

# Unpacking locally led research and evaluation through the lens of collaborative autoethnography



## Authors:

Clement Sefa-Nyarko<sup>1,2</sup>   
Edem Agbe<sup>2,3</sup>   
Alexander Afram<sup>2</sup>   
Raymond Hodor<sup>2</sup>   
Lucy Ofori-Davis<sup>2</sup>   
Arnold Bediako<sup>2</sup>   
Ernest A. Owusu<sup>2</sup>

## Affiliations:

<sup>1</sup>African Leadership Centre, Faculty of Social Science and Public Policy, King's College London, London, United Kingdom

<sup>2</sup>Research, Evaluation and Learning Unit, Participatory Development Associates Limited, Accra, Ghana

<sup>3</sup>School of Social Policy and Political Science, University of Lincoln, Lincoln, United Kingdom

## Corresponding author:

Clement Sefa-Nyarko,  
clement.1.sefa-nyarko@kcl.ac.uk

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**Background:** Evaluation in Africa and the Global South has been driven by external, often foreign, actors and focused on meeting donor funding needs, conducted through the lens of 'others' other than the affected populations. There is growing interest to change or decolonise this trend in the international development community.

**Objectives:** To address the fundamental question of positionality in redefining the scope and understanding of locally-led evaluation.

**Method:** This qualitative research article departs from the practice of externally driven evaluation and adopts a methodology called collaborative autoethnography. Its strength is that it is experiential and reflective, and the researcher is also the researched. The collaborative nature tampers the extreme subjectivity in the legitimate analysis of personal experiences to interpret wider cultural, political, and social phenomena.

**Results:** We found that the notion of locally-led evaluation is highly nuanced and contested, and goes beyond a dichotomy between the 'local' and the 'external'. Another arena of contestation which our research clarifies is the outcomes of locally-led evaluation. Local leadership of evaluation processes alone does not guarantee contextualised, participatory evaluation.

**Conclusion:** The localised adaptation and application of evaluation principles and practices are essential for relevance. But there is no one-cap-fit-all checklist. Much comes down to the values, mindsets, and competencies of evaluators.

**Contribution:** We propose that epistemology and methodology should go hand-in-hand with questions of identity or geography in evaluation, if relevance, robust application of indigenous methodologies, participation of the affected populations and uptake are the expected outcomes.

**Keywords:** locally led evaluation; African-led evaluation; collaborative autoethnography; autoethnography; Ghana; Africa; evaluation.

## Introduction

A prominent school of thought in evaluation has emerged around locally led, locally centred, and locally relevant evaluation in the contexts of Global South (Chilisa et al. 2016), which has gained prominence in Africa, including the oft-cited Made-in-Africa evaluation that was spearheaded by Sulley Gariba (Dlakavu, Mathebula & Mkhize 2022; Khumalo 2022; Mbava 2019). It proposes a paradigm shift in evaluation approaches, away from Western thoughts and theories, to methodologies grounded in local socio-cultural values, philosophies, and experiences. It is grounded in the indigenous evaluation principle of 'by us for us' applied in Australia, Canada and elsewhere, which emphasises inclusivity, shared values, and the need to localise evaluations to reflect local norms, knowledge systems, and values. This is partly because existing development evaluation theories and practices are viewed as extensions of colonialism. To decolonise, it proposes an evaluation ecosystem that radically transforms the theory and practice from evaluation conceptualisation, through design, data collection and analysis, to dissemination and uptake. In the African context, evaluation is expected to go beyond indigenous participation in evaluations, to include the pursuance of alternative evaluation frameworks that are unique to African societies. This includes a rethinking and recalibration of existing evaluation frameworks that are deeply rooted in Western thinking and values. At the very least, such existing frameworks should be reframed to reflect the uniqueness of African context and values.

**Note:** Special Collection: Addressing Knowledge Asymmetries.

This article offers an avenue for such recalibration using collaborative autoethnography.

Autoethnography is designed as a critical self-reflective process that systematically and qualitatively critiques personal experiences in a way that could have broader implications on culture and society in general (Ellis & Bochner 2000; Spry 2001). In our autoethnography, we have triangulated those personal reflections with a collaborative discourse among people who have similar experiences in the realms of monitoring, evaluation and learning in Ghana and Africa. Collaborative autoethnography addresses the sources of subjectivity associated with autoethnography such as misjudgement, self-inflated value of experiences and personal biases (Ettorre 2017). More recent studies that adopted this approach of collaborative autoethnography include Atkinson et al. (2021) and Atkinson et al. (2023). Collaborative autoethnography combines the researcher and the researched experience into one body of thought, not just as individuals; but in this research, as a group of seven experienced researchers and evaluators who have expertise in the geographic and thematic interface of evaluation in Africa.

The article addresses the pressing need to shift the locus of power, knowledge, and influence within the realm of evaluation in Africa. It highlights the crucial importance of positioning African evaluators at the centre of evaluation, not least because they bring unique perspectives, contextual understanding, and an intimate knowledge of the diverse cultures and societies in Africa. By placing African evaluators in leadership roles and fostering their active participation, evaluation in Africa can become more culturally relevant, locally responsive, and ultimately more effective in addressing the complex challenges facing African societies. Using the collaborative autoethnography approach, we analyse the lived experiences of African evaluators in the last decade to explore the current landscape of evaluations in Africa, shedding light on the relationships between 'external' and 'internal' evaluators and the implications of such relationships on the process and outcomes of evaluation. The article delves into the advantages of promoting the active engagement of African evaluators, such as the distribution of power in the evaluation team, increasing the credibility and ownership of evaluation results, fostering sustainable capacity development, and contributing to the broader agenda of decolonising knowledge systems.

Despite the increasing demand for people-centred evaluation in Africa, there is a persistent issue – the significant underrepresentation of African evaluators and limited involvement of local expertise in the design, conduct, and interpretation of evaluations in Africa. We define evaluation as a process that is designed to provide critical insights into what 'works' and 'what does not work' to shape evidence-based decision-making, and to influence the allocation of resources in various sectors, programmes, projects and institutions. In defining locally led evaluation, we depart from the narrative that calls for African-based evaluation

framework to focus on the positionality of the African evaluator in evaluation, irrespective of the evaluation framework being used. We do not necessarily argue that African-led evaluation should entirely replace external evaluations on the continent. To the contrary, we argue for complementarities of evaluation in Africa, where Africans (internal evaluators) and Westerners (external evaluators) leverage their unique strengths and expertise to improve evaluation practice and outcomes on the continent. We further argue for tangible African leadership and participation in evaluation practices to forestall equity and to increase the possibility of deploying indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) in evaluation.

In the next section, we discuss some of the theoretical and practical underpinnings of locally led evaluation through secondary literature review. This is followed by the methodology, three thematic findings from our review, and then their implications for evaluation in Africa.

## Literature review on locally led evaluation

The process of evaluation, which is considered a recent phenomenon, dates back in time notably to the eras of the 'New Deal' and 'Great Society' policies when there was the need for the United States government to evaluate its social reform programmes on which large sums of money had been expended (Mbava 2017; Mbava & Chapman 2020). Evaluation has since advanced and is now practised globally in multicultural contexts, impacting the lives of people around the world (Mbava 2019). Notwithstanding the fact that evaluation has become a global phenomenon, Cloete (2016) observed that most evaluation approaches, models, theories, and practitioners who operate in Africa are still mainly of Western origin and do not always achieve the optimal results in the African context. Chilisa (2015) and Frehiwot (2022) have also observed that evaluation practice is donor driven and based on values and contexts other than data and knowledge relevant to the most affected populations, that is, the population who were the ultimate targets of the programmes to be evaluated. We argue in this article that to contribute to development and to impact the lives of people, evaluation needs to be better placed in context, aligning with cultures, conditions, traditions, and institutions.

