

# Reflections on building an Afrocentric monitoring and evaluation system



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**Background:** While Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) plays a vital role in improving performance, many systems rely heavily on donor-centric and Western-oriented models that do not reflect Africa's ecosystem dynamics.

**Objectives:** To critically examine the experiences of African thought leaders involved in the Made in Africa Evaluation (MAE) initiative and integrate these reflections with conceptual insights to guide the ongoing refinement of MAE.

**Method:** The study employed a scoping literature review and qualitative interviews with five purposively selected evaluation experts. This approach enabled a comprehensive analysis of the MAE initiative and the real-world experiences of M&E practitioners.

**Results:** Major challenges include limited professional training, a weak evaluation culture and perceptions of M&E as donor-driven, which are compounded by political interference, inadequate funding and corruption. Four strategic pathways were identified: fostering an evaluation culture, promoting multi-stakeholder collaboration, embedding governance principles and ensuring flexibility to reflect Africa's diverse contexts and development realities.

**Conclusion:** The study underscores the importance of developing Afrocentric M&E systems that are technically robust, contextually grounded, independent and resistant to political interference. However, its findings may be constrained by sampling bias due to the small participant pool. Future research should expand on this initiative using the Delphi technique and creating a checklist of key issues for broader quantitative or regional qualitative testing.

**Contribution:** The study contributes to the growing body of work advocating for an Afrocentric M&E system by capturing the lived experiences of African thought leaders behind the MAE initiative.

**Keywords:** Afrocentric; donor-centric; monitoring and evaluation; African context; indigenous knowledge systems.

## Introduction

Despite more than a decade of efforts to align monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems with African realities (Chilisa 2015), concerns about their compatibility and gaps persist. This article draws on the experiences of African thought leaders behind the 2012 *Made in Africa Evaluation (MAE)* initiative, alongside reflections on evaluation practice, to explore the prospects for developing an Afrocentric M&E system. In this study, an Afrocentric M&E system refers to a framework designed to reflect African cultural, social and contextual realities in assessing programmes and policies. Growing evidence from sources such as Masuku and Makhanya (2023), Dlakavu, Mathebula and Mkhize (2022), Chilimampungu (2020) and Abrahams (2019) has shown that most accessible M&E models and frameworks originate from the Global North and do not fully explain the socio-economic realities in the Global South, mainly African countries. Omosa and Archibald (2019) argued that this is not to say that existing models have failed to explain practical realities in developing countries, but rather that their ideological alignment does not reflect developing countries' realities. Justifying their claim, Omosa and Archibald (2019) noted that this presents two problems:

'First, Western evaluation methods and approaches, when used in Africa, may, in fact, lack validity, leading to low-quality evaluations, wrong conclusions, and bad development outcomes. Second, Western evaluation approaches may encourage the subjugation of African culture through neo-imperialism and the colonisation 'of the mind.' (p. 32)

Omosa and Archibald's (2019) argument is premised on the belief that knowledge defies boundaries and people can cross-pollinate ideas regardless of the idea's origin. This notion closely aligns with Madhovi (2020) and Khadiagala, Lake and Ayaya's (2019) assertion that, sharing ideas and experiences, concepts, models and frameworks must be contextually adapted and applied to tally with a region's unique cultural setting. This ideological misalignment is further compounded by common misconceptions around M&E, often perceived as a punitive tool or a donor requirement rather than a mechanism for learning and improvement (Madhovi 2020). Arguably, in a quest to align with donors' requirements, programme documents are packaged into formats that remain palatable to Western academic and donor institutions. As such, African countries must be guided in developing contextually sound M&E systems for data-driven and evidence-based strategies.

This study uses a scoping literature review and in-depth interviews with M&E experts to reflect on the prospects for developing an Afrocentric M&E system. This reflection is enabled through assessing potential driving and restraining factors, including acts of politics, lack of funding, corruption and training opportunities availed to practising professionals. Specifically, this study pursues two objectives: to reflect on the experiences of African thought leaders behind the MAE initiative, and to synthesise these experiences with conceptual insights on MAE to advance the development of an Africa-contextualised M&E system. This dual intent seeks to answer the following questions: How do the experiences of African thought leaders highlight both convergences with and deviations from the MAE initiative? In what ways can insights from these experiences, combined with conceptual reflections on MAE, inform the development of an M&E system that is contextually relevant to Africa? The upcoming sections cover the theoretical and empirical literature underpinning this article, followed by the methodology, and a discussion of key ideas for refining current efforts for an Afrocentric M&E system.

