting with a regional analysis of civic tech in Africa. Secondly, the predominant opportunities and challenges facing the sector are highlighted. Lastly, we identify some gaps that can be plugged: to identify appropriate support mechanisms and potential strategies to accelerate capacity-building and resource mobilisation within the ecosystem.

A Regional Analysis of Civic Tech in Africa

> **''Across Africa, different civic tech initiatives have been developed in recent years with similarities and differences to other continents. Governments in Africa tend to be less cooperative with these initiatives than elsewhere. Operating in a more difficult context, African civic tech is often more technologically flexible and pushes its public accountability agenda with more vigour than Western countries." (Dabo and Pouyé, 2022:1)**

The African civic tech sector is gaining momentum as innovators harness the power of technology to tackle pressing social and political challenges. From improving government transparency to enhancing citizen engagement, civic tech initiatives are transforming how communities interact with their governments and hold them accountable. Despite its potential, the African civic tech ecosystem remains diverse, yet fragmented, with varying levels of maturity, success, and impact across regions. Furthermore, there are significant regional disparities in the availability of resources, infrastructure, and support, leading to uneven development and success of civic tech initiatives across the continent. Understanding these challenges at both the continental and regional levels is crucial for developing strategies that can help the ecosystem thrive. Below, we present regional profiles of African civic tech, highlighting the characteristics of the landscape, the scope for growth, and challenges that may hinder scaling civic tech solutions.

North Africa

The civic tech sector in North Africa is relatively less mature than in other parts of Africa. However, there is evidence that the sector is growing, in response to a lack of government transparency and accountability. Within the region, Tunisia represents the most opportunity for civic tech organisations to be tested, developed and implemented. Civic engagement platforms are therefore in demand because citizens are aware of their rights and responsibilities to affect change in their communities. This sense of empowerment was sparked by the Arab Spring movement, triggering a gradual uptake of new civic tech tools ever since. The importance of civic engagement was emphasised by Respondent X who notes: "The main currency of civic tech is engagement. So, the more you have engagement, the more you have users or visitors, the more traffic you have. The more traction you gain, and the more you attract donors or people who are willing to help…. and it helps [you] like gain momentum." Regarding approaches to partnering with government officials, different strategies are available but one of the key ways to

build government trust is to pilot civic tech platforms and solutions to leadership bodies or institutions so that solutions can be demonstrated to add value to and for governments.

> **"Usually, when they are open enough [governments], they will see that it actually opens up their perspective because sometimes they don't know that it is even possible to do that. And when they do, they start dreaming [about the possibilities of civic tech] and they are eager to work with us." (Respondent X)**

In the early stages of working on civic tech solutions, partnering with governments can also be a barrier because of the lack of a legal policy framework that enables collaboration between government agencies and tech startups. But the example of Idaraty in Tunisia illustrates how to build strategic partnerships with the Open Government Partnership, a global movement that supports the use of open data and open government approaches. Partnering with the OGP can build credibility and this relationship has enabled national government buy-in in Tunisia.

> **"It was one of the main pain points, and we lost a lot of time connecting the dots because there is no mechanism, like legal mechanism, that enables public participation to work with startups. There's a lot of fear, there's a lot of apprehension, and nobody wants to be the first to do it. So, we did a lot of projects in order to prove that we are worthy of that opportunity, and now [we are] working within the Open Government Partnership framework...we work with partners, with ministries and independent institutions. Sometimes local government, but not much actually. It's not easy to scale, like human stakeholder engagement that easily...It's a lot of heavy work, so we decided to just work with the national level." (Respondent X)**

When it comes to supporting the civic tech sector in North Africa, innovators believe in the power of collaboration and learning from best practices - both from Africa and from the rest of the world. The importance of building networks and sharing lessons and learning was raised as an important way to drive civic tech innovation.

> **"Actually, I think there we have a lot to learn from Africa, from similar countries that have similar challenges, but also learn from other countries that are doing civic tech and gov tech for more years than us. And we can learn how, what they did wrong, and more what they did right... By collaborating together, we prevent double effort or double work and we put ourselves in a network that can help us connect better and move faster." (Respondent X)**

Overall, the North African civic tech sector can be described as undergoing a teething stage. However, the conditions are suitable for more civic tech actors to take part in the ecosystem. While Tunisia dominates in terms of the number of civic tech projects compared to other

countries in the region, there are opportunities for civic tech innovators to connect and learn from each other. Taking a long-term view on the development potential of the region, civic tech in North Africa should leverage the work being done by community-based organisations and non-governmental organisations that support improving democracy and governance, protecting human rights abuses and advocating for public service delivery. One of the key barriers to linking civic tech innovators in other African countries remains language barriers. In North Africa, Arabic and French are more dominant languages, with English not being the primary language. It is therefore important to think of ways to include civic tech actors from across the continent and accommodate for learning and skills training to be multilingual, especially in the medium to long term.

