

Conversation with Wakanyi Macharia-Hoffman

In this People First Talk, Ubuntu scholar and Co-Director of the [Inclusive AI Lab](#), Wakanyi Hoffman, shares why a People First approach matters in the age of AI. Watch the talk [here](#).

- **Ubuntu asks us to develop the "I" in service of the "we."** As Wakanyi shared, Ubuntu means: "*I am because of who we are*". But that "I" still has to be fully developed, and each of us is accountable for what effect our choices have on the collective. Technologies built to personalize and individualize the human experience are only telling half the story; the collective piece matters too. All of this requires inner development, to cultivate capacities such as self-awareness, ethical grounding, and relational skills, that enable people to engage with technology responsibly.
- **Inclusion starts with centering those who understand the local context.** Wakanyi described a content moderator in Nairobi, who recognized hate speech, but had no mandate to flag it because it didn't fit the platform's policy definitions. Local leaders or "cultural interpreters" have a truer read on harm than distant policy frameworks, and their judgment needs real authority. It may be time to repurpose existing tools with localized data, so the technology answers a specific, local need instead of a generic one.
- **Reviving Indigenous knowledge and languages is a real source of hope.** Efforts like Masakhane are helping revive many of Africa's 3,000+ languages so they can be represented in AI systems, and ancient knowledge systems, like West Africa's Ifá computation system, are gaining new visibility. As Wakanyi put it, "*with language comes knowledge, and with knowledge comes sovereignty*."
- **Leadership today will require diverse leaders coming together.** At a recent convening organized by a large technology company, Wakanyi sat alongside Indigenous leaders, religious leaders, and technologists, each bringing a different lens and set of questions: for example, language and decoloniality from African technologists, decentralization from voices in China, distribution from the US, and protection of democracy from Europe. Collective leadership in this time requires: convening diverse stakeholders, holding tension, and letting a diagnosis and set of solutions come from this.
- **We hold more collective power than the dominant narrative suggests.** Wakanyi challenged the idea that power over AI sits only with the small number of people building it: "*power has always been in the hands of the people, of the majority*." She pointed to teachers as an example: by ensuring their voices are leading the conversation on what's working in classrooms and giving them real authority to opt out of harmful tools, we shift responsible AI from talk to practice. Ethics, likewise, can't be delegated to any one function like IT; it takes convening people across roles and disciplines.



Wakanyi Macharia-Hoffman

Co-Director, Inclusive AI Lab, Utrecht
University

“Power has always, always been in the hands of the people, of the majority. It's never really ever been in the hands of the few”

— Wakanyi Macharia-Hoffman