# Skill-Based Immigration In Africa

Mo Shehu, PhD

Gideon Onunwa

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# **Executive summary**

Africa's future economic growth hinges on how effectively it mobilizes its own talent. Despite significant progress in education and regional development, millions of skilled Africans continue to migrate abroad in search of opportunity — draining innovation and slowing industrialization. This report examines how African nations can reduce brain drain by developing open, skill-based visa systems that enable professionals, entrepreneurs, and graduates to move and work freely within the continent.



## **Key insights**

- Africa's biggest opportunity lies in unlocking intra-continental mobility for its skilled workforce. Despite abundant resources es and strong policy frameworks like Agenda 2063, high travel costs and restrictive visa systems still inhibit the free flow of talent across borders. Skill-based visa systems that are affordable, renewable, and low-friction can help retain and circulate African talent where it's needed most.
- Nigeria, Rwanda, and Kenya are early leaders in flexible visa models. Their programs allow skilled professionals to work and live without employer sponsorship, offering a blueprint for other nations. By contrast, countries like Mauritius, Seychelles, Uganda, Tanzania, Namibia, and Cabo Verde show partial progress through entrepreneur or remote-work visas, but these often emphasize financial capital over professional skills, limiting their developmental impact.
- To build a self-sustaining talent ecosystem, governments should adopt post-study work routes for African graduates, harmonize regional visa frameworks, and make it easier for professionals to start or join businesses across the continent. A unified "African Skills Visa" — grounded in mutual recognition of qualifications and supported by digital systems to track talent flows — could catalyze the next phase of Africa's integration and growth.

The report concludes that Africa's challenge is not a lack of talent, but a lack of mobility. By turning brain drain into brain circulation, African countries can build a shared talent network that fuels innovation, industry, and sustainable growth from within.

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# Background

Africa faces a set of interrelated challenges that hold back its growth and global competitiveness. These include:

- High unemployment, especially among youth, with one in four youth between 15 and 35 being unemployed or discouraged. This erodes human capital and limits economic mobility.
- Persistent poverty, with more than 460 million people still living below the poverty line, and income inequality that keeps large segments of society excluded from opportunity.
- Low resource activation, despite abundant potential Africa holds roughly 65% of the world's uncultivated arable land, yet remains a net food importer. Poor infrastructure, limited access to finance, and fragmented value chains continue to slow agricultural and industrial productivity.
- Limited human capacity, where skills mismatches persist between what schools produce and what industries require. Many graduates struggle to find work in their fields, while employers struggle to find qualified talent.
- A high rate of brain drain, as skilled Africans migrate to countries with better economic prospects and more predictable governance systems. This drains innovation capacity and weakens domestic development ecosystems.

Africa has made repeated commitments to address these systemic challenges through continental frameworks, development plans, and global partnerships. Many of these efforts are tied to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly those focused on inclusive growth and industrial capacity.

- SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth which calls for productive employment, entrepreneurship, and innovation-led growth.
- SDG 9: Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure which emphasizes sustainable industrialization, resilient infrastructure, and research-driven development.

The African Union's Agenda 2063 also envisions a more integrated and prosperous continent, where citizens can move, trade, and work freely. In principle, these frameworks recognize that mobility is essential to shared prosperity. Yet in practice, integration remains slow.



# Challenges with travel and visa systems

Travel within Africa is still prohibitively expensive. An average intra-African flight costs more than a comparable trip to Europe or the Middle East, largely due to high taxes, low competition, and poor connectivity. Only a few airlines operate true intra-African routes, limiting both affordability and access.

Visa systems remain restrictive and fragmented. Many African countries require visitors from neighboring states to apply for visas in advance, and even where visa-on-arrival policies exist, work authorization remains tightly controlled. Governments fear that easing restrictions could worsen domestic unemployment or stir political backlash, yet this protectionist stance often undermines innovation and talent exchange.

As a result, there are few clear, streamlined pathways for African students and professionals to move across borders — whether to pursue further study, collaborate on research, or start new ventures. Even those trained within African universities often struggle to remain in their country of education once their student visa expires. This lack of mobility discourages cross-border collaboration, prevents knowledge transfer, and accelerates the very brain drain many governments say they want to reverse.