Central Africa

The Central African civic tech ecosystem was described to be in an embryonic stage. The country in which civic tech is showing signs of growth is Chad. There is little known about the civic tech sector in other parts of the region. According to Respondent Y, the long-term sustainability and implementation of civic tech initiatives are not known, with accessibility to funding being a major challenge.

> **"The current state of the civic technology ecosystem is embryonic, some civil society organizations and incubators have been able to develop some projects. But the large-scale deployment of these civic tech initiatives remains a big mystery. Often faced with the difficulty of accessing funding, the initiatives are always in a test state". (Respondent Y)**

The political context is also an important factor that is shaping the perception of civic tech actors in the region. Many countries in Central Africa are governed by military rule, making it difficult to get the support of those in power. In this context, civic tech actors' intentions and means of supporting citizen engagement are viewed as a threat to the status quo.

> **''[There is a] lack of a specific legal status for civic-tech, reluctance of the authorities with regard to civic-tech initiatives, almost non-existent financing mechanism for civic-tech initiatives.'' (Respondent Y)**

> **The degree of openness in my opinion is 5/10, since in a country like ours where the regime is held by a military man, the slightest civic technology initiative that challenges the authority is seen as an incitement to a popular uprising.'' (Respondent Z)**

Similar to North Africa, there are language barriers in Central Africa that could be hindering greater participation of civic tech actors with their English-speaking counterparts in neighbouring countries. Interestingly, the link between Central Africa and North Africa has not been made in terms of collaborating on projects or sharing data. This disjuncture could be the result of the different political and regulatory frameworks in the respective countries. Advocacy

strategies therefore should begin with building trust from within to educate governments on the role of civic tech and work towards demonstrating the benefits of citizen engagement.

West Africa

The civic tech sector in West Africa represents a significant growth opportunity. Within the region, Nigeria is a dominant country, with the highest number of civic tech organisations compared to other countries. The Nigerian civic tech ecosystem has a total of 56 civic tech initiatives that are active and operate across domains such as 1) citizen engagement and community building; 2). Transparency and Accountability; 3) Public Service Delivery; 4) Elections; and 5) Justice and Human Rights (see Civic Hive, 2024:13). Notable examples of civic tech initiatives in Nigeria are Co-Creation Hub (Cc-HUB), BudgIT, ElectHER, Tracka and Connected Development. While still progressing, Nigeria's civic tech ecosystem "has shown immense potential for addressing some of the most pressing social and political challenges of our time" (*Civic Hive, 2024: 10)*.

> **"The current stage of the civic tech ecosystem in Nigeria is vibrant and rapidly evolving... It's still in its early stage, but it is evolving rapidly. Most of the top initiatives that we have seen are ones that are aimed at enhancing civic engagement." (Respondent C)**

Participants from West Africa agree that the civic tech sector in the region is rapidly evolving, spurred by the diverse range of civic tech platforms and tools aimed to increase citizen engagement and demand more transparency and accountability from respective governments. The Nigerian civic tech ecosystem in particular benefits from a range of stakeholders in the ecosystem. These have been referred to as "civic tech enablers" (funders, innovation labs and incubators), "civic tech developers" (civil society organisations, innovators, journalists and media organisations, governments, and researchers/academics, and lastly the "civic tech users (the intended beneficiaries of civic tech tools) (see Civic Hive, 2024). With high levels of youth in Nigeria (and on the continent as a whole), young people are ideally suited to benefit from civic tech tools as they are already familiar with using digital tools and platforms.

> **"This is quite a unique time in Nigeria, where not just the government but also [the] civil society community are being intentional in leveraging tech to drive social change." (Respondent D)**

While Nigeria represents the potential for the civic tech landscape to grow, there remain challenges such as high levels of inequality and a widening digital divide that are threatening the civic tech sector (Cc-Hub, 2023). Adequate investment in digital technologies and digital training are key priorities for the government. Improving digital infrastructure and internet access across West African countries is equally important.