Evaluators have increasingly called for the decolonisation of evaluation by advocating for full participation and involvement of relevant stakeholders and evaluators in the construction of evaluation theory and practice that align with the lived experiences of the people (including participants) for which it is designed (Mbava & Chapman 2020). Dlakavu et al. (2022) also argue that, for a better decolonised evaluation, there is the need to not only address power imbalances in the design and implementation of development interventions but also within Africa for instance, to have evaluation rooted in African or IKS. Mbava and Dahler-Larsen (2019) assert that the involvement of local evaluators

in the evaluation process and design other than being merely data collectors results in a better evaluation. This supports our argument that for evaluation to be locally and contextually grounded, African evaluators must have strong decision-making power and influence in the continent's evaluation value chain.

Efforts to change this approach in Africa has therefore galvanised interest in the international development community, especially because of the growing interest in decolonising evaluation. Notable among these is the formation of African Evaluation Association (AfrEA) in 1999 to respond to Africa's growing need for advocacy, information sharing and capacity building in evaluation. This led to the increasing formation of evaluation networks in Africa, giving prominence to evaluation in Africa (Chilisa 2015). Since its formation, AfrEA has been advocating not only for high standard African-led and African-owned evaluations but also one that is based on evaluation theory and practice relevant to the African context and tells the story of Africa (Chilisa 2015; Mbava & Chapman 2020).

Made in African Evaluation (MAE) embodies Africa's ways of knowing, realities and values (Chilisa et al. 2016). In defining MAE, Adeline Sibanda (former president of AfrEA) explained that:

MAE is one that promotes African-led and African rooted evaluations. Thus, MAE champions that Africa's development should mainly be spearheaded by Africans using Afrocentric paradigms or worldviews, ways of knowing and working, and their interaction over time with evolving African contexts. (Twende Mbele 2021:3)

Scholars such as Chilisa (2015) are of the view that an African-led evaluation needs not necessarily be conducted by only Africans and professional evaluators. It should involve employing evaluation theories, practices and methodologies pertinent to African cultural contexts, and should involve Africans from the outset. Chilisa & Mertens (2021) believe that the inclusion of indigenes and indigenous methodologies will contribute to sustainable development if well intentioned and done well.

Different approaches to evaluation are highlighted by the literature on MAE. On the one hand, MAE advocates for the adaptation of Western evaluation models and designs to suit the African context. On the other hand, it calls for a transformative approach and the development of new evaluation theories, methodologies, and practice, developed from African philosophies, IKS and values, among others (Chilisa & Mertens 2021; Fish 2022).

Three main approaches are discussed by Chilisa (2015): First, least indigenised evaluation approach, in which evaluation is mainly dominated by Western theories with minimum changes done to make it relevant to the African context. The involvement of the local, for instance, is limited to translating data collection tools into local languages. Second, the adaptation evaluation approach, which involves the

integration of both Western and African methodologies. Third, the African-relational based approach, which advocates for a completely new evaluation practice based on African evaluation conceptual frameworks. The graduation from the first to the third approach borders on the degree of intensity and intentionality in the inclusion of indigenous values and expertise, which we argue, have significant impact on the quality of the evaluation if they are higher. The degree of participation is therefore an important factor.

Dlakavu et al. (2022) assert that developing and mainstreaming MAE practice can be achieved by mainstreaming participatory methodologies such as ethnography, Most Significant Change Stories (MSCS) and participatory rural appraisal tools (PRA) such as storytelling to gain insights into the lived experiences and needs of project participants. He explained that these localised approaches offer opportunities to effectively utilise indigenous knowledge. This is corroborated by Chilisa (2015), who argues that for a successful MAE, the methodologies used should emanate from IKS, local cultures, African philosophies, and paradigms. This calls for a need to embed African methodologies, ways of knowing and approaches consciously and continuously in the evaluation praxis (Dlakavu et al. 2022; Twende Mbele 2021).

To explain indigenous knowledge, Bruchac (2014) describes indigenous knowledge as being conveyed formally and informally among kin groups and communities through social encounters, oral traditions, ritual practices, and other activities. They include oral narratives that recount human histories; cosmological observations and modes of reckoning time and place; symbolic and decorative modes of communication and specialised understandings of local ecosystems. This understanding is important because it offers context and justification why indigenous knowledge is important in evaluation – reports are not the only useful product of evaluation as stories, jokes, arts and other cultural expressions are equally important evaluation outputs. Whether African-led evaluation would necessarily adopt these IKS is contestable and part of this article is to interrogate this question.

According to Popiwa and Saidi (2022), to achieve MAE initiatives that are relevant to African challenges and needs, one needs to fuse evaluation with IKS approaches. They observe that Africans rely on indigenous knowledge, which is key to their existence, to interact with each other and their environment for their survival, problem solving and development. This, as Asakitikpi (2020) explains, is deeply rooted in the Africans' lived-experiences and defines their worldviews, relations, and practices.

The use of the African IKS and the deepening of MAE is however inhibited as the mainstream approaches being used currently in African evaluations marginalise the African knowledge systems and African evaluators (Chirau & Ramasobana 2022). Cloete (2016) attributes this to the fact that evaluations in Africa are still largely commissioned by non-Africans who are mostly international development

agencies who fund development programmes on the continent. Kaya and Seleti (2014) also noticed that Western worldviews of knowledge are yet to appreciate alternative non-Western ways of knowing and producing knowledge. This lack of appreciation implies that IKS are less documented and applied in evaluation processes (Kaya & Seleti 2014).

The low representation of African knowledge systems in evaluation practice has also been raised as an indictment on evaluation practices (Chilisa et al. 2016), and Khumalo (2022) explains this as a colonial legacy in international development assistance. As a remedy, Khumalo has recommended a decolonisation of evaluation, which can be achieved through emphasis on the significance of legitimising African knowledge systems. We argue in this article that IKS, while no homogenous definition exists, is a multidisciplinary approach to monitoring and evaluation (M&E) that promotes inclusivity, local relevance, and representation in evaluation.

Two challenges that have been identified as stumbling blocks to achieving locally led evaluation and the adoption of IKS in evaluation are power differentials between external evaluators who consider themselves specialists and locally based evaluators who are at the receiving end of funding for evaluation on the one hand and task sharing in project management where the allocation is externally led on the other hand (Chirau & Ramasobana 2022). Chirau and Ramasobana (2022) reported that Western evaluators often assume responsibility for highly technical and strategic roles in the evaluation process, leaving the African evaluators with the logistics support and data collection roles, thereby undermining African evaluation in the process. To avoid the use of least indigenised approaches and knowledge systems as described by Chilisa et al. (2016), where locals are only involved in the evaluation process as translators and data collectors, Dlakavu et al. (2022) recommend that relevant stakeholders and community leaders should be involved in planning and developing research methods, guided and informed by indigenous ways of knowing and doing. This recommendation is similar to that of Pophiwa and Saidi (2022), who argues for an embeddedness of IKS in MAE. The general drift in thought is that evaluation design, right from conceptualisation to reporting and dissemination, should be locally formulated, and intervention programmes need to be premised on local and indigenous epistemologies. These can be achieved if local participants and local experts are not only actively involved but also have the power to make decisions throughout the design and implementation processes.