## Theoretical and empirical review

The present study is inspired by Grant and Osanloo (2014) and Lysaght's (2011) assertion that a theoretical framework serves as a guide on which to build and support an inquiry. In line with this advice, the study adopted the MAE concept to guide its direction, extract variables, frame assumptions, refine research questions and inform key choices made throughout the research process. The MAE concept is approximately one decade old; it first appeared in the evaluation debate in 2012 when it was discussed at a forum held by African thought leaders in evaluation in Bellagio, Italy, to dissect the fundamentals of African-rooted and African-driven evaluation (Chilisa 2015). The concept underscores decolonising and indigenising African evaluation practices. As Khadiagala et al. (2019) and Omosa and Archibald (2019) noted, it advances the development of M&E frameworks rooted in African epistemologies and methodologies, countering the dominance of Western

paradigms. Made in Africa Evaluation was later agreed upon at the eighth African Evaluation Association (AfrEA) conference held in Uganda in 2017, which stated that context, culture, history and beliefs shape the nature of evaluations, specifically in the diverse, often complex African reality. Therefore, further research is needed to support the development of an Afrocentric evaluation system.

The MAE concept builds a case for having evaluations in Africa using African principles. Because MAE recognises the importance of collaborations between the Global North and South, this study first reviews how the African evaluation community can benefit from global experiences while contributing to evaluation theory and practice. As AfrEA leads MAE, we argue that it draws upon the rich diversity of African cultural and value systems, which vary across countries. So, it provides the foundation for examining case data from different African countries to give general parameters adaptable to the heterogeneity of nations. Furthermore, the outcomes of this study are key in contributing to the generation and furthering of knowledge on building Afrocentric evaluation practices.

The performance of M&E largely hinges on how well systems for collecting, analysing and reporting evidence are integrated into planning, learning and adaptation processes. For this reason, adopting a system-based approach to M&E strengthening is essential. Both contemporary and classical scholars (e.g. Omosa & Archibald 2019; Rossi & Freeman 1993) have cautioned against treating evaluation practices as merely a supplement to policy and programme implementation. Instead, they emphasised incorporating M&E from the planning stage and tailoring it to the context of beneficiaries. This aligns with Arnold and Wade's (2015) definition of a system as an interconnected set of elements forming a unified whole. In the context of M&E concepts, this 'whole' encompasses an enabling environment regarding human and non-human elements, technical and financial components and decision-making rules (Rossi & Freeman 1993). Although these components function at the institutional level, they are significantly influenced by the local context, particularly in the African setting. Details on how M&E has evolved are key to understanding its contextual application.

Mbava (2017), Cloete (2016), Ofir (2013) and Porter and Goldman (2013) have concurred that evaluation practice emanated from the United States (US), the United Kingdom (UK), Germany, France and selected members of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). During its formative stages, it was widely used as an instrument for accountability in the private and not-for-profit sectors (Abrahams 2015; Bisgard 2017). Dahler-Larsen (2019) noted that all facets of human life are now being evaluated and compared to quality standards, which creates a passionate assessment wave globally. In recent decades, many developing nations have used M&E to assess public management initiatives, drawing lessons from their developed counterparts. However, Mbava (2017) argued that as developing nations attempt to understand the effects and

outcomes of government action, they encounter numerous challenges.

Drawing from the experiences of developed nations, many countries in the Global South, particularly in Africa, have established M&E systems within their government frameworks to ensure the quality of their programming. Centre for Learning on Evaluation and Results – Anglophone Africa (CLEAR-AA) (2013) noted that countries such as South Africa, Tanzania, Benin, Namibia, Ghana and Uganda have implemented M&E systems to evaluate their development programmes and policies. According to the United Nations (UN) (2020), the adoption of these systems is partly driven by the need to track progress and report on the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the recurring Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs), which Heads of States present at the High-Level Political Forum during the annual UN General Assembly. Scholars like Omosa and Archibald (2019) and Dahler-Larsen (2019) have recommended that M&E practices be rooted in strong evaluative thinking to ensure that lessons learned are effectively integrated and utilised. Despite its increased adoption in Africa, Omosa and Archibald (2019) have argued that most M&E systems are too controlled and ritualised and have lost their value. They have turned from being a chance for hands-on learning and practical responsibility to become a mandate that must be met – more of a compliance procedure. To counter some of these challenges, the AfrEA has resolved that an Afrocentric M&E system must be anchored on the African cultural values and the context in which it occurs (Chilisa 2015).