> **"Civic tech relies on digital infrastructure and internet connectivity...We need to rely on mobile connectivity. These are very effective for the use of**

civic tools. The majority of Nigerians still live in rural communities. We still have a great deficit in terms of infrastructure gaps. [The] Government is key to addressing these gaps." (Respondent C)

Competition in the civic tech ecosystem is a recurring challenge. Limited and uneven distribution of funding represents a threat to the region. Sustaining civic tech requires buy-in from a range of stakeholders from the civic, private, government and knowledge sectors. While Nigeria has brought in the most investment for civic tech projects, civic tech projects are emerging in other countries such as the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ghana and Togo. Best practices from Nigeria can be used to support the growth of civic tech innovation in neighbouring countries.

"We need to identify that we have limited resources in Nigeria and Africa as a whole. But we need to innovate with those resources. What is most important is a way to sustain digital literacy." (Respondent C)

Sustainable financing remains the biggest challenge. To scale and achieve greater impact, civic tech initiatives need to invest in core capabilities, skills, human resources and data management. Civic tech innovators can address this challenge by exploring alternative funding models and strategies, alongside thinking of how to best mobilise resources between ecosystem actors and organisational networks.

"One thing that is lacking in the ecosystem is... sustainability to scale projects. To be able to make great[er] impact together we need to build partnerships. We need more collaboration with tech companies and development partners. Also [we need] to advocate for open data and open government." (Respondent C)

Some other challenges that were mentioned by participants are the threat of cyberattacks and social media shutdowns. The level of government responsiveness and trust regarding civic tech platforms also inhibits civic tech solutions from scaling. The general observation from participants is a level of government pushback and the gradual shrinking of civic spaces, which has been proven to "hamper the ability of these technologies to engage effectively with citizens, impeding efforts to promote transparency and accountability (Civic Hive, 2024:)." The shrinking of civic spaces in Africa has been identified previously to represent a significant threat to the civic tech sector (see Tine and Bakari, 2021).

"There's much pushback from the government when you are trying to deploy solutions that have to do with accountability and transparency. But the beauty of that is..with our population, when you can push through, you have enormous opportunities...because you will have a good number of people who will be interacting with your solution. We usually have to consistently keep advocating, lobbying and also finding ways to better engage. Engage government. There is also public awareness and

engagement. It's a great challenge. Many citizens are still unaware of the top civic tech tools and how to even use them effectively." (Respondent C)

In summary, the West African civic tech ecosystem is the second most developed in terms of the total number of initiatives but has the most significant growth potential. This potential is based on the 200 million inhabitants just in Nigeria alone. The best-case scenario would be for the other countries in the region to learn from the Nigerian ecosystem through partnerships or informal mentoring and networking.

East Africa

East Africa represents a lot of opportunities for civic tech innovators. The regional ecosystem has been growing steadily, with many organisations such as Pollicy, Open Institute, Transparency International and Paradigm Initiative delivering tools, platforms, toolkits and research. Notable initiatives include Ushahidi, Mzalendo and Safe Bangle. Additionally, there are newcomers to the space who have been able to build off the foundational work of those who have come before them.

''The civic tech ecosystem in Kenya is maturing... There are many independent players in the spaces, organisations like myself who may not know that they are actually in civic technology, but they are filling in a gap that civic tech plays in society.'' (Respondent A)

Within East Africa, Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania are the countries in which civic tech organisations are having the most impact. It would be important to track the rate of growth in the region and to determine where new civic tech initiatives are being developed and if the growth of the sector can expand to other parts of East Africa.

''There is a civic awakening in East Africa. There are so many individuals, small organisations who are basically doing their small role in advancing civic participation in good governance.'' (Respondent A)

Within the regional growth trend, the newer civic tech actors understand the importance of finding a niche so that their civic tech solutions (and their approaches to citizen engagement) can complement existing initiatives. Participants reiterated the benefits of having well-established civic tech players in East Africa, who hold the prerequisite knowledge, expertise and experience. Within the regional ecosystem, there are opportunities to leverage mentoring, learning and training from these organisations.