Despite the interest in locally led evaluation, the definition of 'the local' is not settled, as we discover in this study. For instance, there are so many degrees of the local – micro such as community, meso such as district and regional, and macro such as national – and the triaging and choices that have to happen to ensure actual and systematic representation is not as straightforward as the literature suggest. We have offered experiential grounds for clarifying this. Our experiential contribution to this discourse responds to critique from

scholars such as Fish (2022), who argue that there is too much focus on theory (concepts and philosophies) in the discourse on locally led evaluation at the expense of clear, practical steps for implementation.

The question remains whether locally led evaluation produces distinctively superior outcome than externally led evaluation: does locally led evaluation actually achieves better evaluation outcomes than externally led evaluation? While Dlakavu et al. (2022) posit that locally led evaluation can potentially produce accurate and context-specific evidence to inform responsive and better policies and interventions that respond to the needs of the African populations, Fish (2022) argues for more. He argues that it is only when locally led evaluation is practicalised that it will have any impact – a move from the theory to the practice. We have critically assessed this debate and based on our experiential reflections, produced some analysis ahead in this article.

## Methodology

Autoethnography is a qualitative research approach that combines elements of autobiography and ethnography, which allows researchers to explore personal experiences within a wider cultural, social, and political context (Ellis & Bochner 2000). In collaborative autoethnography, multiple researchers engage in the process of shared reflection and analysis, which helps to mitigate the limitations of individual subjectivity (Chang, Ngunjiri & Hernandez 2013).

Our choice of collaborative autoethnography was driven by the need to elevate the voices and experiences of African evaluators in the discourse on African-led evaluation. By engaging in a collective process of critical self-reflection, we sought to generate rich insights into the complexities and nuances of evaluation practice in African contexts. This approach aligns with the principles of indigenous research methodologies, which emphasise the importance of self-determination, cultural protocol, and community engagement in the production of knowledge (Chilisa 2020).

To ensure rigour and trustworthiness of our results, we followed a structured process of data collection and analysis. This involved multiple rounds of individual reflections, group discussions, and thematic analysis. We also incorporated techniques such as member checking and peer debriefing to enhance the credibility and confirmability of our interpretations (Lincoln & Guba 1985).

Our collaborative autoethnography is based on the experiences of seven M&E specialists who are also the authors of this article, and who have several decades of experience shared among them. The geographic scope of their experience spans five African countries (Ghana, Cote d'Ivoire, Cameroun, Kenya, South Africa), Australia, and the United Kingdom. One is an academic, two are in management positions in development, and each member of the team has expertise in programme design, analytical skills, community-driven development, and several other technical skills in

M&E, including the use of analytical software and theoretical framework development. All of us have worked together on more than 25 different research, M&E tasks, as well as in different combinations. Each of us has worked with other partners or collaborators who are based in Ghana, Africa, and elsewhere in Europe, Australia and America. Our sectors of expertise include education, agriculture, child protection, social protection, organisational development, climate action, energy transitions, among others. These identities, expertise and experiences are the foundation upon which our data for this study is drawn. The careful balance of drawing from our individual and group experiences has shaped the design and implementation of this collaborative autoethnography. We also recognise that our experiences could cloud our judgement in the discussions and analysis; however, we believe that the diverse backgrounds as people who have lived and worked in both the Global South and North, and across several sectors and organisational ladder have moderated our biases to an extent. The group discussions were open-ended, candid, and critical.

We divided the study into three phases based on the core standards of autoethnography (Spry 2001). Firstly, conceptualisation: In this phase, we discussed the privacy and ethical conditions governing our study, and agreed upon the core objectives, questions that would govern our discussions, the number and nature of our data collection rounds, and end goal of the project.

Secondly, data collection: In this phase, we did four rounds of primary data collection and added a fifth round for synthesising the data. The synthesis meeting allowed us to have a reflective recapitulation of the emerging findings and to probe further the extent to which key assumptions and themes were shared among the team. Each data collection round had a facilitator and a notes taker, and the meetings were convened in the fashion of a traditional focus group discussion lasting two hours each and blending in-person and virtual participation. The primary difference is that the facilitator and the notes taker were part of the study sample – all of us – and each of us took our own notes for comparison and further reflections. All the data collection were performed within a period of 5 weeks, involving a data collection round per week. We also asked each person to present a picture that best represented their understanding of locally led evaluation. After discussing each image, we all agreed upon one, which we present and discuss ahead in this article. The questions we discussed per round of data collection were:

*'Round One Question: African-led evaluation versus Indigenous ways of knowing: What are they? How does African-led evaluation make a difference when using indigenous ways of knowing?'*

*'Round Two Question: What are the perceptions of competence, quality, capacity and professionalism of locally-led evaluation in comparison with externally-led evaluation since these are important standards for selecting evaluators?'*

*'Round Three Question: How different is African-led evaluation from non-African-led evaluations?'*

*'Round Four Question: The end of evaluation: Do we achieve better evaluation outcomes with locally-led evaluation than with externally led evaluations?'*

Thirdly, analysis: In this phase, we analysed the pool of data that we collected through the collaborative reflections of our experiences. Each of us analysed the data independently over a couple of weeks to identify themes, after which we reconvened to discuss and synthesise them into a single document. We used the thematic approach to pull out common and contested themes that are responsive to our enquiry around the meaning, expected outcomes, lessons, and complexities of locally led evaluation. We also used the period to reflect further on the images we each presented to represent our understanding of locally led evaluation.

## Presentation of results

Three main themes emerged from our analysis. The detailed accounts these themes are presented next.

### African-led evaluation means more than one thing: It is complex and nuanced

#### Unpacking African-led evaluation

As a starting point, we tasked each of us to spend a week to identify an image that offered a personal meaning of African-led evaluation. Interestingly, two members of the team identified and shared the image of a growing palm tree (Figure 1) to represent their perspectives on African-led evaluation. Through an intense debate that revolved around consensus building and reasoning, we agreed that a growing palm tree offered a deep representation of an African-led evaluation.



Bottle Palm Tree, n.d., [Photograph], *Palms and Plants*, viewed n.d., from <https://palmsandplants.ca/products/bottle-palm-tree>  
**FIGURE 1:** The image of a growing palm tree.

### Interpretation:

The palm tree offers a rich and evocative metaphor for the qualities of African-led evaluation that we aim to highlight in this article. A closer examination of the palm tree in its natural ecosystem reveals multiple layers of meaning that are relevant to our discussion.

At a surface level, the palm tree itself embodies key attributes of African-led evaluation. Its deep roots, ability to thrive in local conditions, and provision of sustenance to communities all speak to the grounding of African-led evaluation in local context, knowledge, and values. The diverse branches of the palm tree also symbolise the plurality of African evaluation approaches that share common roots.

However, the metaphor gains even greater depth and resonance when we consider the palm tree not in isolation, but as part of a complex web of ecological relationships. The palm tree's roots are nourished by the soil, which teems with microorganisms, fungi and other living elements that work together to cycle nutrients and support growth. The palm tree is also enmeshed in networks of reciprocal exchange with other plants and animals in the ecosystem. It is this dynamic interconnectedness that enables the palm tree to grow strong and resilient.

This ecological perspective offers a powerful lens for understanding African-led evaluation as an approach that is embedded in and constantly interacting with surrounding contexts and knowledge systems. African-led evaluation does not stand apart from the communities and environments in which it is situated, but is rooted in and responsive to them. Its validity and value are derived from its ability to tap into and engage with local ways of knowing, being and doing.

