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Evaluation from Africa: Advancing integrity, inclusion, and reciprocity in global evaluation practice

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Background: Made in Africa Evaluation (MAE) has emerged as a response to the dominance of Euro-Western epistemologies in evaluation theory and practice, particularly within African development contexts shaped by externally driven funding and accountability regimes. While MAE has played a critical role in challenging epistemic injustice and advancing decolonial critique, much of the discourse remains anchored in oppositional framings of the Global North and Global South.

Objectives: This article argues that the future of Africa-rooted evaluation lies not only in resisting Western dominance but also in advancing a constructive, principled, and globally engaged practice of evaluation from Africa. It contends that a continued fixation on binaries risks limiting MAE's transformative potential.

Method: Drawing on MAE scholarship, African Evaluation Principles, Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS), and relational African philosophies such as *ubuntu* and *ukama*, the article critically examines prevailing decolonial arguments and proposes a shift towards an African relational evaluation orientation.

Results: The article advances three interrelated principles – integrity, inclusion, and reciprocity – as foundational to evaluation from Africa. These principles reposition accountability, ethics, participation, and benefit-sharing at the centre of evaluation practice, while remaining open to global knowledge exchange.

Conclusion: By moving beyond 'Made in Africa' as a defensive identity marker, the article offers a forward-looking framework for evaluation from Africa.

Contribution: This article contributes substantively to global evaluation theory and practice, grounded in African values yet connected to the world.

Keywords: Made in Africa Evaluation; indigenous knowledge; indigenous knowledge systems; evaluation principles; decoloniality; relational evaluation theory; integrity.

Introduction

Moving beyond Made in Africa Evaluation (MAE) does not entail rejecting its foundational contributions or downplaying the significance of decolonial critique. Instead, it signals an acknowledgement that critique, on its own, is insufficient to sustain a robust and practice-oriented evaluation paradigm. For MAE to retain its relevance, it must transition from a predominantly diagnostic endeavour, centred on exposing epistemic injustice, to a constructive and operational framework that informs how evaluations are conceptualised, implemented, and utilised within complex African contexts.

The dominant MAE narrative has, understandably, centred on historical and contemporary asymmetries of power between Africa and the Global North, particularly in relation to financing structures, knowledge production, and methodological authority. While analytically important, an exclusive reliance on this binary framing risks reducing the complexity of evaluation practice. In reality, African evaluators operate within hybrid and multilayered institutional environments, engaging national governments, multilateral agencies, civil society actors, and communities, each with distinct and at times competing expectations. Within such contexts, a rigidly oppositional positioning provides limited practical guidance for navigating the negotiated and relational nature of evaluation work.

African relational philosophies, such as *ubuntu* (humanness) and *ukama* (interconnectedness), provide a coherent ontological and axiological grounding for this orientation. These philosophical

traditions contest transactional and extractive models of evaluation by foregrounding collective responsibility, ethical relationality, and mutual accountability among evaluators, commissioners, and communities. Importantly, they broaden the scope of evaluation ethics beyond immediate human stakeholders to encompass responsibilities towards the environment and future generations.

This article advances the proposition that the future of Africa-rooted evaluation depends on foregrounding relationality rather than opposition as its organising logic. A relational orientation acknowledges the interconnectedness of knowledge systems, actors, and evaluative purposes, while maintaining the centrality of African values and priorities. Within this framing, African Indigenous Knowledge Systems (AIKS) serve as a critical entry point, not as static or traditionalist, but as dynamic, contextually embedded knowledge systems grounded in lived experience, place, and social relationships.

Building on AIKS relational grounding, the article advances integrity, inclusion, and reciprocity as core principles for evaluation from Africa. Integrity reconceptualises independence and accountability as ethical commitments rooted in responsibility, rather than mere procedural adherence. Inclusion moves beyond tokenistic participation towards substantive co-creation that acknowledges power asymmetries and the heterogeneity of communities. Reciprocity, in turn, confronts extractive knowledge practices by emphasising mutual benefit, shared learning, and enduring relationships that extend beyond the lifespan of a single evaluation.

These principles resonate strongly with the African Evaluation Principles' (AEP) call for evaluations that are meaningful for Africans, ethically robust, Africa-centred yet globally engaged. By anchoring practice in relational values rather than oppositional positioning, evaluation from Africa can achieve both contextual legitimacy and broader international relevance.

In this sense, moving beyond MAE is not a departure from Africa-rooted evaluation, but its maturation – positioning Africa as an active contributor to the evolution of global evaluation theory and practice.

Overview

This article adopts a conceptual and normative analytical approach, drawing on a critical synthesis of African evaluation scholarship, Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS), and African philosophical traditions. Rather than presenting empirical findings, it integrates bodies of work often treated separately within evaluation discourse.

The argument is developed through: (1) critical synthesis of MAE and decolonial evaluation literature; (2) normative analysis of African relational philosophies as ethical and epistemological foundations for evaluation; and (3) principle-based reasoning, informed by the AEPs to advance integrity, inclusion, and reciprocity as guiding values for practice.

This approach supports the article's aim to provide conceptual clarity and practice-oriented guidance as Africa-rooted evaluation moves from critique towards consolidation and application.

