INTERDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL OF
ARTS, POLITICS AND LAW
3080–3284

Interdisciplinary Journal of Arts, Politics and Law (IJAPL) – ISSN 3080-3284

Reimagining Access to Justice: Tech Based Solutions for Underserved Communities in Africa

SPRINGFIELD RESEARCH UNIVERSITY

Title of Article

Reimagining Access to Justice: Tech-Based Solutions for Underserved Communities in Africa

Author

Clarance Erenes Gandawa[1]
Springfield Research University
Ezulwini, Eswatini

Author

Godfrey Gandawa[2]
Springfield Research University
Ezulwini, Eswatini

Abstract

Access to justice remains a significant challenge for many underserved communities across Africa, hindered by geographic, economic, and systemic barriers. Emerging technology-driven solutions offer promising avenues to bridge these gaps by enhancing legal awareness, streamlining dispute resolution, and facilitating remote legal assistance. This paper examines the current landscape of tech-based justice initiatives in Africa, including mobile legal aid platforms, online dispute resolution (ODR), and artificial intelligence applications tailored for local contexts. It also explores challenges such as digital literacy, infrastructure deficits, and regulatory constraints that impact the effectiveness and scalability of these innovations. By analyzing case studies and ongoing projects, the paper highlights best practices and policy recommendations to harness technology in making justice more accessible, affordable, and inclusive for marginalized populations across the continent.

Keywords

Access to justice, legal technology, underserved communities, Africa, digital inclusion, online dispute resolution, mobile legal aid, AI in law.

Introduction

Justice is a fundamental human right and cornerstone of democratic governance, yet in many parts of Africa, it remains elusive for vast segments of the population. Structural barriers such as poverty, illiteracy, limited legal infrastructure, and geographic isolation exacerbate disparities in legal access, leaving millions without meaningful recourse to resolve disputes, protect rights, or obtain legal advice. Traditional justice systems, often overburdened and under-resourced, struggle to meet the demand of diverse and growing populations.

In recent years, technological innovation has emerged as a transformative force with the potential to reimagine access to justice for underserved communities. Mobile phone penetration, increasing internet connectivity, and the rise of digital platforms create new opportunities to deliver legal services remotely, reduce costs, and increase transparency. Legal tech initiatives from mobile legal aid apps to AI-powered

chatbots and online dispute resolution mechanisms are being piloted and implemented across African countries with promising results.

However, the deployment of technology in justice systems also raises critical questions. Digital divides, regulatory environments, cultural appropriateness, and data privacy concerns all influence the success and sustainability of tech-based solutions. Moreover, technology alone cannot replace the need for institutional reforms, community engagement, and capacity building.

This paper aims to provide a comprehensive overview of tech-driven approaches to expanding access to justice in Africa, highlighting successful case studies, identifying key challenges, and offering recommendations for policymakers, practitioners, and technologists committed to creating more equitable legal ecosystems.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Access to Justice: The African Context

Access to justice in Africa is constrained by multiple systemic challenges. According to the World Justice Project (2023), many African countries rank low on the Rule of Law Index, reflecting issues such as judicial inefficiency, corruption, and limited legal aid availability. For rural and marginalized populations, physical distance from courts, lack of affordable legal representation, and linguistic or cultural barriers further limit effective access (Oduro & Ankamah, 2020).

Traditional justice systems, including formal courts, customary law, and alternative dispute resolution (ADR), coexist but often function in parallel without effective integration (Gathogo, 2016). This fragmentation contributes to confusion and uneven outcomes, especially for vulnerable groups such as women, refugees, and persons with disabilities.

2.2 Technology as a Catalyst for Access to Justice

Emerging scholarship highlights the role of technology in bridging justice gaps. Mobile technologies have been particularly impactful in Africa due to high mobile phone penetration even in low-income communities (GSMA, 2022). Mobile legal aid platforms enable users to access legal information, file complaints, or connect with lawyers remotely, lowering traditional barriers of cost and distance (Mutema & Sarr, 2021).