The challenges of adopting evaluation practices in Africa are partly rooted in diverse understandings of its role in research. While some view evaluation as a form of applied social research, emphasising empirical investigation (Chilimampungu 2020), others position it as crucial for programme design and decision-making. For example, Mapitsa, Tshuma and Chirau (2020) highlighted the use of M&E data to inform adaptive management and programme improvement, while Mapitsa et al. (2020) and Khadiagala et al. (2019) stressed the importance of rigorous evaluation methodologies for generating credible evidence to guide policy. According to White (2018) and Rossi and Freeman (1993), this echoes the idea that evaluation practice lies at the intersection of these perspectives, applying scientific methods to social research to assess programme conception, design and implementation.

In light of this theoretical and conceptual complexity, M&E functions in modern African culture have been moulded by development aspirations that emphasise economic development and policies that are influenced by a ‘new public management’ attitude. For example, CLEAR-AA (2013) noted that, in South Africa, the need for a competent, effective and efficient government has resulted in a hierarchical governance system centred on compliance and supervision. Similarly, Umlaw and Chitepo’s (2015:13) study revealed a ‘... narrow use of M&E for internal monitoring

and control’ in the national and local governments of South Africa. Furthermore, Umlaw and Chitepo (2015) revealed that senior government officials are driven by perverse incentives created by these audit-oriented systems that prioritise fast victories.

Political interference in countries such as Zimbabwe often hinders the fostering of a culture of inquiry and curiosity (Kolstad, Fritz & O’Neil 2008). Such an environment encourages collusion between corrupt state officials and private sector actors, diverting public funds for personal benefit. Genuine efforts to investigate expenditure and performance are frequently disregarded. Consequently, M&E mechanisms may not be prioritised or may be designed to avoid addressing significant issues, instead, focusing on ‘safe’ topics that present no risk of exposing corrupt practices. In contrast, the realities in Africa significantly differ from those in the Global North, from which most M&E best practices are derived. Sources, such as Dlakavu et al. (2022), Omosa and Archibald (2019), Dahler-Larsen (2019), Bisgard (2017), Chilisa (2015) and Umlaw and Chitepo (2015), underscored that M&E best practices encompass promoting good governance, nurturing an evaluation culture and encouraging multi-stakeholder collaboration that is sensitive to the unique challenges confronting Africa. The next section provides details on how this study was conducted, which is key to showing how the research questions were answered.

## Research methods and design

The study used both secondary and primary data to reflect on prospects for developing an Afrocentric M&E system. Secondary data were sources using a *scoping literature review* to examine efforts towards developing contextually appropriate M&E systems. This review was guided in part by Xiao and Watson’s (2019) three-step process: planning, conducting and reporting. This approach helped keep the review focused and organised, with clear questions and a semi-systematic method for identifying and evaluating sources. It is important to note that this was not a strict systematic review, but a flexible scoping review aimed at exploring key ideas and trends. In the *planning stage*, the two research questions from the introduction were specified to guide the search process, along with Google Scholar as the search database. The search focused primarily on Africa and English-language sources, but sources from other regions were included when they provided historical context on M&E. Both recent and older studies were considered to understand how evaluation practices have evolved and adapted in Africa.

During the *conducting stage*, relevant literature was identified using keywords such as ‘MAE’, ‘origins of M&E’ and ‘Afrocentric M&E system’. Titles and abstracts were screened for relevance, and sources matching the language, region and topic focus were selected. In the *reporting stage*, post-structural perspectives guided interpretation. Texts were read closely to identify underlying assumptions, locate contradictions and

understand how widely used M&E frameworks were designed and applied in context.

Then, primary data were gathered using in-depth interviews with key participants such as representatives from AfrEA, the Zimbabwe Evaluation Association (ZEA), the South African Monitoring and Evaluation Association (SAMEA) and private consultants. After reviewing the included literature, practitioners were purposefully selected to give their expert opinions and experiences on the agenda for developing an Afrocentric M&E system and to gain profound insights and explanations beyond accessible literature. Among the five selected practitioners were one member from each of AfrEA (P1), ZEA (P2) and SAMEA (P3), and two private consultants (P4 and P5), who specialise in impact evaluation and research design. It must be noted that the participants are identified using codes P1 to P5 (Table 1). These development experts were selected for their role as thought leaders behind the MAE initiative and their daily exposure to evaluation-related issues. As such, they have experience and expertise in handling and interpreting M&E issues. An interview guide designed using probing, follow-up and specifying questions was used to conduct in-depth interviews with these experts. This guide was developed using researchers' interpretation of accessible literature and the objectives of this study. Interview data were manually examined using conversation analysis, and secondary data were analysed using thematic and content analyses. The results were concurrently reported, with participants' sentiments complemented by findings from literature, where possible.