Made in Africa Evaluation and the decolonial argument

The common thread that underlies the argument for MAE by some authors (Dlakavu 2022; Fish 2022; Frehiwot 2022; Masvaure & Mothlanthe 2022; Trivanu 2022) is that the current evaluation principles, assumptions, and practices are based on Eurocentric epistemologies that are frequently found to be unsuitable for the African context. This is because, as Frehiwot (2022) puts it, the African development space is dominated by the Western hegemony that shapes the structural funding model, knowledge transfer and aid. Through the domination of the development space, the Global North perpetuates Africa's colonial history and racism and the underdevelopment of African countries (Masvaure & Mothlanthe 2022). The authors draw on the analyses of Chilisa (2015), Chilisa and Malunga (2012), Chilisa and Mertens (2021), Cloete (2026), Uwizeyimana (2020), and others who argued that evaluation practices in Africa were based on external values and contexts and that international funders dictated the content, the frequency and processes of evaluation. Fish (2022) examines how evaluation as a tool has perpetuated Western hegemony on the epistemological, axiological and ontological understanding of development. She maintains that much of this understanding relates to who funds, designs, implements, commissions and conducts an evaluation.

This challenge calls for the decolonisation of evaluation that entails the restructuring of power relations in the current global architecture of evaluation knowledge generation (Chilisa et al. 2016). Moreover, Frehiwot (2019) adds that the efforts towards the decolonisation of evaluation should be informed by contemporary discourse on decolonising knowledge for epistemic freedom in Africa. This, according to her, will allow African evaluators to play a meaningful role in the conceptualisation of what is evaluated, when it is evaluated, by whom, and with which methodologies. In the same vain, Dlakavu (2022) emphasises the advancement of social justice as a goal of the decolonisation and indigenisation process, where local communities and stakeholders are empowered to conceptualise and implement development interventions that use results frameworks that are locally relevant and appropriate and which should then yield sustainable results. Furthermore, Frehiwot (2022) maintains that to examine the epistemology and ontology of evaluation, it is important to appreciate the epistemic injustice of knowledge production globally.

Despite growing scholarship on MAE and the decolonisation of knowledge, there remains a gap between critique and practical conceptualisation. Much of the literature highlights the dominance of Eurocentric evaluation systems and the need to shift power, yet offers limited clarity on how evaluation can be theoretically repositioned and operationalised from an African perspective. Thus, the

article responds to that gap by moving beyond critique to clarify the conceptual foundations and practical implications of evaluation from Africa, by contributing to the reconstruction of African evaluation theory, positioning evaluation from Africa as a constructive and globally relevant contribution that advances epistemic justice, strengthens local ownership of evaluation processes, and supports more contextually meaningful and socially just development outcomes.

The decolonisation task will require a decolonial pedagogy that entails learning to unlearn in order to re-learn. The decolonial pedagogy has to facilitate a unique pedagogy of unlearning as part of epistemological decolonisation, which results in the removal of that colonial and Eurocentric hard disk of coloniality together with its software (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2009). Siu, Desai and Ritkes (2012) make it clear that the starting point of decolonisation is not a rejection of colonialism. According to them, the decolonising project seeks to reimagine and rearticulate power, change, and knowledge through a multiplicity of epistemologies, ontologies and axiologies. It is not just about replacing the dominant with the marginalised. (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013) state that decoloniality involves the re-telling of history, of humanity and knowledge from the vantage point of those epistemic sites that received the 'darker side' of modernity. The decoloniality agenda, as articulated by Cherrington, Botha and Keet (2018), is 'more pertinent to evaluation research, at the methodological level, they state that decoloniality rebels against knowledges of equilibrium and those methods that operate as part of colonial matrices of power that prevent transformation'.

The deconstruction of the postcolonial, neoliberal 'underdevelopment' project in Africa, inevitably presents postcolonial indigenous theory and decolonising and indigenous methodologies as alternative frameworks of knowledge production in Africa, but the argument gets stuck in a form of reasoning that renders 'Made in Africa' prone to the label of 'traditionalism', craft-based and mysticism that is different from other globalised notions of development.

Negative perceptions of Africa remain deeply embedded, with the continent often portrayed through poverty, hunger and underdevelopment. Economic indicators such as gross domestic product, gross national product and poverty thresholds have contributed to classifying many African countries as Least Developed or Low-Income, reinforcing deficit narratives that frame Africa as a 'hopeless continent' (Poncian 2015). Misconceptions are further reflected in the tendency to treat Africa as a single country and in the ways postcolonial nation-state formation reproduced inherited power relations. Within this context, the label 'Made in Africa' can be misinterpreted as traditional or imprecise when contrasted with associations of efficiency, imitation or high quality attached to labels such as 'Made in Germany', 'Made in China', or 'Made in the USA'. Decoloniality, however, moves beyond such stereotypes and draws on the work of Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013) to challenge these inherited hierarchies of knowledge and value:

> Decoloniality must not be confused with nationalist and Marxist thought. Decoloniality is against essentialism and fundamentalism. This is not an essentialist, fundamentalist, anti-European critique. It is a perspective that is critical of both Eurocentric and Third World fundamentalisms, colonialism and nationalism. (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013:15)

While the decolonial turn in evaluation has been crucial in highlighting epistemic injustices and structural inequalities, its focus on Global North–Global South binaries can risk reproducing the reductionism it critiques. By positioning Western and African knowledge systems as oppositional, some strands of MAE discourse may unintentionally essentialise difference rather than reflect the hybrid, negotiated realities African evaluators navigate (Chilisa 2016; Frehiwot 2022). In practice, evaluation in Africa occurs within complex, interdependent systems shaped by both domestic and transnational influences (Porter & Goldman 2013).