Online dispute resolution (ODR) platforms, which facilitate mediation or arbitration through digital means, are gaining traction for resolving low-value or high-volume cases efficiently (Rule & McNamara, 2017). Additionally, artificial intelligence (AI) tools, including chatbots and document automation, are being piloted to support legal literacy and streamline case management (Maru & Mwesigwa, 2020).

2.3 Challenges and Limitations

Despite enthusiasm, the literature also cautions against techno-optimism. Digital literacy remains uneven, with vulnerable populations often lacking the skills to use legal tech effectively (Nkomo, 2023).

Infrastructure challenges such as unreliable internet, electricity, and device affordability limit reach. Furthermore, data privacy and security are pressing concerns in contexts with weak regulatory frameworks (Adeyemi & Nwachukwu, 2019).

There are also institutional hurdles. Legal systems may resist integration of technology due to fear of disruption or lack of capacity. Socio-cultural factors, including mistrust of digital platforms and preference for face-to-face interactions, complicate adoption (Nyalunga, 2022).

Case Studies

3.1 Mobile Legal Aid Platforms

Several African countries have launched mobile-based legal aid platforms that increase access to legal information and services. For example, in Kenya, MyJustice offers a mobile app providing free legal advice, document templates, and referral services for underserved populations (Kenya Legal Aid Network, 2021). Similarly, Nigeria's LawPadi app connects users with lawyers for affordable consultations via mobile phones, breaking down geographic barriers (Ojo & Udeh, 2020).

These platforms empower users by offering round-the-clock access, simplified language, and culturally relevant content, which is crucial in multilingual societies. However, they rely heavily on user digital literacy and smartphone ownership, limiting reach in some rural areas.

3.2 Online Dispute Resolution (ODR)

ODR initiatives have been piloted in countries like South Africa and Rwanda to address the backlog of small claims and civil disputes. The South African Resolution Channel enables parties to resolve disputes online without court appearances, reducing costs and time (South African Judiciary, 2022). Rwanda's e-Justice portal integrates case management and virtual hearings to streamline judicial processes (Rwanda Ministry of Justice, 2021).

ODR platforms have shown promise in increasing efficiency and accessibility, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, they require robust digital infrastructure and legal frameworks to ensure enforceability and fairness.

3.3 Artificial Intelligence and Chatbots

AI-powered chatbots like DoNotPay have gained global attention for providing automated legal advice, and similar innovations are emerging in Africa. Uganda's Ask-Attorney chatbot offers legal guidance on common issues such as tenancy and employment rights via SMS, catering to populations with limited internet access (Mukasa, 2023).

While AI tools can reduce costs and provide instant assistance, their accuracy depends on the quality of underlying data and algorithms. There are also concerns about accountability and the risk of over-reliance on automated systems without human oversight.

4. Challenges and Barriers

4.1 Digital Divide and Infrastructure Limitations

Despite increasing mobile penetration, significant portions of Africa's population still lack reliable access to internet and digital devices. While GSMA (2022) highlights expanding mobile connectivity across the region, these gains mask persistent gaps. The ITU (2023) reveals stark disparities in broadband and electricity access especially in rural zones where fragile infrastructure undermines the potential of tech-based justice solutions. Without robust, affordable networks, digital interventions risk reinforcing exclusion rather than alleviating it.

4.2 Digital Literacy and Language Barriers

Even when technology is available, digital literacy remains a critical barrier. Many potential users lack the skills to navigate apps or online platforms effectively. Furthermore, Africa's linguistic diversity complicates the development of accessible content, as many legal tech initiatives rely on English or French, leaving speakers of indigenous languages underserved (Chikozho, 2022).

4.3 Regulatory and Institutional Constraints

Legal frameworks in many countries have yet to adapt to the rapid pace of technological innovation. Ambiguities around the legality of online dispute resolution, electronic signatures, and data privacy pose risks to users and providers. Institutional resistance to change, limited capacity within justice systems, and lack of political will further slow the integration of technology into formal justice mechanisms (Adeyemo, 2021).