In contrast, a palm tree in a plantation setting, removed from the sustaining relationships of a diverse ecosystem, is an impoverished version of its potential. Similarly, an evaluation approach that is narrowly conceived or imposed without deep engagement with context is likely to be stunted and limited in its growth and impact. (Authors' reflection on the image)

We can extend the ecological metaphor to critique Western evaluation models that abstract from context and local ways of knowing. Like a tree uprooted from its natural environment and starved of connection, these approaches struggle to thrive or bear meaningful fruit. They may be bereft of the nourishing inputs and relationships needed to generate relevant and useful evaluative knowledge.

The vibrant and generative potential of African-led evaluation, in contrast, lies in its embrace of context, recognition of complexity, and openness to diverse sources of insight. Like a palm tree, African-led evaluation is part of a living system, continuously adapting and evolving in response to its environment. By centring African ways of knowing and being, while critically engaging with other knowledge traditions, African-led evaluation can flourish and bear fruits that sustainably nourish the communities it aims to serve.

Hence, the palm tree metaphor captures the dynamic, contested evolution of African-led evaluation as a concept. At the surface level, African-led evaluation implies leadership

and control of the evaluation process by Africans and African institutions. But our dialogues complicated this notion in important ways. A member of the team indicated:

'I appreciate if an African is involved in the process and the African voice is heard, and that voice has been used to define a methodology. On the face of it, we wouldn't know an African is involved in the process.' (Participant 5, Female, Round 1 Discussion)

We found that an African leadership in an evaluation in itself does not guarantee the use of contextually appropriate and culturally relevant evaluation approaches. Africans can lead evaluations using Western theories and methods that ignore local ways of knowing and doing – we subsequently spent some time to interrogate what indigenous ways of knowing are, which we discuss next in this article. We posited, for instance, that evaluators from outside Africa have conducted African-focussed evaluations that are strongly driven by local agendas, perspectives, and values.

For example, in an evaluation of a community-based health intervention in rural Ghana, the African evaluators on the team played a crucial role in adapting the data collection methods to align with local cultural norms and communication styles. For instance, we conducted interviews in informal settings, such as under a shade tree or while walking with participants to their farms, rather than in a formal, seated format. We have also used locally resonant metaphors and storytelling prompts to elicit richer responses. These adaptations, grounded in the evaluators' deep understanding of the local context, resulted in more authentic and meaningful engagement with community members and yielded insights that might have been missed with a more rigid, externally imposed approach.

Similarly, during an evaluation of an agricultural livelihoods project in Ghana, the African evaluators' knowledge of local agroecological conditions and farming practices was invaluable in shaping the evaluation questions and indicators. We pointed out that the project's focus on promoting a single, high-yield maize variety overlooked the importance of crop diversity for resilience in the face of climate variability. We advocated for broadening the evaluation scope to consider outcomes related to soil health, nutritional diversity, and the preservation of indigenous seed varieties. As a result, after the evaluation, critical insights emerged about the project's unintended consequences and recommendations to support more sustainable and locally adapted agricultural strategies were made.

For these reasons, we reflected further in our discussions on what makes African-led evaluation unique, how it stands out from other kinds of evaluations that are non-African led.

In responding to this area of inquiry, we discussed a previous evaluation project in which three members of the research team had been involved as a case study. It was led by a Europe-based evaluator and was supported by a lead person among our team, who is Ghanaian and considered 'local

partner' in the context of the evaluation. Despite the external evaluator originating from an outsider position, he was familiar with the Ghanaian context and really wanted to hear from the people directly with the local partner's support in terms of navigation and interpretation. We wondered whether identity was in contention in this case because it appeared that the external evaluator could tick most of the boxes for a good evaluation in Ghana. This remains an unresolved question.

The aforementioned example raises important questions about what constitutes a 'good evaluation' in the African context. While the evaluator ticked many of the formal boxes, such as engaging with local stakeholders and seeking to understand the local context, there may have been important non-formal factors that were missed. Much of what happens in the 'grey areas' of an evaluation – the subtle cultural nuances, unspoken power dynamics, and historical legacies – can be difficult for an outsider to fully grasp, even with the best of intentions. This is where the deep contextual knowledge and lived experience of African evaluators becomes invaluable. They are attuned to these non-formal factors and can navigate the complex web of relationships, expectations, and values that shape how an evaluation unfolds on the ground. They can pick up on cues and insights that may be invisible to an external evaluator, no matter how culturally sensitive and well-prepared they are.

### The relationship between African-led evaluation and indigenous ways of knowing

We differentiated between 'African-led evaluation' and 'evaluation using indigenous ways of knowing'. The former refers to the leadership and control of the evaluation, while the latter describes the epistemological foundations and methodological approaches used. We concluded that African leadership in evaluation does not necessarily equate to the use of IKS and methods. Either can occur with or without the

other. This was after an extensive debate, which also led us to develop a matrix of scenarios that can offer a degree of African-led-ness, as shown in Table 1.

This raised deeper questions about what constitutes indigenous evaluation. We pondered whether there are distinctly African evaluation theories and practices or if these are dynamic constructs continuously shaped through ongoing cultural exchange (socialisation and modernisation). Must indigenous evaluation involve reinventing evaluation methods and frameworks? Or does it manifest in how existing tools are adapted and applied contextually? In considering indigenous practices, we discussed incorporating traditional knowledge sources such as stories, rituals, divination, and reading signs in nature. At the same time, we proposed that indigenous evaluation could also entail simply using local languages, words, and ways of engaging with communities that align with cultural values and customs. Our conclusion was that indigenous ways of knowing can be as simple as using the tools we have for undertaking evaluation and or applying them in innovative ways to make them more relevant and effective.

Across these deliberations, a central theme emerged: There is no one-cap-fits-all scenario for what African-led evaluation looks like in practice. It depends on context, purposes, values, and people involved in each case. Possibilities span a wide spectrum, but there was unanimity that indigenous evaluation generally has significant value on the outcomes of evaluation if done well.

### Markers of African-led evaluation

Based on the scenarios that we developed, we identified four key markers for distinguishing between African-led evaluation and externally led evaluation. These markers include: (1) appreciation and use of indigenous ways of knowing; (2) inclusion of programme and/or intervention participants in the evaluation design; (3) methods and

**TABLE 1:** A matrix that defines the degree of African leadership in evaluation in Africa.

#	Scenarios	African-led?	Comments
1	African involved and wields 'decision-making power' in the entire value chain of the evaluation, from setting agenda to design of methodology, tools, among others.	Yes	This is the ideal situation where the African's voice is 'seen' in the evaluation process. The evaluation is likely to be designed in a way that will suit the African context and respond to the needs of the African. African values and traditions will likely (not certainly) be incorporated into the evaluation process. There is a high probability that the process will reflect the African realities; this remains inconclusive.
2	African evaluators involved in the use of the evaluation findings.	No	The African only executes what has already been designed and cannot make any substantial contribution to make it African-led.
3	African evaluators asked to participate in the evaluation (collection of data)	No	The African, at this point, can only apply indigenous ways to getting the best responses as much as possible. That will probably be the only contribution.
4	African evaluators involved and wields decision-making power but don't apply indigenous ways of knowing.	Yes	African-led evaluation is different from indigenous evaluation or indigenous ways of knowing. We can have an African-led evaluation without using indigenous approaches, although it adds value if used.
5	African partially involved but uses indigenous ways of knowing	Yes	If the African evaluator can influence the process with indigenous ways of knowing, that is a positive indicator.
6	Non-African leads and adopts African indigenous ways of knowing	Uncertain	This remains debatable and unsettled among the researchers involved in this study.
7	Evaluation designed by African but implemented by non-Africans?	Yes	It is not about the African leading, but once the design or the evaluation responds to the needs of the African context, it can become African led.
8	Should African-led evaluation be necessarily implemented in Africa to be called African-led evaluation?	No	Once the African is pivotal and/or instrumental to the design of the evaluation, it is African-led. Although if this is not implemented in Africa, it can raise similar contextual issues being raised here.
9	An African involved in the process of evaluation, but not visibly seen, that is, not seen at the forefront.	Yes	One can lead without necessarily being seen by third parties. What's involved in the evaluation process would make a difference. Who would be credited in the final report? If the African was involved, they would be acknowledged.