The assertion is grounded in critiques from post-development and decolonial scholarship that argue that the global development project historically constructed Africa through a deficit lens and privileged Western models of progress and knowledge production. By 'globalised notions of development', this article refers to the dominant international model shaped by multilateral institutions and donors, which emphasises economic growth, standardised metrics, results-based management, and universal best practices. Within this paradigm, indigenous and decolonial approaches to knowledge and evaluation are sometimes mischaracterised as traditional, cultural, or insufficiently scientific. However, similar critiques and alternative frameworks have emerged globally, including the Indigenous evaluation agendas in New Zealand (Cram 2017) and Canada (Dinh et al. 2025). Situating MAE alongside these traditions helps reposition it not as an outlier, but as part of a broader global movement to pluralise development and evaluation theory and practice.

The challenge, therefore, is not whether decolonial critique is necessary; it remains indispensable, but whether critique alone is sufficient to sustain a forward-looking evaluation paradigm. If MAE is to mature beyond a primarily diagnostic project of exposing epistemic injustice, it must articulate constructive principles that guide how evaluations are designed, conducted, and used in complex African contexts. This requires moving from opposition as an organising logic towards relationality as a foundational orientation.

Made in Africa Evaluation: Foundations in African evaluation principles

Thought leaders such as Dr Sulley Gariba and Prof Zenda Ofir have been instrumental in the formation of MAE. They have been strong agents in addressing knowledge asymmetries in African evaluation and have been advocates for the imperative of decolonising mindsets. At the 2007 4th AfrEA conference, these thought leaders spearheaded, alongside other prominent evaluators, the special stream discussion on 'Making Evaluation Our Own: Strengthening the Foundations for Africa-Rooted and Africa-Led Monitoring

and Evaluation'. The results coming out from this discussion produced three broad challenges facing evaluation in Africa: cultural and contextual relevance of evaluations; appropriateness of evaluation methodologies and approaches and ethics and values in evaluation.

Subsequent to the laid groundwork, much of the ongoing discussions on progressing the MAE agenda have been documented by authors such as Chilisa (2015, 2016), Frehiwot (2019), Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013, 2020), Omosa et al. (2021), Abrahams (2022) and most recently AfrEA's publication of the Made in Africa Handbook (2025). Literature documenting MAE conceptualisation starts as far as the 2012 Bellagio conference, in which African evaluation leaders and scholars convened to focus on clarifying, consolidating, and advancing the conceptual foundations of MAE. The conceptualisation that followed is captured in Chilisa's (2015) 'Synthesis Paper on the Made in Africa Evaluation Concept', and since then, there has been published thought leadership across the continent and internationally on how to advance components, approaches and values of the concept.

Chilisa (2015) underscores the importance of aligning evaluation practices with the values, beliefs, and lived realities of African communities. She identifies a persistent gap between development conceptualisations, frequently framed through Western perspectives, and the conduct of evaluations, which often neglects local contexts and priorities; MAE should be operationalised as a development-oriented approach that aligns evaluation methods with African perspectives, bridging the gap between prevailing conceptions of development and the ways evaluations are conducted. An openness to and about African people's beliefs and values about what constitutes development in Africa will facilitate MAE implementation.

Taking a lead from Chilisa (2015), Omosa et al. (2021) also recognise that MAE theory and practices are informed by and influenced by multiple disciplines from African history, Political Science, Anthropology, Sociology, African Philosophy, African Oral Literature, and African knowledge systems. This makes it a transdisciplinary concept, MAE challenges Western compartmentalisation of knowledge by advancing a holistic approach grounded in African thought. It views development as emerging from dynamic relationships between people, environments, and value systems. Rather than separating outcomes from context, it understands change as relational, ecological, and culturally embedded. It also promotes collaboration across indigenous, local, and disciplinary knowledge systems so that evaluation reflects lived complexity rather than linear external models (Chilisa 2015).

The transdisciplinary nature of MAE and the complex socio-historical development experiences of the African continent necessitate a hesitancy in selecting a starting point for MAE development to critically examine dominant Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) models and their use in the African context (Frehiwot 2022). A recent edition (2022) of the African Evaluation Journal (AEJ) sponsored by CLEAR AA,[1] focused on the MAE theme. The authors had as a starting point the deconstruction of the historical and socio-economic development power dynamics between the Global North and Global South to build their argument for MAE as an alternative approach to Eurocentric approaches of evaluation practices. They argued for the decolonisation of evaluation approaches. The next section draws on the critiques and points of departure used by these authors.