## Results

This section links insights from M&E professionals who participated in the study with conceptual observations about the decolonisation of M&E systems, highlighting how the two can enhance efforts towards having an Afrocentric M&E system. The discussion begins with two voices from two of the five participants who served as key informants during the narrative inquiry:

'Most M&E systems used by African governments are based on received wisdom and borrowed ideas ... their ideologies are, sometimes, not in sync with local ideas ... there are numerous misconceptions about M&E, often viewed as a donor-mandated tool and not a mechanism for learning and improvement ... there is the absence of an M&E culture ... where most practices are not

are operationalised without adhering to best practices such as having trained and qualified personnel.' (P1, a technocrat sharing their experience working as an M&E practitioner in Africa)

'M&E is a politically charged profession where all stakeholders, particularly politicians and senior government officials, paint it as an apolitical practice, yet deep down, they have hidden political agendas and interests to protect ... data is sometimes manipulated to misrepresent facts in favour of a particular mission, to preserve specific (political) interests, cover-up corrupt tendencies ... best practices are challenging to observe because of insufficient funding and lack of political will.' (P4, an M&E practitioner working with senior government officials in M&E thought and practice)

The two voices came from seasoned M&E professionals working in different spaces; P1 works with a non-governmental organisation and has over two decades of experience in applied social research, having worked in seven different African countries, and P4 has slightly above 15 years of experience working with government departments of different African countries as an independent consultant. In this case, an independent consultant refers to an M&E practitioner who advises selected African governments, but is not fully employed as a civil servant. Despite the differences in their knowledge and working environments, their sentiments somehow overlap, bringing to light the link between best practices in evaluation and acts of politics. The diversity and cross-cutting of issues from these two voices is a clear testimony that M&E systems have become essential components in the public sector of many African countries. They are designed to assess the performance and impact of development programmes, and ensure that resources are used effectively, objectives are achieved and outcomes are aligned with national development goals.

However, there is increasing recognition that many M&E systems in Africa are based on received wisdom and borrowed ideas, which often fail to meet local needs and conditions. Furthermore, significant misconceptions surround M&E, leading to its misuse or underutilisation. For example, P1's sentiments highlighted how most M&E systems in African governments are shaped by external models that may not be fully compatible with local contexts. P1 also clarified the misconceptions about M&E, the absence of an M&E culture, and the challenges that stem from the lack of skilled personnel and adherence to best practices. Then, P4's voice broadly described M&E as a politically charged profession, highlighting how data is manipulated and misrepresented, and the role of political interests in funding M&E practice.

**Table 1:** Participants' unique identifiers.

Participant Code	Participant Identifier
P1	A member of AfrEA and an M&E specialist working with a non-governmental organisation in Africa.
P2	A ZEA member and founder of a consultancy firm that delivers services to philanthropic, public, and non-governmental organisations across Africa.
P3	A SAMEA member who works in academia and also serves as an independent consultant.
P4	An independent M&E consultant who collaborates with senior government officials in the M&E departments of various African governments.
P5	A private consultant based in West Africa who offers services across the African continent.

AfrEA, African Evaluation Association; M&E, Monitoring and Evaluation; ZEA, Zimbabwe Evaluation Association; SAMEA, South African Monitoring and Evaluation Association.

## External models and borrowed ideologies

A key concern raised by P1 is that M&E systems in African governments are frequently designed using external models that fail to align with local realities. Many of these systems are shaped by Western development paradigms and influenced by international donors and aid agencies. This perspective aligns with recent scholarly arguments by Masuku and Makhanya (2023) and Dlakavu et al. (2022), who highlighted that most widely used M&E frameworks originate from countries such as the US, UK and France.

Expanding on this position, P3 cited examples of projects funded by ‘... USAID and UKAID, organisations rooted in the USA and UK’, which often mandate using their proprietary M&E templates for reporting. Consequently, these externally designed systems prioritise donor-centric indicators and measurements rather than address African nations’ distinct development challenges.