# A possible solution

Africa needs to solve this problem, and one of the most direct ways to do so is by modernizing its collective visa systems to actively encourage the free flow of African talent within the continent. A reimagined framework should prioritize skill-based mobility, designed to attract individuals with expertise in high-demand sectors such as engineering, agriculture, healthcare, education, and digital technology.

These visas should be affordable and accessible, modeled on examples like Rwanda's streamlined e-visa system that lowers costs and eliminates unnecessary bureaucracy. Processing must be fast — ideally within days, not months — with simple, transparent requirements that remove friction for qualified applicants.

The permits themselves should be long-term and renewable, providing stability for professionals and their families. A clear, merit-based pathway to permanent residency (PR) would reward contribution and commitment, encouraging African professionals to build lasting careers and enterprises within the continent rather than seeking opportunity abroad.

In short, the goal is to create a mobility system that recognizes talent as a shared African asset — not a national threat — and turns migration into a deliberate tool for development, collaboration, and industrial growth.

# Current landscape of intra-African skills mobility

Several African countries have begun experimenting with immigration frameworks that align with the vision of a continent-wide skills mobility system. Three notable examples — Nigeria, Rwanda, and Kenya — have created visa categories that prioritize qualifications and professional expertise over employer sponsorship, offering early models for a more open, skill-based regime.

### Nigeria's Highly Skilled Immigrant Visa (N4a)

The N4A is perhaps one of the strongest prototypes of a pan-African skills visa. It targets foreign nationals with "knowledge, abilities, and technical know-how deemed highly relevant to the current and future needs of the Nigerian economy." Crucially, it does not require a pre-secured job offer or sponsorship by a Nigerian company, giving holders freedom to seek employment or operate independently once in the country. The visa is valid for five years, renewable, and extendable, with dependents fully accommodated under family visa categories (N6A–N6D). It strikes a balance between openness and control, maintaining professional standards while inviting talent across industries.

#### Rwanda's C1 Prescribed Professionals Visa

Rwanda's approach is more sector-specific but still progressive. The C1 permit is available to self-employed foreigners working in prescribed professions listed under the country's Occupational Demand List — typically high-skill sectors such as medicine, engineering, ICT, and finance. Applicants don't need a job offer; proof of business registration and professional credentials suffices. The visa allows full local practice rights and can include dependents (via M2 visas). It's valid for up to two years initially, extendable to five years upon renewal. Rwanda's system demonstrates how a country can combine workforce planning with flexible talent mobility.

## Kenya's Class C Work Permit

Kenya's framework resembles Rwanda's but covers a narrower professional range. The Class C permit applies to prescribed professions such as doctors, lawyers, engineers, and ICT specialists. Applicants can be self-employed or employed by local organizations, provided they show sufficient capital or resources to sustain their work. The visa is valid for one year and renewable, with dependent passes available for family members. Though more restrictive in scope, it provides another functional example of a professional visa that recognizes skill-based entry without requiring a firm job offer.

Together, these three examples show that African countries are beginning to design immigration pathways that value human capital as an asset. While they vary in inclusivity, duration, and flexibility, they share a common principle — that qualified professionals should be able to live, work, and contribute without bureaucratic dependency on a single employer. However, this level of openness remains the exception rather than the rule. Many other African nations have introduced visa frameworks that move in the right direction but still fall short of enabling true skills mobility. Countries such as Mauritius, Seychelles, Uganda, Tanzania, Namibia, and Cabo Verde illustrate these partial steps — progressive in intent, yet constrained in execution. Their approaches reveal the gaps and policy inconsistencies that continue to limit genuine intra-African talent circulation.

# Restricted visas

#### South Africa's critical skills visa

South Africa once embodied the kind of open, skill-based framework envisioned in this report. Its Critical Skills Visa was designed to attract professionals in occupations deemed essential to national development - from medicine and engineering to IT and academia. For several years, it allowed foreign experts to enter South Africa without a pre-secured job offer, obtain local employment, and eventually qualify for permanent residency after sustained contribution.

In recent years, however, the system has tightened. Rising unemployment, especially post-COVID, and growing anti-migrant sentiment driven by movements like Operation Dudula have shifted political incentives toward restriction. This regression demonstrates how political pressure and economic anxiety can reverse progressive immigration policy, turning what was once a model for Africa into a cautionary tale about how easily openness can be lost.