''I'd say it's maturing fast enough that you have many, it's evolving so fast that you really have to understand what your role is in the space so that you can make a meaningful impact.'' (Respondent B)

Regarding opportunities, there is potential for civic tech innovators to collaborate, and find ways to share resources. Meaningful collaboration would lead to efficient resource mobilisation that,

over time, could promote further investment into civic tech solutions. Civic tech platforms themselves need to be tested and used by intended beneficiaries. Therefore civic awareness and education campaigns will be valuable to build community trust and empower the younger generation that are already using digital devices to engage in democracy.

From an institutional perspective, historically, civic tech in East Africa has generally been supported by the government, although with some hiccups along the way. The recent social protests in Kenya over the signing of the Kenyan Finance Bill paint a different picture of the Kenyan government's relationship with civic tech actors who stand for supporting access to information and holding governments to account. To enable greater transparency and accountability, participants from East Africa agree that governments need to come to the table by opening up access to datasets and supporting engagement programmes alongside civic tech organisations that are driving citizen engagement at the grassroots level.

> **"The role that government agencies need to play is to open up their datasets, open up points of engagement with citizens, because again, looking at how public participation has been anchored in Kenya, it shows that the legal framework exists on how civic tech can play a role. But government's [role in] participa[ting] in this is kind of limited and up for interpretation." (Respondent A)**

One of the challenges that was highlighted by all the participants from East Africa is the lack of deliberative user engagement. Civic tech solutions have to prioritise the user and make sure that users are considered at the beginning of designing civic tech tools. Civic tech projects are inherently iterative. But to ensure greater success in the longer term, end-users must be consulted, educated and included in the process from the onset. To be truly inclusive, considerations of language, civic education programmes, context, cultural acceptance and ongoing participation of end-users need to be designed into civic tech projects.

> **"So you can see the disconnect between the derivative actors, the developers, and the users themselves that you're building these solutions for. Until that disconnect is actually bridged, I see a serious, serious struggle for civic tech". The language itself of building the solution is not inclusive at the end of it all... We need to make sure that the end user is part of the solution from the onset.'' (Respondent B)**

Another challenge is the digital divide, particularly evident in the disproportionate access to digital devices and internet connectivity in rural and urban areas respectively. The participants from East Africa acknowledge this limitation in the civic tech space - both regionally and across Africa. Going forward, investing in rural civic tech platforms was identified as being beneficial, especially considering the large proportion of people living in rural areas in African countries. The success of civic tech projects relies on equitable internet access, access to mobile phones, and beyond that digital skills training so that

people become familiar with how to use civic tech platforms, and can thereby teach others about civic tech.

Southern Africa

Southern Africa has a well-developed civic tech sector, driven by a healthy civic and non-governmental sector. Within the region, South Africa stands out as the country with the most civic tech initiatives. Reputable civic tech organisations include Open Cities Lab (OCL), OpenUp, amandla.mobi, My Vote Counts, and Corruption Watch, amongst others. Southern Africa's civic tech ecosystem is growing steadily, albeit influenced by the changing nature of funding in the civic tech space (see Gevers, 2017; Karuri-Sebina and Mutua, 2022). Nevertheless, participants agreed on the potential for growth in the region.

> **"I think, opportunity-wise, there is quite a big market for civic tech within the country and within the region as well as a lot of the metros of course they act independently from national government....but the competition in the sector is quite tight. There are a lot of us doing the same thing. So it's quite a competitive market." (Respondent Z)**

A recurring opportunity, also noted by participants working in other parts of Africa, is that of collaboration and partnerships that allow civic tech players to network, learn from one another and exchange skills and other resources. Within the region, Mozambique is an interesting case study. Here, language remains the biggest stumbling block for users to adopt and accept civic tech platforms. Equip Mozambique is attempting to address this challenge by developing a WhatsApp chatbot that translates from English to Portuguese. In a context where 45% of the national population speaks Portuguese as a first language, this approach ensures that users are best served. Complementing the use of appropriate language in civic tech tools is the importance of engaging the community directly through in-person workshops and civic education campaigns. Equip Moz works with local community leaders, and organisational partners in the rural villages to support a sustainable civic engagement model.

When it comes to foundational challenges, participants in Southern Africa concur that adequate technology infrastructure is a prerequisite for civic tech development and should be viewed as a fundamental human right, in need of government support and investment. Until the digital divide is addressed, civic tech cannot reach its full potential nor can the continent reach its full socioeconomic development potential. Partnering with government has been uneven across the region. There have been examples of successful collaborations with government. In Mozambique, Equip Moz has been able to gain the support of National government ministries. In South Africa, Pulego Technologies has demonstrated that partnering with local government is possible, if the civic tech solution proposed can meet both community and government objectives. Although partnerships with government are possible, the process is not always easy because of the bureaucratic processes involved and the changing nature of political leadership.