A significant limitation of these imported M&E frameworks is their heavy reliance on quantitative indicators, such as output measures and financial expenditures, often at the expense of qualitative assessments that show real-life impact. P1 elaborated that in African contexts, where many development challenges ‘... are deeply intertwined with historical, cultural, and socio-economic dynamics, such rigid measurement approaches fail to capture the full scope of a programme’s success or shortcomings’. Additionally, P1 noted that these external models frequently disregard the value of local knowledge and community-driven solutions, which are crucial for fostering sustainable development outcomes. Similarly, previous studies by Khadiagala et al. (2019), Mbava (2017) and Abrahams (2015) have pointed out that the disconnect between externally borrowed ideologies and local realities results in M&E systems that serve more as compliance mechanisms for donor requirements rather than as practical tools for decision-making and development. As a result, these systems become detached from the local context, reducing their relevance and effectiveness in addressing Africa’s unique developmental needs.

### **Misconceptions about monitoring and evaluation: A donor-mandated tool**

Expanding on P1’s perspective, P3 highlighted a widespread misconception that M&E is primarily a tool for satisfying donor requirements rather than a mechanism for learning and improvement. According to P3, many African governments tend to perceive M&E as ensuring accountability to external actors, particularly donors, rather than as a valuable tool for internal learning, programme adaptation and policy enhancement. P3 further noted that this limited view significantly undermines the transformative potential of M&E systems, as organisations often use them merely to comply with donor expectations and present well-dressed reports rather than to drive meaningful change. From these insights, it becomes evident that when M&E is treated purely as a compliance exercise, the focus shifts away from understanding how programmes can be refined to enhance their long-term sustainability and effectiveness.

This revealed reality confirms Abrahams’s (2015) assertion that the donor-driven nature of many M&E frameworks fosters a culture of ‘box-checking’, where reporting on output indicators takes precedence over assessing the quality and impact of development interventions. To this end, M&E is perceived as an administrative burden rather than an essential tool for improving service delivery and governance. Such an approach stifles innovation, learning and problem-solving, which are critical elements for

navigating the complex and evolving challenges African countries face. In this regard, P2 strongly asserted that M&E is often regarded as ‘... an end in itself, rather than a means to achieve greater development outcomes’. To address this issue, P1 advocated for a fundamental shift in how governments and stakeholders perceive M&E. Rather than being seen as a mere reporting obligation, M&E should be integrated into the development process as a dynamic tool, enabling governments and communities to learn from successes and failures. This adaptive approach would allow for continuous improvement, ensuring that policies and programmes are responsive to local realities and contribute to sustainable development outcomes.

### **Questionable monitoring and evaluation culture**

P1 and P3 noted that there is a questionable M&E culture in Africa. Emphasising the core of his argument, P1 asserted that in any system, ‘... everything rises and falls with culture’. In this context, culture encompasses the shared values, beliefs, stories, myths and norms that shape an institution or society. Using the Kenyan example, Twende (2019) described the M&E culture as:

[...A] combination of doing things fast (competition culture), doing things well (control or hierarchy culture), doing things jointly (collaborative or clan culture), and making things new (adhocratic or generating culture).’ (p. 22)

In light of this conceptualisation, for M&E systems to be truly effective, they must be deeply embedded within the structures of government and development programmes. However, in many African countries, M&E remains an auxiliary function rather than an integral public administration and governance component. Complementary to P1’s point, P3 argued that M&E is often treated as an optional add-on rather than a fundamental pillar of decision-making, signalling a significant gap, the absence of a well-established M&E culture.

This lack of an ingrained M&E culture is exacerbated by limited awareness and understanding of its value among key stakeholders. Madhovi (2020) described this phenomenon as the ‘science of muddling through’, where policymakers, government officials and other actors fail to recognise M&E as a strategic tool for tracking progress, identifying challenges and making data-driven decisions. In many cases, M&E remains confined to specialised departments rather than being integrated into the routine operations of government and development institutions. Madhovi (2020) recommended fostering an M&E culture centred on accountability, transparency and continuous learning to address this gap. Instead of being seen as an isolated bureaucratic requirement, M&E should be embedded as an ongoing process that informs the entire policy and programme cycle, from design and implementation to evaluation and refinement. P1 argued that achieving this shift requires a deliberate effort to raise awareness, train personnel and institutionalise M&E practices in all governance and development sectors. By doing so, African governments can enhance decision-making,

optimise resource allocation and improve the impact of their development initiatives.