#, number.

definition of concepts (e.g., reliable income); and (4) adoption and use of appropriate local and cultural contexts (language, dressing, greeting, questioning, etc.) during the evaluation.

These markers emerged from our collective reflections on what distinguishes African-led evaluation from externally driven approaches. They are grounded in our shared experiences as African evaluators and our critical engagement with the literature on evaluation in African contexts. For example, the emphasis on indigenous ways of knowing is informed by the growing recognition in the African evaluation community of the need to value and incorporate local knowledge systems, as reflected in the work of scholars such as Chilisa (2015) and Mkabela (2005).

Similarly, the focus on participant inclusion and culturally appropriate methods and concepts reflects the principles of participatory and culturally responsive evaluation that have been advocated by African evaluation thought leaders such as Cloete (2016) and Mouton et al. (2014). The call for greater involvement of local stakeholders in all aspects of the evaluation process is also a key tenet of the MAE approach, as articulated by Chilisa and Malunga (2012) and others.

At the same time, we acknowledge that these markers are not exhaustive or definitive. They represent our attempt to distil some of the key features of African-led evaluation based on our own experiences and engagement with the literature. We see them as a starting point for further dialogue and refinement within the African evaluation community.

Hence, we concluded that strict, narrow definitions of indigenous evaluation can be hard to pin down and potentially detrimental to knowledge if this definition is forced. Perhaps, the value rests more in consciously and critically examining how we can evaluate in ways that align with people's values, worldviews, and ways of constructing knowledge in their unique contexts. This 'localisation' of evaluation need not be restricted to Africa or other regions of the Global South. Even evaluations in the West, we proposed, should consider how to evaluate with cultural awareness and responsiveness, something which Broomfield-Massey et al. (2024) have further reflected upon.

### The spectrum of Africans' involvement in evaluation is a continuum

At one extreme, external consultants conduct rapid evaluations using imported designs and methods with minimal African input. At the other extreme, African evaluators lead highly participatory and embedded long-

term processes grounded in local ways of knowing and doing (See Figure 2). Between the two extremes are infinite options available to commissioners of evaluation. To put this continuum of participation into perspective, we developed an African-led evaluation assessment matrix split into five stages depicting five degrees of participation (Table 2).

These debates revealed just how multidimensional the appraisal of 'African-led-ness' can be when considering the purpose, sponsorship, leadership, methodology, adaptation to context, and more in evaluation.

The continuous spectrum applies to indigenous evaluation as well. There is no universally applicable indigenous evaluation framework or manual. Africa is incredibly diverse, encompassing thousands of distinct cultures, languages, histories, and knowledge systems. Indigenous evaluation takes myriad forms across – and within – different African societies. Efforts to indigenise evaluation must be rooted in nuanced understandings of specific cultural contexts.

### African-led evaluation is meaningful if it has value-add

Beyond conceptual complexities, we also pondered the practical significance of African-led and indigenous evaluation approaches. We asked, do they lead to improved evaluation outcomes and impacts? Here we found many open-ended questions with few definitive answers. Intuitively, it makes sense that African leadership and indigenous practices could enhance evaluation relevance, appropriateness, participation, local capacity building, and utilisation of findings. But limited empirical evidence currently exists to substantiate such claims.

At least half of the members of our team emphasised that African-led evaluation, by nature of the process, holds intrinsic value on its own terms. It signifies self-determination and locus of control for African peoples to shape the decisions that affect their lives. The other half argued that pragmatic evidence of better evaluation results does matter, especially given the resources required for extensive localisation and indigenisation. Our forward-looking conclusion on this debate is that further targeted research is needed to understand whether, and how African-led evaluation strengthens evaluation processes, findings, and impacts.

### The meaning and value of indigenous ways of knowing

An important dimension of the discourse on locally led evaluation is the adoption of indigenous ways of knowing the evaluation methodologies that evaluators adopt. We

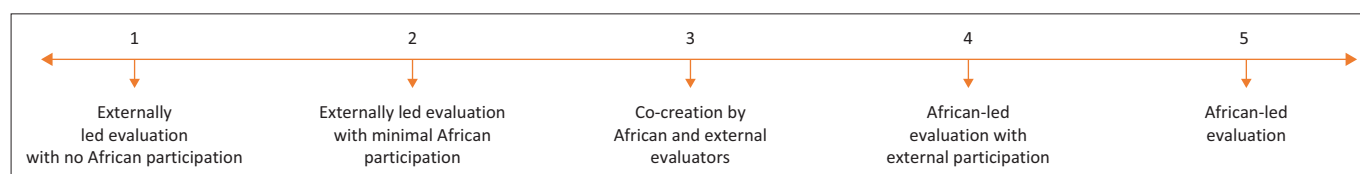


FIGURE 2: The continuum of African involvement in evaluation.



**TABLE 2:** A matrix for local participation that expands the stations of the continuum and typologies.

Externally led evaluation with minimal African participation	Externally led evaluation with some degree of African participation	Co-led by Africans and external evaluators	African-led with external participation	African-led/locally-led evaluation with little or no external participation
External evaluators lead the design of the evaluation with no African input	External evaluators design the evaluation and share with Africans to make an input, but the Africans don't have control to change much from what has been designed even if they disagree significantly.	Both African and external evaluators equally play influential roles and co-create the evaluation design. Major decisions around the design are discussed and collectively decided.	Africans lead the evaluation design but invite inputs and feedback from external evaluators.	African evaluators lead and take all the major decisions around evaluation design with minimal or no input from external partners such as funders.
External evaluators lead in the development of tools without input from Africans	External evaluators design the tools and only invite Africans to review but with limited control to change or overhaul the questions significantly.	Data collection tools are co-designed by both the external African evaluators with almost equal degree of influence in the process.	Data collection tools are designed by African evaluations with inputs and feedback from external evaluators.	African evaluators lead the development of evaluation tools. External stakeholders may make input but do not dictate the set of questions to ask.
External evaluators lead training, data collection and supervision	African evaluators collect data, but training and supervision are conducted by external evaluators.	Training of data collectors and data collection supervision is considered a shared responsibility between Africans and the external evaluators. Both parties play frontline roles in the process.	African evaluators lead the training and data collection and supervision with some degree of support from external evaluators to make the process successful.	African evaluators lead the recruitment, training, and supervision of data collection process.
External evaluators lead the analysis of data without input from Africans/locals	External evaluators lead the data analysis and later share the results with Africans for input with limited control to change the phase of the analysis. Africans may also do transcription and hand over the notes to the external evaluators for coding and analysis.	Analysis of data is shared between African evaluators and external counterparts. Both parties take similar levels of analysis responsibilities based on their expertise and strength.	African evaluators lead the data analysis with some degree of support from external evaluators.	African evaluators lead the analysis of data. They may invite external stakeholders to make input, but the African evaluators remain in the driving seat and take all major decisions and responsibility around how data should be analysed.
External evaluators lead the writing of evaluation report and production of other evaluation outputs without input from Africans/locals	External evaluators write the report and invite Africans to make input. Africans however, cannot change the structure and content of the report meaningfully even if they think differently from how the report or its content has been organised.	Writing of the evaluation report is performed by both Africans and external partners in the evaluation. Both parties take equal responsibilities and ownership of the report.	African evaluators lead the report writing process with needed support from external evaluators.	African evaluators write the evaluation report. External collaborators (e.g., funders) may feedback on the reporting, but the African evaluators control the process and determine the structure and what content should make way into the final output.
External evaluators present findings with no participation from Africans	Africans may be invited to present part of the findings, but the presentation and dominant narrative is led and controlled by the external evaluator.	Dissemination of findings is jointly done by the African evaluators and external collaborators with neither of them assuming greater authority over the other in the process.	African evaluators lead the dissemination of the findings with input and support from the external evaluators.	African evaluators lead the dissemination of the findings to relevant stakeholders.