#### Mauritius occupational permit (self-employed and investor categories)

Mauritius offers several visa options that blend residence and work rights, but most are capital-based rather than skill-based. The Self-Employed Occupational Permit is open to freelancers or professionals registering a business locally, yet it requires an upfront transfer of USD 35,000. The Investor category is even more capital-intensive, demanding at least USD 50,000 - though a "no-investment" route exists for accredited innovative start-ups. Holders may operate their own businesses but cannot take employment from Mauritian companies, limiting their ability to contribute skills directly to the local workforce. Both permits are long-term (up to ten years) and renewable, but they effectively privilege wealth over expertise.



#### Seychelles gainful occupation permit (GOP)

The Seychelles system remains tied to some form of employer sponsorship. The GOP is primarily designed for foreign employees hired by local companies or for individuals setting up a business under clear commercial terms. A job offer or business plan is mandatory, and switching employers requires official approval (called a 'variation'). While dependents are allowed, the permit's annual renewal and limited flexibility make it less attractive for mobile professionals seeking long-term engagement.



#### Uganda's class F work permit

Uganda's work-permit ecosystem is fundamentally employer-sponsored: most permits (including those used for professionals and company shareholders/executives) must be applied for by a registered organization using a mandatory organisation code. Class F is often used in the context of company shareholders or professionals tied to firms, so applicants are typically linked to an employer or corporate sponsor rather than free agents. There is a limited alternative, a Special Pass for individuals applying in their own capacity to explore business opportunities, but it is temporary and not a full substitute for an open, skills-based route. Also, the Class F system cost structure creates a barrier to entry - six months costs USD 1,500; twelve months, USD 3,000; twenty-four months, USD 6,000; and thirty-six months, USD 9,000, which includes a USD 1,500 non-refundable fee. For highly skilled Africans seeking regional mobility, these fees make Uganda's permit one of the most expensive on the continent. The Class F work permit is renewable for up to three years. Uganda provides a pathway to permanent residence for individuals that have stayed in the country for over 10 years and have contributed to the socio-economic development of Uganda.



#### Tanzania residence permit class B & C

Tanzania Class B permit is issued to foreigners who possess qualifications or technical skills not readily available in the local labor market. While it acknowledges skill scarcity, it still requires a signed employment contract and job offer from a registered company or institution, with the employer applying on behalf of the expatriate. This employer dependency places it squarely within the "closed" category of work permits, as it prevents mobility across employers or self-employment. The permit is valid for two years and renewable, but the total stay cannot exceed eight years. Dependents can be included under a Dependant's Pass. Although Class B recognizes technical expertise, its design prioritizes employer control over professional freedom.

Tanzania's Class C permit, by contrast, is designed for researchers, interns, professional artists, retirees, missionaries, volunteers, and other individuals who do not fall under standard employment or investor categories. While the permit accommodates diverse purposes, it is primarily a residency instrument rather than a channel for general professional employment or business operation within the local labor market. The permit is valid for up to two years and renewable, offering some stability but limited economic participation. Overall, the Class C category reflects a framework centered on authorized presence - not on facilitating skill-based mobility.



#### Namibia digital nomad visa

Namibia's Digital Nomad Visa represents one of the more restrictive versions of the "remote work only" model on the continent. Applicants must show proof of steady foreign income - a minimum of USD 2,000 per month for singles, higher for couples and families — and are explicitly prohibited from working for Namibian employers or earning local income. The visa is valid for six months and non-renewable; applicants can only reapply twelve months after the expiry date, creating an enforced break in eligibility. Moreover, no change of condition is permitted, meaning holders cannot transition to any other visa category or apply for residence while inside Namibia. While the program offers a straightforward application process and aims to attract temporary foreign spending, it contributes little to local skill transfer or knowledge exchange. In practice, Namibia's model imports consumers but exports expertise.



#### Cabo Verde digital nomad visa

Cabo Verde's Remote Working Program follows a similar logic to Namibia's, emphasizing temporary residency for foreign remote workers rather than long-term professional participation in the local economy. The program allows eligible applicants to live in Cabo Verde while working remotely for foreign employers or clients, but it explicitly excludes local employment or income from Cabo Verdean entities. The visa lasts six months, with the opportunity of renewal for another six months after. This structure caps total stay at one year. Dependents such as spouses and children can accompany the main applicant for the same duration. Eligibility is also limited. The program is open only to citizens from Europe, North America, the Community of Portuguese-Speaking Countries (CPLP), and the Economic Community of West African States (CEDEAO). While affordable and well-administered, Cabo Verde's model - like Namibia's - imports short-term spending rather than long-term expertise.