### **Lack of qualified personnel and adherence to best practices**

P1 also highlighted the shortage of qualified personnel and the failure to adhere to best practices as significant barriers to the effective implementation of M&E systems in African countries. A well-functioning M&E system requires skilled professionals trained in designing, implementing and assessing programmes using rigorous methodologies (Khadiagala et al. 2019). However, P1 noted that many African governments struggle with a limited pool of trained M&E experts, and numerous government departments cannot conduct thorough and meaningful evaluations. Drawing from his extensive experience working with African governments, P1 noted that instead of hiring professionals with strong backgrounds in applied and evaluative research, many governments encourage employees to take short-term certificate courses, typically 6 months, in project planning, monitoring and evaluation. While these certificates have value, they do not provide an in-depth immersion in research methodologies, which is crucial for practical evaluation. As a discipline, evaluation is among the most demanding forms of research, requiring a deep understanding of scientific methods to assess programme conception, design and implementation. Rossi and Freeman (1993) argued that evaluation practice necessitates grounding in social research methodologies. According to P1, such immersion cannot be acquired through short-term training alone but requires rigorous academic preparation and hands-on experience.

Beyond the personnel issue, P1 also stressed that failure to adhere to established M&E best practices compromises data reliability, which leads to inconsistent reporting and weak decision-making. Many M&E systems in Africa, as P2 keenly observed, overlook key elements such as stakeholder engagement, participatory approaches and structured feedback mechanisms. The exclusion of local communities and beneficiaries from the evaluation process diminishes the credibility of findings and limits the capacity of governments to make well-informed, evidence-based decisions. Rather than merely identifying these challenges, P1 also proposed viable solutions for long-term improvement. He advocated for African governments to invest in building local capacity for M&E through both personnel development and institutional strengthening. This includes hiring qualified experts who can, in turn, train and mentor less experienced staff, establishing standardised M&E guidelines and ensuring that sufficient resources are allocated to sustain M&E activities. Additionally, P2 noted that best practices such as participatory approaches, regular data validation, and timely feedback loops should be institutionalised to enhance the quality, relevance and impact of M&E systems. By prioritising these measures, African governments can create more effective, data-driven policies and programmes that address local development challenges.

### **The politics of monitoring and evaluation in Africa**

Although M&E is often portrayed as a neutral, technical practice designed to assess the efficiency, effectiveness and impact of government programmes, evidence suggests otherwise. P4 asserted that beneath the veneer of objectivity, M&E is deeply entangled with political structures, interests and power dynamics. According to P4, politicians and senior officials often use M&E processes to advance their agendas, whether to justify policy choices, safeguard political influence or obscure corruption. This politicisation undermines M&E's potential to foster accountability, transparency and evidence-based decision-making.

Several participants (notably P2, P4 and P5) highlighted that M&E findings often determine whether programmes are sustained, adjusted or abandoned. Because such decisions directly affect governance strategies, public perception and voter confidence, political actors have strong incentives to shape outcomes. Prior research by Omosa and Archibald (2019), Dahler-Larsen (2019) and Chilisa (2015) confirms this trend across African contexts, where governments deliberately frame M&E as apolitical, while in practice intervening to ensure results align with predetermined narratives. P4 claimed that evaluations are sometimes conducted with conclusions already decided, selectively released to the public or presented in ways that highlight only positive findings while concealing failures.

Many participants reported that political influence often manifests through the manipulation of data. As P4 observed, governments often alter or inflate statistics to create the illusion of progress, particularly during election periods. Indicators such as poverty reduction, employment and economic growth may be exaggerated to bolster claims of success (Bisgard 2017; Dahler-Larsen 2019). In extreme cases, as P5 noted, data is fabricated altogether, misleading the public and hindering genuine policy reforms. According to P2, this practice also serves as a shield for corruption: when funds are misappropriated or projects fail because of mismanagement, doctored M&E reports obscure the truth, allowing officials to evade accountability. The persistence of corruption as a major obstacle was also highlighted during the eighth AfrEA conference, where it was identified as a key challenge to credible M&E practice.