> **''There's not really a buy-in process if you're selling to government. That prolonged buy-in process is quite frustrating. There are also some**

technology limitations as well. Because you know you must build solutions for its intended people." (Respondent Z)

Overall, the Southern African civic tech landscape demonstrates a diverse range of civic tech organisations, many of whom complement each other. There have been a few examples of collaborations across countries but for the most part, each country within the region tends to function independently. The region could benefit from collaboration on civic tech projects of mutual interest and benefit.

SWOT Analysis

The findings reveal that the African civic tech landscape is diverse and dynamic, with a range of civic tech actors, and invested stakeholders, that want to drive social change through citizen engagement tools platforms in the digital era. Below we present a SWOT analysis that outlines the major strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of the African civic tech landscape.

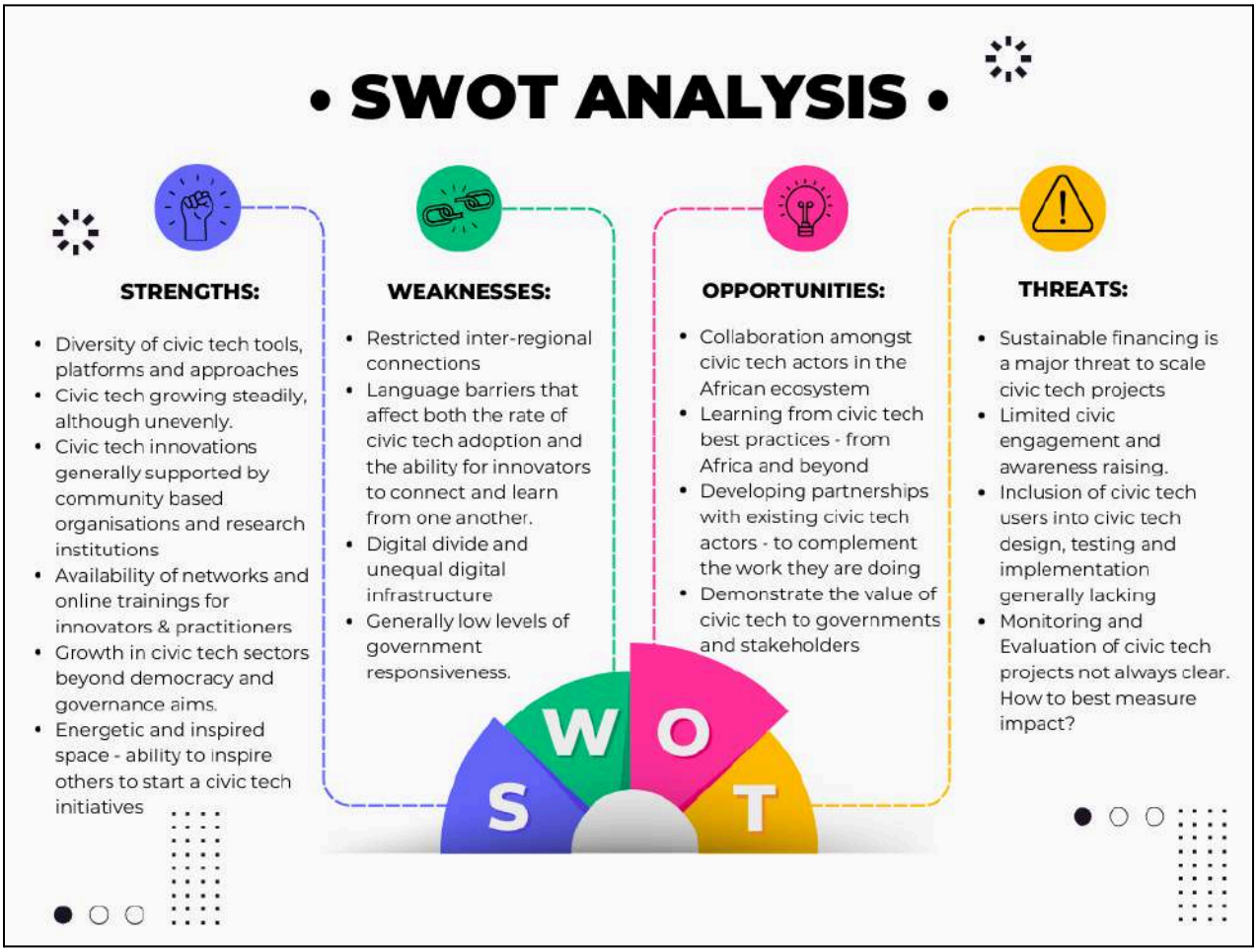

Fig. 4: *Evaluating the African Civic Tech Landscape: A Swot Analysis (Source: Author)*