Overall, these models illustrate the difference between "presence" and "participation." While some African countries have introduced flexible residence or freelance visas, most still privilege financial capital, employer sponsorship, or remote work over the active integration of skilled professionals into their local economies.

# Why is this the case?

Understanding Africa's restrictive migration landscape requires more than policy critique — it demands empathy for the structural and political realities shaping these decisions. The limits placed on mobility across African borders reflect concerns about control, stability, and capacity. Each factor below helps explain why many governments remain cautious about opening their doors too wide.

#### **Economic stability and job protection**

Most African countries grapple with high unemployment rates, particularly among youth. Allowing unrestricted inflows of skilled professionals risks the perception of taking jobs away from locals — a politically sensitive issue. Governments often view migration policy through the lens of protecting their citizens' livelihoods, even when these restrictions inadvertently slow innovation and knowledge exchange.

#### Security and border control

Many African nations face porous borders and limited immigration infrastructure. Concerns about trafficking, terrorism, and transnational crime make governments wary of relaxing visa systems without reliable data-sharing and border management tools. Visa restrictions often serve as blunt instruments for national security in contexts where technological monitoring and regional coordination remain weak.

#### Country size and absorptive capacity

Africa's nations vary widely in size and population density. Smaller or more resource-constrained countries — like Cabo Verde, Seychelles, or Mauritius — simply lack the housing, institutional, or infrastructural capacity to absorb large numbers of professionals. Their visa systems may reflect a defensive economic posture rather than a lack of continental solidarity.

#### Political stability and public sentiment

Migration debates easily spill into politics. Movements such as South Africa's Operation Dudula show how quickly anti-migrant sentiment can shape public discourse and electoral politics. Leaders, in turn, may tighten visa systems to avoid appearing lenient. In environments where nationalism and populism influence governance, migration reform can seem politically risky, even when it aligns with long-term economic goals.

#### Fiscal constraints and social safety nets

Few African states have robust welfare systems or unemployment support programs. The absence of comprehensive social safety nets means governments must carefully manage population inflows to prevent strain on limited healthcare, housing, and public services. Without these cushions, rapid increases in migration can feel unsustainable, especially for smaller economies.

#### Distance, isolation, and infrastructure gaps

Intra-African movement is still hampered by high travel costs, limited transport networks, and weak digital systems. The practical challenge isn't whether to welcome skilled Africans, but whether those professionals can easily arrive, integrate, and work productively once there. Without better transport and data infrastructure, more open visa systems risk proper functionality.

Taken together, these factors illustrate that Africa's restrictive visa regimes are not merely products of protectionism but reflections of capacity, caution, and political trade-offs. The goal, therefore, is not to dismiss these constraints but to build Africa's absorptive capacity — economically, institutionally, and socially — so that freer movement of skilled professionals strengthens rather than destabilizes national systems.

## Recommendations

Building on the findings, African countries have an opportunity to create a unified, skill-based mobility system that retains African talent, attracts expertise from across the continent, and absorbs them sustainably. This requires deliberate policy reform, targeted incentives, and regional coordination.

#### Retain African-trained graduates

Many African countries host international students from neighboring nations who, after completing their studies, are required to leave due to restrictive visa rules. Governments should establish post-study work permits that allow graduates to remain and contribute to local research and industry for at least two to five years, particularly those with advanced degrees such as master's, PhDs, or professional certifications. This not only preserves the investment already made in their education but also boosts innovation ecosystems and knowledge transfer.

African countries could start pilot programs for high-achieving African graduates, similar to other regions. Countries such as Norway, Finland, United Kingdom, and Germany have post-study work systems that deliberately retain international graduates. Norway allows students to stay for up to a year to look for work after completing their degree. Finland offers up to two years for graduates seeking employment or launching a business. Germany provides up to 18 months for foreign students to find a job in their field, with clear pathways to permanent residence thereafter. The UK graduates' visa lasts for up to 3 years if the individual has a Ph.D. or other doctoral qualification, and for up to 2 years if they do not.

Ironically, many African students move to these very countries for higher education and end up staying precisely because these policies make it easy for them to transition from study to work. African countries, meanwhile, finance schooling up to the secondary level through tax revenue, only to lose those same students — and the potential return on that investment — to foreign economies that capture the upside of their skills.