Chilisa (2015) framed MAE as an approach rooted in African worldviews, emphasising cultural relevance, local context, and IKS to challenge the dominance of Western evaluation paradigms. The article highlighted MAE's transdisciplinary, development-oriented potential and outlined pathways for mainstreaming it, including integrating African epistemologies, promoting inclusive methodologies, and strengthening research and practice networks. The article lists the following attributes of MAE:

- Identifies and articulates how African culture, history, belief systems and contexts contribute to evaluation theory, practice and methods;
- Embraces African resistance to blind borrowing of Western values and standards to evaluate programmes in Africa;
- Advocates for capacity building of African policy analysts, researchers and evaluators to carry out their own evaluation;
- Promotes adaptation of evaluation tools, instruments, strategies and theory and model adjustment;
- Advocates for the development of evaluation practice, theory and methodologies emanating from local cultures, IKS, African philosophies and African paradigms;
- Promotes global partnerships of knowledge systems and of evaluation actors and stakeholders;
- Seeks to stamp out decontextualised evaluation, while at the same time creating new African informed evaluation strategies;
- In its most advanced form, it is predominantly informed by African worldviews and African evaluation paradigms.

Through using the Delphi technique to derive a definition of MAE from the analysis of six illustrative evaluation reports, Omosa et al. (2021) contributed their effort to defining MAE, and they came up with the following definition that was broadly acceptable for the constituencies they engaged with in Africa:

> Evaluation that is conducted based on AfrEA standards, using localised methods or approaches with the aim of aligning all evaluations to the lifestyles and needs of affected African peoples while also promoting African values. (Omosa et al. 2021)

1.The Centre for Learning on Evaluation and Results in Anglophone Africa (CLEAR-AA) strengthens the capacity of people and institutions to plan, monitor, and report on projects through Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E). By improving M&E practice, it contributes to stronger governance and better development outcomes across the continent.

From reviewing the 2002 AfrEA guidelines through the lens of MAE, Omosa et al. (2021) called for action for the guidelines to evolve in line with evolving MAE definitions. Revised guidelines would strengthen MAE and improve evaluation practice in Africa (Chilisa 2015), as continuous growth requires regularly revisiting and refining of the foundations of the field.

The original guidelines have since been replaced by the AEPs, developed in 2021 to guide evaluation practice in ways that are responsive to and grounded in African contexts. The AEP's development illustrates a deliberate effort to institutionalise standards that reflect African values, knowledge systems, and priorities. Importantly, the AEP complements global standards, including the Indigenous African Ethical Protocol for Evaluation developed by EvalIndigenous, reinforcing a continental movement towards culturally responsive and African-rooted evaluation practice (Afrea 2021). The AEP's general assertion is that evaluation in Africa must align with local values and priorities to specific principles that embody this alignment, such as contextual relevance, cultural responsiveness, and accountability to communities (AfrEA 2021).

A journey beyond Made in Africa Evaluation

Western knowledge is globally perceived to be regarded as universal and has continued to be the dominant voice in all forms of development discussions, devoid of any influences from other knowledge systems. Monitoring and Evaluation models in Africa have been a reflection of the relationship between Africa and the Global North – a relationship that has been uneven and driven by power dynamics that favour knowledge and practices developed outside of Africa (Frehiwot 2019). Critically examining how Euro-Western research paradigms and methodologies marginalise or dismiss the knowledge systems of formerly colonised and historically oppressed societies, as well as the deficit-oriented narratives constructed about Africa, enables evaluators to adopt a reflexive stance, according to Chilisa (2016). She challenges evaluators to rigorously interrogate the power dynamics shaping evaluation agendas, the timing of evaluations, and the methodological choices employed (Chilisa 2016). This stance is supported, but it should be observed that critique alone cannot sustain a viable, practice-oriented evaluation paradigm. For MAE to remain relevant, it must evolve from a primarily diagnostic project, focused on identifying epistemic injustice, into a constructive framework that guides how evaluations are designed, conducted, and used in complex African contexts (Trivanu 2022).

While there is no single definition of indigenous knowledge, most of the widely used definitions share three key features. Firstly, indigenous knowledge has evolved over many generations and is historically rooted in a community. Secondly, a key feature of indigenous knowledge is that it exist in a certain cultural context, while this can be difficult to define precisely and to interpret through intersectional lenses of diversity, it is an important feature of indigenous knowledge. Thirdly, it is often geographically bounded in some way (Gadgil, Bereks & Folke 2022; eds. Oloruntoba, Afolayan & Yacob-Haliso 2020). While no populations are entirely homogeneous, nor entirely inactive historically, cultures have formed that have been linked to certain ecological systems, and value systems, history, spirituality and mythology have been impossible to disconnect from ecology, geography and place-making.

There has been an increased interest in indigenous paradigms, particularly around the ways in which they frame the success of socio-ecological systems (Latulippe & Klenck 2020). However, IKS research often engages in complex power dynamics that influence the uptake as well the exclusion of indigenous knowledge.