Political interests further shape the resourcing of M&E systems. As P4 explained, robust M&E requires adequate funding, but many African governments chronically underfund these processes. This underfunding is not simply a financial constraint; it is often intentional, argued P5. Well-resourced evaluations risk exposing inefficiencies, corruption and policy failures, outcomes that some political actors seek to avoid. Consequently, funding is frequently delayed, withheld or strategically allocated to internal departments under direct political control, rather than to independent evaluation units (P4). P2, P4 and P5 concurred that this allows governments to influence the conduct and the findings of M&E, maintaining the appearance of accountability while suppressing genuine oversight.

Scholars such as Weiss (2004) have long argued that insufficient funding weakens M&E's effectiveness, affecting data collection, analysis, reporting and capacity building. In practice, this leads to incomplete, outdated or superficial assessments that do little to inform policy. As P5 observed, evaluations conducted under constrained conditions are often reduced to box-ticking exercises rather than meaningful analyses, something earlier reported by Abrahams (2015). Such politically motivated resource allocation perpetuates the cycle of weak accountability and limited transparency.

### Challenges in observing best practices

In an ideal setting, M&E should adhere to best practices such as transparency, stakeholder participation, evidence-based reporting and methodological rigour (Chilisa 2015). However, these principles are difficult to uphold in many politically charged environments. According to Dahler-Larsen (2019), Bisgard (2017) and Chilisa (2015), political interference often results in selective reporting, biased evaluations and the suppression of unfavourable findings. Additionally, all five participants concurred that the lack of funding and political will further hinder the adoption of best practices. Another key challenge is the marginalisation of independent evaluators. P4 asserted that governments that wish to maintain control over M&E findings often limit the involvement of independent institutions, civil society organisations and academic researchers. Instead, they rely on in-house evaluators who are more susceptible to political pressure. This undermines objectivity, as these evaluators may be forced to align their reports with government expectations rather than presenting an honest assessment.

Another significant issue is the lack of stakeholder engagement in the M&E process. Best practices emphasise the importance of including diverse voices, particularly those of beneficiaries, in evaluations (Chilisa 2015). However, P4 lamented that stakeholders who might present dissenting views, such as opposition parties, civil society groups and marginalised communities, are often excluded in politically charged environments. This selective participation results in skewed assessments that fail to capture the real impact of policies and programmes.

Moreover, P5 noted that the sustainability of M&E systems is often compromised by the lack of long-term strategic planning. In many cases, governments implement M&E frameworks that are tied to specific political cycles rather than long-term national development goals. P3 used an example of countries that conduct harmonised elections every 5 years to demonstrate that they use 5-year rolling plans to align with political cycles. Instead of having, say, 10- or 20-year rolling plans that give a panoramic view of the future, they work with short-term plans. Consequently, when a new administration takes office, previous M&E initiatives are often abandoned or replaced with new ones that align with the new government's political agenda. This lack of

continuity weakens institutional memory and prevents the establishment of robust, enduring M&E structures.

### Fitting the Afrocentric monitoring and evaluation system: Implications and recommendations

Back to theory, two key ideas embedded in the MAE concepts (having practices rooted in African epistemologies and methodologies, and the use of collaborative approaches) have all been reflected upon by the participants. Voices of the five participants, particularly P1 and P4, have brought to the fore that politics has become a linchpin in the emerging order in African evaluation practice. It has been revealed that evaluation practice is a politically charged area where invisible acts of politics have become a potentially powerful governing tool to shape processes, outcomes and subjectivities. As such, political will remains a critical factor in improving M&E integrity.

This study has demonstrated that M&E in Africa is not as neutral and technical a process as it is often portrayed to be. Instead, it operates within a highly politicised environment where data is frequently manipulated, best practices are challenging to uphold, and funding is strategically controlled to serve political agendas. A key implication of this study is that rather than focusing solely on promoting a data-driven culture, greater efforts should be directed towards eradicating corruption and fostering genuine political will. Hypothetically, with strong political will, corruption could be curtailed, and independent M&E organisations could be empowered to cultivate a culture of evaluation among stakeholders. Conversely, the study highlights positive efforts to build capacity by training existing officers through short-term courses in project management and evaluation. While such courses cannot fully immerse trainees in evaluation methodology, they provide a useful foundation for understanding its basic principles. However, the continued reliance on donor funding often compels African governments to adopt donor-driven reporting templates, which are heavily quantitative and leave little room for qualitative indicators that capture long-term impact.