African governments could reverse this trend by creating **graduate retention pathways** modeled on these systems. For example, post-study permits for high-achieving African graduates could include flexible employment rights, entrepreneurship options, and a fast track to permanent residence for those contributing to national development goals. Such policies would help African universities become true talent engines for the continent, rather than training grounds for other regions' economies.

#### Attract skilled professionals through regional visa harmonization

The African Union and Regional Economic Communities (RECs) should work toward mutual recognition of qualifications and a continental "African Skills Visa." This visa could be modeled after Nigeria's N4A and Rwanda's C1 permits — renewable, long-term, and skill-based, without the need for employer sponsorship. Harmonizing professional accreditation across borders (for engineers, doctors, academics, etc.) would make it easier for professionals to work in multiple countries without re-certification barriers. A common African skills registry, integrated into the AU's Digital Identity initiative and potentially backed by blockchain technology and artificial intelligence (AI), could further streamline this process.

#### Create clear, low-friction pathways for self-employment and entrepreneurship

Governments should enable skilled professionals to build startups, consultancies, or training centers by lowering entry barriers such as capital thresholds and bureaucratic requirements. Instead of demanding large capital investments like Mauritius or Rwanda's entrepreneur permits, governments could design "knowledge-based enterprise" visas that recognize intellectual contribution as economic value. These visas should allow holders to operate across sectors, access local financing, and employ citizens. Simplified online registration, transparent renewal procedures, and targeted tax incentives for businesses that create jobs or transfer skills would make professional entrepreneurship easier, faster, and more impactful across Africa.

#### Design guardrails that protect but do not stifle local employment

Many current visa systems in Africa are well-intentioned, as we've seen. However, rather than blanket restrictions, countries can adopt targeted protection mechanisms similar to Singapore's Fair Consideration Framework. Governments could require employers hiring foreign professionals to demonstrate how those hires contribute to local skill development. This might include mentorship programs, structured on-the-job training, or formal knowledge-transfer plans. Employers could also submit localization roadmaps, outlining how roles held by foreign experts (including self-employed professionals) will progressively integrate local talent. Such measures preserve opportunities for citizens while ensuring foreign expertise strengthens, rather than substitutes, the local workforce.

#### Integrate foreign professionals into national development agendas

Governments should align migration policy with national growth priorities by deliberately channeling skilled migrants into sectors facing the greatest shortages — such as renewable energy, agritech, manufacturing, and digital infrastructure. This requires coordination between ministries of labor, higher education, and immigration to ensure that visa categories correspond to industrial and innovation strategies. Countries should maintain national skills inventories to identify gaps and match incoming professionals to priority projects, research institutions, or public-sector initiatives — perhaps using AI to surface opportunities for all parties. Embedding skilled migration within development planning turns foreign expertise into a strategic resource, helping countries accelerate technology transfer, boost productivity, monetize homegrown IP, and achieve long-term competitiveness.

#### Provide clear pathways to permanent residence and citizenship

Reversing Africa's brain drain is as much about retention as it is about attraction. Skilled professionals are highly mobile — they settle where systems are predictable, fair, and stable. When immigration policies are unclear, slow, or frequently changing, these professionals move elsewhere, taking their expertise, capital, and networks with them. Governments should therefore establish transparent, time-bound pathways from temporary residence to permanent residency and, eventually, citizenship. Eligibility criteria — such as duration of stay, tax compliance, or local employment — should be clearly communicated and consistently applied. A reliable, corruption-free process signals stability and respect, encouraging foreign-trained Africans to invest, build families, and embed themselves in their host economies. Creating permanence also fosters continuity. Professionals who know they can stay long term — and not be treated as second-class citizens — are more likely to start businesses, mentor locals, and reinvest their earnings. By making settlement attainable and equitable, African countries can transform skilled migration from a transient opportunity into a sustained engine of national development.