Fig 3. outlines the importance of adopting an integrated approach to nurturing civic tech in Africa. Therefore, the African civic tech organisations and innovators - and the initiatives they lead shouldn't be viewed as operating within a vacuum. Various actors within the innovation and developmental space could reinforce or complement the aims and outcomes of civic tech solutions. The SWOT analysis highlights the importance of sustaining funding for civic tech, partnership building, collaboration with development partners, and digital skills training, alongside civic education (both online and offline) to support and sustain civic tech projects in the future Further, institutional and policy support is crucial, where government actors see civic tech projects are complementary, rather than antagonistic.

Recommendations & Conclusion

This research report explored the role of the African civic tech landscape by characterising the nature of civic tech across different regions. By providing a regional analysis of the civic tech space, the research was able to identify the key opportunities and threats facing the sector. Using first-hand experiences from civic tech innovators working in different contexts, the findings reveal the inherent value of civic tech as a citizen engagement tool with different types of applications, using a range of technologies. The findings reinforce that the development of civic tech across Africa is steadily growing, with uneven development trends being shaped by regional trends such as the maturity of the civic tech sector, the institutional, economic and policy frameworks, and the availability of funding to support civic tech solutions. Civic tech in Southern, West and East Africa is well-developed with countries within these regions having the highest number of civic tech projects compared with the rest of the region. South Africa, Nigeria, Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania serve as prominent role-players in the African civic tech ecosystem. Elsewhere, civic tech is still in an embryonic stage, with the potential to grow given the correct support, resources and funding.

To support the African civic tech ecosystem we recommend:

- **Investment in digital literacy and capacity development** both within the civic tech ecosystem, as well as for citizens.
- **Support for citizen awareness and civic education** on the role of civic tech to help citizens understand the benefits of citizen engagement through digital tools and platforms
- **Understand the value of meaningful inclusion of civic tech users**. Civic tech solutions could benefit from greater end-user participation during each project lifecycle. Earning trust and getting community buy-in early on is paramount to ensure long-term effectiveness and user adoption and acceptance. Designing tools to accommodate indigenous languages should be a priority, while also providing support for and investment in civic tech solutions for rural populations.

- **Building partnerships and nurturing networks**. Partnership building requires civic tech innovators to be fully engaged and invested in collaboration, to ensure that civic tech projects can be scaled. Exploring partnerships amongst civic tech innovators and aligned civic tech ecosystem actors is crucial for longer-term impact. Exploring partnerships with different levels of government is another avenue to pursue. While this process may not always be easy, it will go a long way to demonstrate the mutual benefits of civic tech to improve governance - both for government actors and for citizens.
- **Sharing best practices of civic tech from Africa and globally**. Knowledge is power. By exchanging knowledge, resources, skills and experiences with each other, civic tech actors could benefit from learning about different civic tech projects and how to improve or adapt their civic tech solutions accordingly.
- The **importance of open data and open government** to support civic tech projects and to legitimise their relationships with government.

Alongside these recommendations, the success of the African civic tech sector rests on the ability of civic tech actors to pivot and adapt to the changing nature of the ecosystem. In these contexts, human capital and leadership skills will be critical. Additionally, alignment with civil society organisations, development partners and other civic tech partners could sustain the sector over time. Overall, African civic tech shows potential to scale but this is reliant on strengthening the existing ecosystem and connecting civic tech innovators between regions and within existing regions. Looking towards the future, Africa's civic tech sector hinges on adequate and aligned funding partners, partnerships, open data and government buy-in, inclusiveness of civic tech tools, cultural acceptance and community buy-in, and appropriate investment in digital technologies and infrastructure. For the African civic tech sector to grow, the research findings illustrate that civic tech actors could benefit from building upon the existing foundation carved by prominent civic tech role players. Building on this foundation instead of building new frames was identified as a smart strategy to grow and sustain African civic tech.

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