A relevant example of this is 'Tino Rangatiratanga', which is grounded in Kaupapa Māori theory. It offers a distinctly Māori framework for research and evaluation. Tino Rangatiratanga speaks of self-determination, ensuring the Māori have control over the evaluation process and outcomes. As Cram (2001) explains, Kaupapa Māori is grounded in Māori philosophies, values, and principles, with the overarching vision of advancing Māori cultural, social, and economic wellbeing. This approach positions Māori worldviews, knowledge systems, and aspirations at the centre of research, recognising Māori authority over how knowledge is generated and used. Therefore, Kaupapa Māori evaluation is seen as challenging the marginalisation of IKS as mere traditionalism and critiques Western evaluation practices by asserting the legitimacy and authority of Māori ways of knowing and engaging with their communities. This example from Māori evaluation illustrates how relational epistemologies have already been operationalised elsewhere, raising the question: what would a similarly operational African relational framework look like?

Central to this repositioning is the role of IKS, not as parallel or alternative epistemologies to be selectively appended to mainstream evaluation, but as relational systems of knowledge that shape how value, evidence, accountability, and usefulness are understood. African relational philosophies such as *ubuntu* and *ukama* offer a coherent ontological and axiological foundation for this approach, foregrounding interconnectedness, collective responsibility, and ethical relationality.

The relational grounding of AIKS is not unique in global Indigenous scholarship. Comparable efforts elsewhere, such as Kaupapa Māori evaluation, demonstrate how Indigenous epistemologies can be operationalised into coherent evaluation frameworks. These examples are not offered as models to replicate, but as illustrations of how relational worldviews can move from philosophical positioning to methodological practice. They raise a critical question for African evaluation: what would a similarly operationalised African relational framework entail?

Relational systems thinking

Some lessons can be drawn from the relational research branch that involves relational systems thinking (Chilisa et al. 2016). Relational systems thinking refers to a dialectic between Western ways of knowing and Indigenous knowledge worldviews, brought together into a place of shared epistemologies that embrace the idea of connection rather than separation. Gates, Page and Bhoquez (2022) and Gresku, Jones and Kurtza (2022) introduce a phrase termed Etuaptmumak a Mi'kmaq, from the Canadian indigenous Atlantic provinces, which means 'two-eyed seeing'. Expanding on the relational systems thinking, Etuaptmumak means extracting the best practices from both IKS and mainstream knowledge systems to bring the knowledge systems together in recognising the strengths of both worlds.

However, relational systems thinking emphasises the interconnectedness of systems, including knowledge, culture and society, and highlights the importance of relationships in knowledge creation and transmission. In recent times, indigenous-led programmes focus on methodologies that place value on improved self-determination, cultural identity and the togetherness of the local community (Gresku et al. 2022). Furthermore, for the AIKS, relationality manifests through the concepts *ubuntu* (humanness) and *ukama* (relatedness). These concepts sustain human and non-human life in all shapes and forms and across all generations (Carstens & Preiser 2024).

Chilisa et al. (2016) consider the dialectic between Western and IKS not only as necessary but also limiting because embedded in the Western knowledge system is a type of transactional rationality that supports differentiation (segmentation) and exclusion relating to human and non-humans. They translate the relational research branch in a way that is more Afrocentric, while still recognising the adaptation of Euro-American paradigms and practices in evaluation, in ways that serve the needs of Africans. In harmonising the worlds of Eurocentric and African views, the African relational-based evaluation approach is driven by African postcolonial indigenous paradigms of philosophical assumptions about the nature of reality, knowledge and values in evaluations.

In a practical sense, what the relational ontology is based on is the philosophy of *ubuntu*; the nature of being, the relations among people, the spiritual existence that promotes love and harmony among people and communities. The African relational epistemology is the socially constructed knowledge that reflects the relationships and connections among people and with the environment and spirits of ancestors. Lastly, the relational axiology refers to the value systems of African societies, which are built on the *ubuntu* principle of respect for others and oneself, collective responsibilities, cooperation and interpersonal relationships among people (Mertens, Cram & Chilisa 2013; Chilisa et al. 2016). Relational ontology, rooted in *ubuntu*, situates individuals within networks of social, spiritual, and environmental relationships, challenging Western individualism. Knowledge and understanding emerge through these interconnected relationships, emphasising collective and socially embedded ways of knowing. This perspective shows that African-centred evaluation is grounded in ethical and epistemic commitments that prioritise community cohesion and relational accountability.

Relational systems thinking provides a useful conceptual bridge between Western and Indigenous paradigms. The African take on the Relation-based evaluation approach is put forward as a submission for integrating AIKS in mainstream evaluation principles, as it introduces the unique African lens of African values to mainstream evaluation. In setting itself as a viable approach to evaluation, the African relational approach is an acknowledgement of the interdependence and interconnectedness of global evaluation discourse. This has linkages with the African Evaluation Principles (2021) of 'connected to the world'. As Chilisa (2015 p. 5) says, 'we can learn from each other and therefore, adapting Euro-Western evaluation approaches to suit local contexts is a good practice that is supported by African value systems'.

