

# Luminate CEO says Africa must own AI infrastructure or risk a subordinate role

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Africa's cloud infrastructure crisis risks exploitation

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Enterprise & Policy

Africa must own its digital future or risk exploitation, says Luminate CEO

By

Noah Banjo

22nd Oct, 2026

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Melanie Hui, CEO of Luminate, speaking at Build 2026 Conference in Abuja, believes Africa risks being locked into a subordinate role in the global artificial intelligence economy. Image source: Luminate.

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Nigeria reportedly bleeds millions of dollars annually due to its reliance on cloud infrastructure controlled by a handful of foreign big tech firms, according to Melanie Hui, Chief Executive Officer of Luminate, a global organisation working to ensure digital technology serves human rights.

Delivering the keynote address at the Build 2026 Conference in Abuja on Wednesday, Hui warned that Africa risks being locked into a subordinate role in the global artificial intelligence economy unless the continent secures genuine ownership of the infrastructure powering the technology.

"My African friends tell me they will not be confined to the role of consumer, supplier of raw data, source of critical minerals or provider of low-paid labour in somebody else's AI economy," Hui told an audience of government officials, diplomats, tech leaders, and members of the Nigeria AI Collective. "And Luminate will stand with them in securing a better digital age."

To illustrate her point, Hui referenced India's Ministry of Agriculture, which leveraged AI to predict monsoon patterns for nearly 40 million farmers. Citing African energy expert Rose Mutiso, Hui noted that AI was merely "the last piece of this breakthrough, not the first."

The initiative succeeded because key foundation layers were already in place: actionable demand from local farmers, public climate data, a century of local rainfall records, and an established SMS distribution network operating in native languages.

"Talking about AI for the sake of AI often misses the point," Hui said, urging stakeholders to ask critical questions about infrastructure control, value capture, and who holds the power to challenge dominant digital systems when they fail the public good.

Highlighting research commissioned by Luminate by the Global Centre on AI Governance, Hui pointed out a sobering physical reality: the undersea fibre-optic cables carrying Africa's internet traffic closely mirror historical trade and extraction routes.

"Infrastructure lives in the shadows of power," she said. "It determines who connects to whom, who controls the

gates, who pays rent, and who extracts value. The cables are new. The questions they raise are very old.”

With core components of the AI value chain—ranging from microchips and cloud servers to energy and specialised talent—concentrated in foreign markets, global dependencies remain acute. Hui cautioned African nations against confusing data centre hosting with sovereign control.

“A country does not own its digital future when a data centre merely sits within its borders,” she emphasised. “The more important questions are who controls it, who can afford to use it, what powers it, whose data it processes and where the resulting economic value flows.”

Addressing data governance, Hui pushed back against the clichéd comparison of data to crude oil. “Data is much more than this. It is people’s identities, behaviours, relationships and lives,” she said, maintaining that African communities must not be treated as passive data reservoirs for foreign product development.

She also raised concerns about language representation, noting that despite hosting a third of the world’s languages, modern AI platforms remain largely tone-deaf to African linguistic diversity.

Rejecting claims that regulatory frameworks stifle technical innovation, Hui cited ongoing societal harms, including algorithmic bias on gig-worker platforms, technology-facilitated abuse, and flawed identity-verification deployments.

“Safeguards are the allies of progress,” she argued. “Prosperity is not shared automatically. It is shared because workers have bargaining power... because regulators and courts have resources and authority.”

Hui noted recent regulatory and civic victories as proof of growing continental momentum. She cited Nigeria’s competition watchdog taking action against Meta over data exploitation, as well as Nigerian e-hailing drivers successfully unionising.

Concluding her address, Hui called on philanthropic foundations to play a sustained role by backing researchers, civil society, and labour movements, building long-term ecosystem capacity.

“The global AI order is not settled,” she said. “That places a profound responsibility on this generation to build an AI economy rooted in African agency, capability, and imagination.”

True scale demands moving beyond surface-level integrations to robust execution. We’ve filtered the noise out of Moonshot 2026, optimising the conference strictly for high-calibre connections between startup founders, global financial operators, enterprise leaders and individuals rewiring Africa’s technical frameworks. Get 20% off Early Bird tickets for a limited time .

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