decided therefore to unpack what knowledge and indigenous ways of knowing are. This section documents the process we adopted and insights we gathered.

We agreed on a definition of 'ways of knowing' as the processes or procedures through which we acquire knowledge. They are also tools we use to gather, create, represent, and pass on knowledge. On the basis of our discussions, we concluded that there are eight ways of knowing: language, reason, sense perception, memory, faith, intuition, imagination, and emotion, consistent with the definition offered by Anthony (2023). We discussed these at length and then settled on the following operational definition for each:

Language is a system of symbols, words or signs that have particular meaning and are universally understood and spoken by people, although we acknowledge that dialects and variances in interpretation complicate understanding. Its main function is to communicate knowledge. Reason allows us to form knowledge without relying on our senses. It helps us to synthesise existing knowledge we have and generate new knowledge from it. That is, it enables us to obtain new knowledge through the assimilation of other pieces of knowledge. Therefore, reason allows us to deduce what we cannot immediately experience for ourselves. Sense perception concerns how we experience the world through our senses – sight, taste, touch, smell and hearing. This has

impact on the meaning that people assign to their experiences on a project to be evaluated. Memory is the recall of old knowledge and ideas from our experiences, which facilitates recall of experiences during an evaluation. Other ways of knowing that have influence on the evaluation outcome include faith, which is belief or confidence in something based on spiritual conviction. Intuition is a gut feeling, which is often based on past experiences, which cannot be explicitly identified. Imagination is forming new images, ideas or concepts that are not actually there in the real world. It is often crucial for the development of new knowledge. Emotion is a way we make sense of experiences and behaviours using feelings. It also includes our response to stimulus in our environment. As a way of knowing, emotion is extremely powerful because we tend to make most of our day-to-day decisions based on our emotions<sup>1</sup> (Anthony 2023).

The debate about how the wider modes of knowing apply to indigenous realms remains unsettled. One thing we all agreed upon was that the indigenous way of knowing is a means of passing or acquiring knowledge that is peculiar to a particular people or context. This is what a member of the research team had to say about indigenous way of knowing:

'If there is an evaluation and you see how the tools have been designed, how the data has been collected, what and what went

1. <https://ibbetter.com/ways-of-knowing/>.

into the data collection or design or analysis of the data, you should be able to readily link it to a certain kind of people or a certain kind of context.' (Participant 5, Female, Round 1 Discussion)

Another member supported this definition by adding that indigenous ways of knowing is using local means like drawings, storytelling, flash cards, seasonal calendars, and demonstrations to gather data from participants or facilitate their recall of events. It concerns using data collection tools and applying them innovatively in such a way that it collects data from the local population effectively and naturally. According to Participant 6:

'[I]t's data collection that is being done, you should be able to apply a technique that makes it easy to take data from the local people naturally without stress and distortion of the meaning.' (Participant 6, Team Member, Round 2 Discussion)

We found a synthesised conceptualisation of indigenous or African ways of knowing, which we categorise into four main sources: (1) symbolic interaction; (2) lived experiences; (3) witch doctoring, soothsaying, and the prophecies; and (4) folklore and storytelling. These are all interconnected and have association with history, knowledge and actions created over generations and with roots from earlier generations.

Firstly, symbolic interaction is how people or communities interact with their environment and the meaning they ascribe to them by examining the behaviour or nature of things around them, which includes both living and non-living things. For instance, in Africa, people can look at the appearance of certain grasses or the nature of the leaves of some trees during a certain period, and they can predict or tell what will happen. Secondly, lived experiences are ways through which people acquire knowledge about a situation based on their individual and collective previous experiences of that situations and previous generations of acquired knowledge. That defines their lived experiences by doing. Here, people get to make informed decision on certain activities because they have engaged in those activities before. Also, new knowledge is acquired based on the existing ones.

The third indigenous way of knowing is through traditional doctors, soothsayers, and the prophets. This happens when the traditional doctors, soothsayers, and prophets use cowries, stones, powder, anointing oils and other 'spiritual' materials to foretell the future. They dig into the past of people or events by engaging in some spiritual, often superstitious acts. Some of their predictions eventually manifest through association with observable conditions although correlation is impossible to prove through scientific methods. They offer advice and counsel to their clients and based on their directions, people claim to know, perhaps, because of power and interest of the parties involved.

The fourth indigenous way of knowing is through folklore and storytelling. Through these media, older members of society tell stories of conquest, famine, and heroism to people, especially children, who learn about their culture

and history this way. The storytellers gather the people in a traditional setting during the moonlight or evenings and tell these stories thereby solidifying communality and culture. This is a way of transmitting knowledge to the people especially the younger generations who were born after events of interest.

From the discussions, we agreed that an indigenous way of knowing or an African way of knowing is simply acquiring or seeking knowledge through the use of local resources, nature, traditions, cultural practices and processes. It is underpinned by people's beliefs systems, spirituality, and superstitions, and communicated through several media.

We also observed that the indigenous or African way of knowing can add significant value to evaluation in Africa. Indeed, existing conventional evaluation methodologies such as Participatory Rapid Appraisal (PRA) and Participatory Learning and Action (PLA) adopt some of the indigenous ways of knowledge, such as storytelling and the use of local symbols to convey meaning and impacts. In any case, the work of traditional doctors and soothsayers can be likened to an evaluator. They collect data on their clients through face-to-face interactions and ask questions about their past and present to understand their clients' current and past condition. Then they do their data analysis by using the cowries, stones and other materials to forecast what could happen to the client. And then they give their recommendations. According to a participant 2 who has encountered soothsayers and traditional doctors in his evaluation work:

The soothsayers do everything evaluators do and they do it better. When someone presents a case to them, they ask questions. They are the evaluators. They ask questions, that is in-depth interview (IDI). Example, how are you?, Who is your grandfather?, where is your mother from?, Was your mother born on Wednesday?, so you are this and that. At that point they are collecting data ... Then they do their analysis with the cowries and other things, and then they forecast. And then they tell you that, ABC could happen. They'll give you recommendation. They ask you to do this and that every day. Go and see this person. This person has a message for you, that is progress updates. The person will ask you to do something when you go, and pre-empt you about things that are likely to happen. That is, intermediate outcome. So, really, they do everything evaluators do. The question is, how do we tap into their methodologies in our own evaluation? (Participant 2, Male, Round 2 Discussion)

But we also argue that the local is a contested space and concept. An indigenous way of knowing depends on the context or environment in which one finds oneself. For example, people who do things in a certain way and live together in a particular location, will see what they do as indigenous or local to themselves. What is indigenous or local is determined by the environment or area within which we find ourselves, and to a larger extent, by the people we engage with. Therefore, when discussing indigenous ways of knowing, context plays a key role. Importantly, what is indigenous to some groups of people may not be indigenous or local to another group of people.