The African relational evaluation approach is meant to heighten the role of African people in participating in how evaluations are designed. Have a say on 'what' is evaluated and what appropriate methodologies are to be applied, 'when' it is evaluated, 'how' it is to be evaluated, and even 'who' should conduct the evaluation. African Indigenous Knowledge Systems and MAE need that elevated step to rigorously interrogate evaluation practices by heightening the role of cultural competencies, contextual relevance and cultural validity as foundations for evaluation processes (Pophiwa & Saidi 2022).

To omit or exclude AIKSs in developmental initiatives is tantamount to creating unsustainable developmental programmes or services, which makes evaluation weak and sometimes misplaced. It also denies the majority of Africans, most of whom live in rural or remote areas, from participating in using their ingenuity to drive their developmental agenda, despite the many campaigns by international developmental agencies calling for an AIKS-centred point of departure. Indigenous knowledge systems define African existence for the simple reason that indigenous knowledge is a key resource Africans use to engage with each other and the environment for the common good, as well as their survival. Indigenous knowledge systems are entrenched in real-life experiences, which in turn define their worldview, relations and practices, creating a system far removed from the Euro-Western celebrated orthodox scientific systems (Asakitipi 2020).

Recent efforts and valuable insights from the University for Development Studies (UDS) based in Ghana produced a toolkit for integrating indigenous knowledge in evaluation practices in Africa (UDS 2025). The toolkit is being piloted and provides a culturally responsive framework for monitoring, evaluation and learning in Africa. The framework

offers six distinct steps that include 'the decolonisation of the evaluation process and the decolonisation of the evaluator' and ending with 'local capacity development'. The framework also states that it is rooted in African ontologies, epistemologies, methodologies, and methods that emphasise IKS, values, beliefs, and aspirations. Such efforts are applauded with a warning that less is more, that too many steps can be burdensome and difficult to implement in practice. The framework (toolkit) can also be usefully utilised to bolster the integrity of evaluations as discussed later. The arguments for expressing evaluation from Africa in three substantive principles follow.

While relationality is foundational to African ways of knowing, it alone is insufficient unless translated into principles that guide evaluative practice. This article proposes integrity, inclusion, and reciprocity as core principles for evaluation from Africa. Integrity emphasises ethical responsibility over procedural compliance; inclusion foregrounds meaningful participation and the recognition of power dynamics and diverse knowledge systems; and reciprocity ensures mutual benefit, shared learning, and sustained relationships beyond the evaluation process. Together, these principles synthesise recurring themes in the MAE literature, offering clear normative and operational guidance that makes evaluation both contextually relevant and ethically grounded.

Evaluation from Africa with integrity

Evaluation research in Africa occupies a pivotal position at the intersection of knowledge production, policy influence, and social accountability. As governments, donors, and civil society increasingly rely on evaluations to inform decision-making, questions of credibility, trust, and ethical conduct have become central. At the heart of these concerns lies the principle of integrity. Integrity in evaluation research is not merely about avoiding misconduct; it encompasses a commitment to honesty, transparency, methodological rigour, respect for participants, and responsibility towards the broader public good. Strengthening integrity is therefore essential for ensuring that evaluation findings are both credible and socially meaningful, particularly within diverse and often unequal African contexts.

Integrity must be understood as both an ethical and epistemological principle. From an ethical standpoint, it involves adherence to norms such as informed consent, confidentiality, and the respectful treatment of participants. From an epistemological perspective, integrity relates to the production of valid, reliable, and unbiased knowledge. In African evaluation contexts, where power asymmetries between funders, evaluators, and communities are often pronounced, these dimensions intersect. Evaluations that are technically rigorous but ethically compromised – or ethically sound but methodologically weak – undermine their own legitimacy. Thus, improving evaluation research requires an integrated approach in which ethical commitments and methodological rigour reinforce one another.

One of the primary ways to infuse integrity into evaluation approaches is through the adoption of context-responsive and culturally grounded frameworks. Many evaluation models used in Africa have historically been imported from the Global North, often without sufficient adaptation. This can lead to epistemic injustice, where local knowledge systems and ways of knowing are marginalised. Promoting integrity requires evaluators to engage seriously with indigenous knowledge, local languages, and community-defined indicators of success. Participatory and culturally responsive evaluation approaches offer a pathway in this regard. By involving stakeholders – especially beneficiaries – in defining evaluation questions, methods, and interpretations, these approaches enhance both the ethical legitimacy and the contextual validity of findings.

Relational stakeholder management also involves mapping stakeholders' interests, influence, and connections to anticipate pressures and negotiate competing agendas. By recognising stakeholders as active relational agents, evaluators can safeguard credibility and independence while enhancing engagement and the relevance of evaluation findings (Jacobson & Azzam 2018). Bryson, Patton and Brownman (2011) provide an extensive guiding tool on how to map out and manage evaluation stakeholders. Stakeholder management alerts the evaluator of possible biases from stakeholders and the power balance spectrum among stakeholders to manage their weighting of influence towards the evaluation outcome. This is a practice intended to ensure the independence of the evaluator. Ultimately, the core focus of the evaluation should be based around the credibility and usefulness of the evaluation report 'bringing evaluation to the people' as the intended users and not to appease the commissioners' expected outcomes (Arthur-K 2017).