This study adds to the growing body of scholarship advocating for an Afrocentric M&E system, one that is contextually relevant, independent and resistant to political influence. The study amplifies the voices and experiences of African thought leaders behind the MAE initiative and synthesises these insights with conceptual reflections, thereby advancing the development of a contextually grounded, Africa-centred M&E system. It also reinforces Omosa and Archibald's (2019) argument that the goal is not to discredit existing models, but to highlight that their ideological foundations often fail to reflect the realities of developing countries. Scholars such as Dlakavu et al. (2022), Mapitsa et al. (2020), Chilimampungu (2020), Omosa and Archibald (2019), Khadiagala et al. (2019), Twende (2019), Cloete (2016), Abrahams (2015), Umlaw and Chitepo (2015), Chilisa (2015), Wildschut (2014), Porter and Goldman (2013) and CLEAR-AA (2013) have significantly

contributed to this discourse. Their work continues to shape theoretical, methodological and empirical approaches aimed at strengthening the integrity and effectiveness of M&E systems across the continent.

Insights from participants' experience can go a long way in addressing the challenges highlighted in the preceding paragraphs. However, this requires a commitment to transparency, independent oversight and a shift towards a culture that values evidence-based decision-making. Without such reforms, M&E risks remaining a tool for political convenience rather than a mechanism for genuine development and accountability. While M&E systems have the potential to improve governance and development outcomes in Africa significantly, many challenges hinder their effectiveness. The reliance on external models, misconceptions about M&E, the absence of an M&E culture and the lack of qualified personnel all contribute to the underperformance of M&E systems in many African governments. Concerning the way forward and strengthening M&E integrity, this study recommends:

- Fostering a culture of transparency and open data can help counteract the manipulation of M&E findings. Governments should publish all M&E reports, making them accessible to the public, media and research institutions. This would allow independent scrutiny and verification of reported data, reducing the likelihood of misrepresentation.
- Investing in M&E capacity building through training professionals in rigorous evaluation methodologies and ethical reporting can help strengthen the credibility of M&E systems. Governments should also collaborate with universities and research institutions to enhance the technical expertise available for conducting evaluations.
- Citizens, civil society organisations and the international community continue to advocate for stronger accountability mechanisms that ensure M&E serves its true purpose, that is, enhancing governance, improving service delivery and fostering sustainable development.
- Adopting systemic reforms that promote transparency, accountability and independence in evaluation processes. One crucial step is strengthening the role of independent M&E bodies such as ZEA, AfrEA, and SAMEA that operate outside government control. These institutions should be given the legal mandate and financial autonomy to conduct evaluations without political interference.
- Shifting the lenses through which M&E is perceived and implemented in African countries. Monitoring and evaluation should be seen as an essential tool for learning and improvement, not merely a compliance requirement for donors.
- Building an M&E culture, investing in training and adhering to best practices are key steps in ensuring that M&E systems are adequate, relevant and capable of contributing to sustainable development outcomes. Furthermore, African governments can create M&E systems that genuinely reflect local realities and support the achievement of national development goals.

Given that this is a relatively new area of discourse, gaining prominence only in the early 2010s, the available literature remains limited. Consequently, this study primarily drew from the most accessible sources published since the inception of the MAE concept and engaged seasoned M&E practitioners in a narrative inquiry. Although this study adds to the growing body of work advocating for an Afrocentric M&E system by capturing the lived experiences of African thought leaders behind the MAE initiative, its findings are limited by potential sampling bias, as they draw on a small group of only five participants. Future research can address this gap by expanding the scope of inquiry and employing the Delphi technique to build on the findings of this study. To enhance the credibility and transferability of these findings, future studies could develop a checklist of key issues emerging from this study. These issues could then be examined either quantitatively, using a larger sample of practitioners from various countries, or qualitatively, through in-depth engagement with practitioners from each of the African regions. Such an approach would provide a more comprehensive and regionally nuanced understanding of the challenges and opportunities in developing a truly Afrocentric M&E system.

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### Authors' contributions

E.M. took the lead in conceptualising and developing the methodology and writing the first draft, including data analysis. S.S.M. supervised the reviewing and editing of the manuscript.

### Ethical considerations

An application for full ethical approval was made to the JIMAT Development Consultants Review Board, and ethics consent was received. The ethics waiver number is 1/25. The Internal Review Board issued an ethics waiver for the study based on its minimal risk to participants and its methodological approach. *Informed Consent*: Written and verbal informed consent was obtained from all individual participants after being fully briefed on the objective of the study, their voluntary participation and the intended academic and practical use of the findings to advance evaluation practice.

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### Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, E.M., upon reasonable request.

## 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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