This contestation is also linked to positionality. The definition of the 'local' or 'non-local' is determined by the people we engage during evaluations – this is emergent, meaning one cannot fully set a list of respondents and consultations in advance. For example, in a particular project evaluation in a local community in Ghana, the chief and his elders saw the evaluation team as foreigners and non-locals because they could not speak the Ga language during community engagements, although they were all from Ghana. They didn't recognise the evaluation team as indigenous people although they were Ghanaians and also reside in the region (Greater Accra) where the evaluation had taken place. According to the chief, the evaluation team should have included someone who could speak the Ga language. Language plays a crucial role in ways of knowing and in evaluation. It is much more than just a medium for communication – concepts and things have a place in some languages and not others. A tree or snow, for instance, may not mean much for a linguistic group that have not seen a tree or snow the way others who have seen it in abundance. It can influence how people engage and the extent of the engagements. 'It makes people identify with you and work with you easily or otherwise'.

### The end game for locally-led evaluation

Every evaluation seeks to achieve an end goal. Principally, this includes making recommendations to inform and/or influence decisions, assessing what worked and did not work in programme implementation, among others. The end goal or outcome is usually set out by the programme commissioner, independent of the evaluator whether African or non-African. We debated, inconclusively, whether there are realistic alternative options for setting the evaluation goals, as for instance, allowing community members who are the most affected population to set their own evaluation agenda based on their lived experiences. A major challenge with this option is the practical imperative of potentiality, a never-ending exercise among the populations. Further studies are needed in this sphere to clarify alternative realistic options for inclusive evaluation goal setting.

The outcome of evaluation provides multifaceted benefits to the programme implementation and informs major decisions around programming and policy. Programme outcomes aid in determining whether the current framework being implemented is worth investing in, whether there is the need to change the cause of action, which will inform whether to continue or discontinue the programme altogether. In the case of development, it reveals where to continue to invest or not, which aspect of the programme needs tweaking. It helps the implementor to refine the programme assumptions as well as its theory of change. Similarly, a programme outcome aids in determining whether the programme has achieved the needed results, whether it is worth continuing to invest in it or use the same approach, or to revise. A good programme outcome statement offers lessons learning opportunity, not only from programming generally but also from the side of those the programme was intended to help. It provides an

account of their individual perspective, which is pivotal for programme sustainability and replication. However, the ability of an evaluation to achieve a better outcome is hinged on a well-designed and implemented set of evaluation activities.

We argue that the outcome of an evaluation is significantly influenced by who designs and implements the evaluation activities. A proper understanding of the context and setting of the programme jurisdiction and participants has a direct positive impact on the outcomes of the evaluation. In view of this, African-led evaluations in Africa will result in a more robust outcomes compared to evaluations carried out in Africa by non-Africans (for instance people from the Global North). A member of the research team indicated that:

'The African can bring on board contextual understanding and African ways of doing things. This is based on the assumption that they can hear and tell the African story better.' (Participant 1, Male, Round 1 Discussion)

The African leading an evaluation in an African society that they understand will produce more accurate findings and recommendations, which are informed by all the nuances in the African context. The African evaluator can bring all of that to the fore in the evaluation process, in the analysis and in the end, the recommendations that come with the results. The experience that the African brings on to the table, helps in choosing the right tools. But also, even if they are all using the same tools, all things being equal, the African will make more meaningful evaluation than the non-African. Again, the African leadership would make better sense of the questioning and interpretation than someone who is external and does not understand the nuances. Any misinterpretation can highly affect evaluation outcomes.

However, even among the research team, there were divergent views on the point about the quality of outcomes of locally led evaluations. At least two members of the research team held the opinion that every evaluation in an African society that involves Africans who live or understand the society, even if in the most remote sense, can fit the category of African-led evaluation. One thing we all agreed upon is that the degree of involvement of the Africans in the evaluation influences evaluation outcomes. If an African is only involved in data collection, then the impact of the African on the outcome would be minimal compared to when the African is involved in the design, development, and implementation of the evaluation design. Hence, outcomes will reflect the African settings, bring out all contextual nuances and dynamics in the evaluation's outcomes as one progress towards the right-hand side of Figure 2 – where the degree of African-led-ness increases.

We discussed a practical example to reinforce this argument. In that example, two members of the research were involved in an evaluation in Ghana. Originally, the evaluation was designed by people from the Global North where the definitions of key concepts were not suitable to the Ghanaian setting. This is because they were not familiar and immersed

within the Ghanaian context. Their conceptualisation and how they thought things should be, were purely external to the way things play out in Ghana. The team members involved in the evaluation offered advice and made inputs that suitably captured these concepts to reflect the context of Ghana and led the process of clarifying and collecting appropriate data. These concepts were key to the outcomes of the evaluation that, we were unanimous in our views that: if that aspect of the evaluation was led by people from the Global North, they may have found a different phenomenon than what we reported. These misapplications of concepts have implications for the findings and what goes into the recommendations.

Similarly, another set of two team members led an evaluation study where they solely handled the process of data collection and participated largely in the analysis. They were familiar with the project area, understood and could speak the different local languages used by the various target participants. They also made significant inputs into the questionnaire (tool) used for evidence gathering (data collection). The data collection instrument is a very critical input for determining evaluation and programme outcomes. As they knew the terrain and understood the Ghanaian systems, their inputs were key to structuring questions used for the survey. Again, they were in a better position to properly administer the questionnaire, compared to how it would have been performed by someone from the Global North. All these inputs informed robust outcomes for the evaluation.

## **Discussion: Positioning African-led evaluation as complementary rather than antagonistic to Global North-led evaluation**

Our contemplation of the role of African evaluators in the evaluation landscape aligns with the widely held perception that development evaluation in Africa has largely mirrored the path of donor financing, which is predominantly led by Western donor institutions and professionals (Chilisa 2015; Cloete 2016; Frehiwot 2022). Correspondingly, the evaluation landscape in Africa is often characterised by the dominance of external evaluators, primarily sourced from the providers of development financing. A commonly cited rationale for the prevalence of external professionals in African evaluations is the perceived scarcity of qualified evaluation practitioners on the continent. This perceived scarcity has led to unequal power dynamics and decision-making authority between external and African evaluators participating in evaluations across the continent (Chirau & Ramasobana 2022).

But several other factors explain why evaluation in Africa is dominated by Western evaluators and values aside from colonial tendencies. Firstly, there is lack of evaluation culture among African governments leading to limited commissioning or financing of evaluation from within Africa or by African governments (Mbeck 2018). Consequently, many evaluations taking place in Africa are commissioned and financed by Western governments and donor institutions,

which also influences the choice of evaluators to use. To strengthen the participation and positionality of African evaluators, African governments and institutions need to institutionalise the culture of evaluation and evaluative practice in governance and decision-making processes and correspondingly dedicate funding to evaluation. This is currently not happening or on a limited scale at best. To push the frontiers and indigenise evaluation practice in Africa, African evaluators and evaluation associations need to strengthen advocacy to internalise evaluative culture by African governments and institutions for Africans.