Integrity extends to the communication and use of evaluation findings. Evaluations are not neutral; they shape policy decisions, resource allocations, and public perceptions. As such, evaluators have a responsibility to present findings in a balanced and accessible manner. This includes avoiding technical jargon, engaging with multiple audiences, and ensuring that findings are communicated back to the communities involved. In many African contexts, there is a history of extractive research practices where data are collected but not shared with participants. Addressing this requires a commitment to reciprocity and accountability, ensuring that evaluation processes contribute to local learning and empowerment.

Finally, promoting integrity in evaluation research requires a systemic perspective. It is not enough to focus on individual evaluators; the broader institutional and political environment must also support ethical and rigorous practice. This includes the role of funders, governments, and academic institutions in setting expectations and providing incentives for integrity. For example, procurement processes for evaluation services could prioritise quality and ethical standards over cost alone. Donors could require adherence to

ethical guidelines and support capacity-building initiatives. Governments could establish national evaluation policies that emphasise transparency and accountability.

In conclusion, improving evaluation research with integrity in Africa involves a multifaceted approach that integrates ethical principles, methodological rigour, and contextual responsiveness. Integrity should be seen not as an optional add-on but as a guiding principle that shapes every aspect of the evaluation process. By promoting participatory approaches, ensuring transparency and independence, strengthening capacity, and fostering supportive institutional environments, evaluation research can better serve its intended purpose: generating credible knowledge that informs policy and contributes to social justice. In the African context, where evaluation has the potential to address pressing development challenges, embedding integrity at the core of practice is both an ethical imperative and a practical necessity.

While integrity ensures that evaluation relationships are ethically grounded, inclusion determines who is acknowledged within those relationships and whose knowledge is valued. Integrity protects the moral stance of evaluation, whereas inclusion broadens its epistemic and participatory scope.

Evaluation from Africa for inclusion

Mbava (2019) emphasises that collective deliberation and communal decision-making are core to African societies, and that applying an 'African cognitive lens' in reasoning and interpreting evaluation evidence is both valid and necessary. Africa's diverse cultural and linguistic contexts – beyond Anglophone, Lusophone, Francophone, and Arabophone divisions – require cognitive justice grounded in local experiences. Incorporating these perspectives enriches analysis by allowing issues to be viewed through multiple lenses. Embedding collective deliberation in the evaluation process shifts the focus towards evaluations for development, promoting participation and societal transformation rather than externally imposed assessments (Mbava 2019).

Inclusion, at its core, is about ensuring that evaluation processes are participatory, representative, and attentive to diversity. Promoting inclusion requires a deliberate effort to broaden participation across all stages of the evaluation cycle: from the formulation of evaluation questions to data collection, analysis, and dissemination. It entails recognising the heterogeneity within African societies, including differences in gender, age, ethnicity, language, disability, and socio-economic status, and ensuring that these differences are reflected in evaluation design and practice.

Inclusive evaluation approaches, such as participatory evaluation and empowerment evaluation, offer practical pathways for operationalising this principle. These approaches seek to democratise knowledge production by involving stakeholders – especially beneficiaries – as co-researchers rather than passive subjects. In rural communities, for example, participatory rural appraisal techniques enable local people to articulate their own indicators of change, using tools that are accessible and culturally appropriate. Inclusion also requires linguistic accessibility; conducting evaluations in local languages and using culturally resonant forms of communication enhances both the quality of data and the legitimacy of the process. Importantly, inclusion is not merely a technical choice but a normative commitment to equity and justice. It challenges existing power hierarchies and seeks to redistribute authority within the evaluation process.

The promotion of inclusion must contend with practical and structural challenges. These include resource constraints, time pressures, and the demands of accountability to funders. Participatory and reciprocal approaches are often more time-consuming and require specialised skills, which may not always be available. There is also the risk of elite capture, where more powerful community members dominate participatory processes, thereby undermining inclusion. Addressing these challenges requires careful planning, capacity building, and reflexivity on the part of evaluators. It also requires a shift in the broader evaluation ecosystem, where funders and policymakers recognise the value of these approaches and are willing to invest in them.

Inclusion in the evaluation assumes participation in the evaluation process. Participatory evaluation, an offset of participatory action research (PAR), has its elements of action learning and capacity building to include an array of stakeholders in assessing impacts of more complex systems change and comprehensive community initiatives. Participatory action research can be helpful across fields and sectors, including agriculture, rural development, education, social service and health, to name a few. Examples of participatory initiatives can be seen through the Ugandan Barazas forums (Watera 2019) and the South African use of political cabinet Makgotla's (Mbava & Chapman 2020). However, counter to these participatory empowering exercises, there are unintended prejudicial and discriminatory, gendered, socio-economic, ageism, occupation, caste, ethnicity and other factors that create consequences of disempowerment. Evaluators need to consider the heterogeneity of needs, issues and goals, and the relationships among participants. The discounting of these factors may disempower the participation of less knowledgeable or powerless participants (Lennie 2005).

Inclusion ensures presence and voice within evaluation processes, but presence alone does not guarantee mutual benefit. Reciprocity extends relational accountability further, asking not only who participates, but who benefits, who bears costs, and how relationships endure beyond the life of the evaluation.