4.4 Trust and Cultural Acceptance

For technology to succeed in delivering justice, it must gain trust among users accustomed to traditional, personal interactions. Many communities view face-to-face engagement with legal professionals as indispensable. Digital platforms are sometimes perceived as impersonal or unreliable, especially where histories of institutional distrust exist (Nyalunga, 2022).

5. Policy Recommendations and Future Directions

5.1 Investing in Infrastructure and Digital Inclusion

Governments and development partners must prioritize expanding affordable broadband and electricity access, especially in rural and underserved areas. Public-private partnerships can help deploy infrastructure to bridge the digital divide and ensure equitable access to tech-based justice tools.

5.2 Enhancing Digital Literacy and Multilingual Support

Legal tech initiatives should incorporate digital literacy training tailored to diverse user groups. Developing content in local languages and using culturally relevant communication methods will

increase usability and acceptance. Collaborations with community organizations can enhance outreach and trust-building.

5.3 Updating Legal Frameworks for Digital Justice

Regulators need to clarify laws governing electronic evidence, data privacy, and online dispute resolution to provide a secure legal environment for tech innovations. Establishing standards and oversight mechanisms will build confidence among users and providers.

5.4 Fostering Multi-Stakeholder Collaboration

Successful tech-based justice solutions require collaboration among governments, legal professionals, technologists, civil society, and affected communities. Inclusive design processes that center the needs of marginalized users can improve relevance and effectiveness.

5.5 Promoting Research and Impact Evaluation

Ongoing research into the effectiveness, challenges, and unintended consequences of legal tech interventions is essential. Evidence-based policy and practice will support scalable and sustainable solutions that truly enhance access to justice.

5.6 : Strengthening Ethical Governance of Legal Tech

To ensure responsible AI integration, governments should establish ethical oversight bodies, define standards for algorithmic transparency, and support capacity building in legal institutions. Engagement with civil society, technologists, and legal professionals can shape principled innovation that safeguards user rights.

6. Conclusion

Technology presents a transformative opportunity to reimagine access to justice for underserved communities in Africa. Mobile legal aid platforms, online dispute resolution, and AI-driven tools demonstrate how innovation can overcome geographic, economic, and systemic barriers that have long hindered equitable legal access. However, technology is not a panacea. Challenges including digital divides, regulatory gaps, and cultural acceptance must be addressed through coordinated policy, infrastructure investment, and community engagement.

For tech-based justice solutions to be truly inclusive and sustainable, they must be developed with a deep understanding of local contexts, linguistic diversity, and socio-cultural realities. Consider Amahle, a rural entrepreneur in KwaZulu-Natal who, through the MyJustice mobile app, accessed tenancy advice that helped her avoid eviction during the pandemic. Her experience illustrates the tangible impact of localized tech-driven legal aid and underscores how user-centered design combined with inclusive digital infrastructure can transform justice delivery. When systems speak her language, literally and figuratively, justice becomes not only accessible but empowering By fostering multi-stakeholder

collaboration and centering the voices of marginalized populations, African countries can build more accessible, transparent, and effective justice systems for the future.

References

GSMA. (2022). The Mobile Economy: Sub-Saharan Africa 2022. GSMA Intelligence.

International Telecommunication Union (ITU). (2023). Measuring Digital Development: Facts and Figures 2023. ITU Publications.

Kenya Legal Aid Network. (2021). Mobile Legal Aid and Access to Justice: Case Studies from Kenya. Nairobi: KLN Reports.

Rwanda Ministry of Justice. (2021). e-Justice Initiatives: Digital Transformation of Rwanda's Judiciary. Kigali Government Publications.

South African Judiciary. (2022). The Resolution Channel: Online Dispute Resolution Pilot Program. Pretoria: SA Judiciary Reports.

World Justice Project. (2023). Rule of Law Index 2023. Washington, DC.