Furthermore, the lack of political will for evaluation leads to another fundamental problem for African evaluators to amplify their voice – limited resources and opportunities to train evaluators on the continent. Until recently, evaluation courses in African academic institutions were limited or non-existent leading to limited supply of African evaluators on the continent. Also, the existing courses for the teaching of evaluation are Western-oriented with little to no place for Afrocentric materials and practices (Chirau & Ramasobana 2022; Mbeck 2018). This supply side challenge also needs to be tackled to strengthen visibility and positionality of African evaluators in Africa and indigenise the knowledge systems, theories and practices that influence evaluation designs and outcomes in Africa.

The supply side deficit notwithstanding, our experiences as evaluators in Africa have demonstrated that African professionals have much more to contribute to the evaluation process than is acknowledged. In our deliberations, we contemplated the distinctive value that African-led evaluation brings to the forefront: a value not currently fully offered by external evaluators. We unanimously recognise that this value extends beyond mere technical competence displayed during the evaluation process. While both African and external evaluators exhibit comparable technical abilities, we reached the consensus that the African evaluator holds a unique contextual advantage, allowing for a more effective shaping of the evaluation process and outcomes, a view well-grounded in the indigenous evaluation literature (Dlakavu et al., 2022; Mbavu & Dahler-Larsen 2019). This advantage persists irrespective of the external evaluator's technical expertise and years of experience. Consequently, African-led evaluation has the inherent potential to foster local ownership of evaluation outcomes and subsequently influence programming and policy recommendations, provided it is intentionally designed with this objective in mind.

As African evaluators, we have had the opportunity to lead and co-lead various evaluations, working as equal partners alongside counterparts from the Global North. Our nuanced understanding of the context and intricacies involved in designing and implementing evaluation studies in Africa has proven invaluable in influencing the overall design and execution. This becomes particularly crucial in the design and style of evaluation, as well as facilitating smooth implementation and navigating challenges that arise during data capture, analysis and presentation and more.

Furthermore, the discussion of locally led evaluation delves into the incorporation of indigenous ways of knowing within evaluation methodologies, prompting a comprehensive analysis of various modes of knowledge acquisition. Recognising eight distinct ways of knowing – language, reason, sense perception, memory, faith, intuition, imagination, and emotion – the team derived operational definitions for each. While the debate on how these modes apply to indigenous realms remains inconclusive, there is a consensus that indigenous ways of knowing are unique to specific contexts or people. This understanding encompasses the use of local means such as drawings, storytelling, flashcards, seasonal calendars, and demonstrations for data collection, enhancing the evaluation's effectiveness and cultural resonance. Four main sources of indigenous knowledge and/or ways of knowing – symbolic interaction, lived experiences, spiritual practices, and folklore – emerged, interconnected with each other. Acknowledging the contested nature of what constitutes locally led evaluation, the analysis emphasises context, with positionality playing a crucial role in determining what is considered indigenous or local. The interplay of language, cultural practices, and engagement dynamics underscores the significance of embracing indigenous ways of knowing in evaluation, recognising their potential to enhance relevance and effectiveness in diverse African contexts (Dlakavu et al. 2022; Pophiwa & Saidi 2022).

Despite the inherent value of African-led and local or indigenous knowledge in evaluation, our discussions led us to another important realisation: the need for increased collaboration and complementarity in evaluation practices on the continent, as opposed to fostering competition and isolationism. Collaboration among African evaluators could pre-empt challenges by ensuring active and equal engagement in the design and decision-making processes, moving beyond designating African counterparts as mere instruments for data collection. This collaborative approach has the potential to enhance the effectiveness and cultural resonance of evaluations conducted on the continent. Consequently, we advocate for African evaluators to engage in collaborative efforts with their external counterparts to facilitate cross-learning and push the boundaries of evaluation practices on the continent. Nevertheless, we emphasise the importance of establishing progressive collaborations and relationships that position African evaluators at the core of decision-making processes, ensuring their influence in determining the direction and outcomes of evaluations across the continent.

## Conclusion, limitations and implications for future research

In this article, we set out to use collaborative autoethnography to rethink and recalibrate existing evaluation frameworks that are deeply rooted in Western thinking and values. Our proposition is that unless these approaches and frameworks reflect IKS and expertise, evaluation will become only cosmetic and not offer real meaning to programme design

and implementation. Our collective autoethnography is an improvement on autoethnography because it allowed us to temper individual perspectives and experiences with the collectively shared experiences of several decades. Through triangulation and collaborative discourses, we have thoroughly discussed and unpacked the meaning and nuances of African-led evaluation and indigenous-led evaluation, as well as the meaning and contexts through which IKS contribute to evaluation in Africa.

The primary limitation of subjectivity of individual reflectivity was addressed through the collaborative design that brought seven evaluators with over seven decades of experience shared between us across Africa and other continents. However, this does not resolve the drawback that the study involved people with shared experiences mixed race by potential biases informed by their awareness of colonial legacies and north-south inequities in evaluation, their experiences of non-African contexts notwithstanding. Future studies could include evaluators of non-African origin.

The central argument or proposition for the study is confirmed. Our conclusion is that the localised adaptation and application of evaluation principles and practices is essential for relevance. But there is no single recipe or checklist. Much comes down to the values, mindsets, and competencies of evaluators. Do they see diversity as a problem to control or an asset to embrace? Are they conditioned to legitimise only Western ways of knowing? Or are open to alternative, non-Western knowledge systems? How inclined are they to facilitate meaningful local participation, ownership and learning in an evaluation process?

Progress hinges on building capacities of evaluators – from Africa and elsewhere – who can thoughtfully negotiate these complexities. This requires expanding the plurality of voices, epistemologies, and methods engaged in evaluation training, research, and practice. Critical and culturally conscious evaluators, combined with conducive incentives and resources, are essential to unlock the potential of African led and indigenous evaluation.

Labelling evaluation approaches as indigenous does not mean they are rudimentary or obsolete. African-led evaluation does not mean blind rejection of all Western knowledge and methods. Instead, it demands honest appraisal of what values, whose voices, and which ways of knowing are privileged in current evaluation paradigms. And creative open-mindedness to expand the possibilities by drawing from multiple knowledge systems. There is still misalignment between the discourse around localisation and what happens in practice, often because of entrenched mindset and existing power dynamics. African-led evaluation approaches will become more prominent as evaluators thoughtfully navigate complex sociocultural contexts to close these divides.

This demands great nuance in how we conceptualise, discuss, research, and practice African-led and indigenous evaluation. Easy labels and dichotomies of 'local' versus

'external' fail to capture intricate realities. There are no effortless formulas or shortcuts. Through collective critical reflection and experimentation, African-led and indigenous approaches can fundamentally reshape evaluation, not as static alternatives or replacements of Western models but as interconnected strands in an ever-changing fabric of evaluation thinking and practice that is globally informed yet locally rooted.

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The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

### Authors' contributions

All authors, C.S.-N., E.A., A.A., R.H., L.O.-D., A.B. and E.A.O., contributed equally to this research article. Conceptualisation and methodology design was initiated by C.S.-N. The rest of the actual design and methodology was contributed equally by all the authors.

### Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

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### Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as all primary data were generated through reflective discussions on the lived experiences of the authors.

### Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and are the product of professional research. It does not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated institution, funder, agency, or that of the publisher. The authors are responsible for this article's results, findings, and content.

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