#### Strengthen data and governance systems

A modern, skill-based visa system depends on accurate data and efficient administration. Governments should invest in digital transformation of immigration systems, not just to collect and share data but also to cut processing times dramatically, matching countries like the UAE that can approve visas within days. Developing digital migration management platforms can help track labor market needs, monitor talent flows, and flag potential abuses using AI, while also giving applicants real-time visibility into their status. Shared databases among AU member states can improve verification, enhance border security, and foster mutual recognition of credentials. The faster a qualified applicant can apply, get approved, and begin contributing, the more competitive a country becomes in attracting and retaining talent. A data-driven, tech-enabled immigration ecosystem is therefore not just an administrative upgrade, but a foundation for Africa's integration and economic acceleration.

#### Hire, train, and operationalize immigration officials more effectively

Visa frameworks cannot function properly without competent, well-trained officials implementing it consistently. Across much of Africa, there is a persistent gap between policy intent and frontline execution. Governments may announce progressive immigration reforms, yet border officials or local immigration offices apply outdated rules or contradict official policy. This disconnect breeds confusion and distrust among skilled professionals, undermining a country's credibility and competitiveness. To fix this, governments should ensure their immigration officers are regularly trained on new policies, digital tools, and customer service standards. Internal communication between ministries particularly labor, home affairs, and foreign affairs must be strengthened so that messaging is consistent across all levels of government. Clear, unified guidance prevents contradictory interpretations and ensures that reforms translate into real-world efficiency.

Staffing levels also matter. Many immigration offices, such as those in Namibia and South Africa, remain severely under-staffed, forcing existing officials to manage overwhelming caseloads under high pressure. Expanding these departments would not only improve service delivery but also create local jobs in a growing administrative sector. When immigration officials are well-equipped, motivated, and aligned with national objectives, they become active enablers of economic development rather than gatekeepers of bureaucracy or magnifiers of anti-foreigner sentiment.

In essence, these reforms would transform Africa's fragmented migration landscape into a continent-wide talent network: one that recognizes African expertise as a shared developmental resource and enables Africans to build prosperity together.



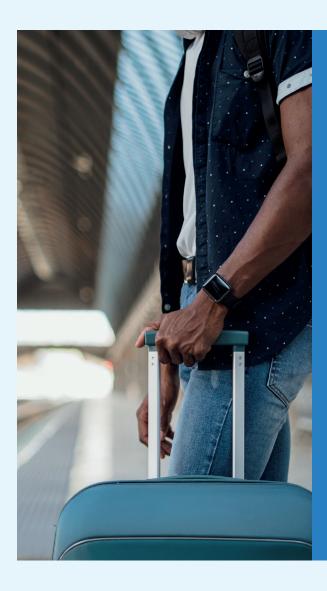
## Conclusion

Africa's future prosperity depends not just on retaining its brightest minds, but on circulating skills, ideas, and innovation across its own borders. The current patchwork of visa systems — often restrictive, expensive, and employer-bound — was built for a different era. It cannot meet the demands of a generation that is increasingly mobile, educated, and eager to contribute to Africa's transformation — especially as Africa is headed toward demographic prosperity and a more central role in the global economy.

By adopting flexible, skill-based mobility policies, African countries can convert brain drain into brain gain and circulation. A unified African Skills Visa, complemented by national pathways for graduates and professionals, would create a continental talent pool that serves Africa's development priorities first. The benefits are tangible: stronger research networks, faster industrial growth, and deeper regional integration.

This vision demands political will, regional trust, and administrative innovation, but the tools already exist. From Rwanda's efficiency to Nigeria's inclusivity, African nations have shown that progress is possible when policy aligns with purpose. What's needed now is coordination and courage.

If Africa is to Agenda 2063's vision of a prosperous, integrated, and globally competitive continent, it must first make it easier for Africans to build, work, and thrive within Africa.



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# About the authors



## Mo Shehu, PhD

**Mo Shehu** is the CEO of Column, a UK-based B2B media and research firm. He holds a PhD in Informatics and has worked across academia, media, tech, and public affairs over more than a decade — leading research, content strategy, and digital visibility projects for founders, startups, and institutions. With experience spanning seven countries across three continents, he leads operations at Column, overseeing research and client strategy to turn insight into action. He lives in the UK.



#### Gideon Onunwa

**Gideon Onunwa** is a researcher and trained data scientist with a background in biotechnology and bioinformatics. He has supported research projects spanning public policy, data analysis, and science communication. Gideon is passionate about helping organizations make evidence-based decisions through clear and accurate sourcing. He holds a BSc in Biochemistry and is certified by Google, DataCamp, and the National Institute of Management. He lives in Abuja, Nigeria.

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