Evaluation from Africa for reciprocity

Reciprocity refers to the mutual exchange and benefit between evaluators and participants. It involves a collaborative and respectful relationship where each party contributes something

the other needs or desires. Onyejiuwa (2017) expresses in her blog post how *ubuntu* 'is the capacity in African culture to express compassion, reciprocity, dignity, harmony and humanity in the interests of building and maintaining community with justice and mutual caring'. She refers to how *ubuntu* is grounded in the philosophical recognition of the intrinsic interconnectedness of human existence. It reflects a deliberate ethical commitment to channel personal agency and power towards the advancement of the collective good, rather than the pursuit of individualistic or isolated self-interest.

Reciprocity reflects the relational worldview, an indigenous worldview that indicates a need to honour our relationships with other life. All life must be respected as we are in reciprocal relations with them; reciprocity is therefore a key element underpinning an indigenous ontology and key in the indigenous research paradigm (Hart 2010). Indigenous theorists identify reciprocity as a core principle and value alongside respect, responsibility and relevance.

The lens of reciprocity helps us to see how relationships mutually sustain life. Reciprocity also considers humans as part of these relationships, whereas some ecosystem approaches see humans as separate from the functioning of their environment. The relational approach to evaluation encourages reciprocity and responsibility, which can be demonstrated in ways the evaluator would relate and act within a community. Defining reciprocity can go beyond mutual benefits. Reciprocity is also defined as knowledge exchanges that are perceived as mutual and fair (Chiu, Hsu & Wang 2006). Studies show that norms related to reciprocity can increase knowledge sharing. While norms of reciprocity may increase the quantity of knowledge shared, they did not have a positive influence on the quality of knowledge.

Partnerships should be characterised by mutual respect, shared decision-making and reciprocal benefit-sharing. This means moving beyond extractive approaches and fostering collaborative relationships where indigenous communities are active participants in all stages of the integration process, from project design and implementation to data analysis and dissemination. (Directory Sustainability n.d.) The uneven relationship between resource-rich areas and the centres of global capital allows for the commodification of resources, leading to displacement, loss of livelihoods and environmental damage. The alternative to extractivism is reciprocity. Reciprocity includes careful consideration of who benefits and who loses? Who is included and who is excluded? How does inequity play out within an intervention, and, if over the time span of the intervention, have there been significant shifts in equity issues in the community (Norins et al. 2022)?

Taken together, integrity, inclusion, and reciprocity reposition evaluation from Africa as more than a defensive assertion of difference; they offer a framework for a constructive and globally engaged approach grounded in African relational philosophy. This orientation reframes 'Made in Africa' not as a defensive label or identity assertion, but as an active contribution to the evolution of evaluation theory and practice worldwide.

Conclusion

The way forward

This article has sought to move the conversation beyond framing MAE merely as an oppositional critique, towards articulating a more generative and globally relevant practice of evaluation from Africa.

While MAE has been pivotal in exposing epistemic injustice, colonial power relations, and the marginalisation of African knowledge systems, its continued relevance depends on moving from critique alone to principled and actionable practice**.** This article has put forward its own principles in line with the *ubuntu* philosophy and integrity, inclusivity and reciprocity ideals to move MAE further. However, how do we flesh out these principles further? How should we be considering such principles as criteria for developing evaluations beyond Made in Africa?

We need to make a conscious shift away from Global North metrics. The AEP provides the basic elements to guide practices that are Africa-centric, yet open. We need to revisit our assumptions about the nature and structures of traditional participatory forums. This perspective is clearly articulated in a blog published on the SAMEA website, where the author reminds readers that the African Evaluation Principles (AEP) advocate an Africa-centric approach while remaining open to learning from and adapting relevant Western theories and evaluation practices. Rather than rejecting external knowledge, the AEP promote an evolutionary process in which such theories and practices are contextualised through an African lens to better address African realities, priorities, and development needs. It is an approach that adopts a holistic perspective by situating the intervention within the broader context of the community ecosystem and environmental sustainability (SAMEA n.d.). M&E must draw on African Indigenous Knowledge Systems, Africa-centric philosophies, including the evolving African Evaluation Principles but should also be grounded in integrity, inclusion and reciprocity**.** Integrity reframes accountability beyond funder compliance, emphasising ethical responsibility to people, communities, and ecosystems. Inclusion extends participation beyond procedural engagement to meaningful co-creation that recognises diversity, power asymmetries, and vulnerability. Reciprocity challenges extractive practices by insisting on mutual benefit, shared learning, and sustained relationships that persist beyond the life of an evaluation.

We need to counter the disempowering tendencies of traditional structures that fail to give voice to the voiceless. Evaluation from Africa does not reject Euro-Western traditions; rather, it embraces relationality and openness, fostering dialogue and learning across knowledge systems while asserting African values, priorities, and epistemologies. By doing so, Africa is positioned not as a peripheral recipient of evaluation models but as an active

contributor to shaping global evaluation theory and practice, offering insights that enrich evaluation discourse worldwide. Ultimately, making evaluation our own is both an internationalisation endeavour and a commitment to local relevance. It requires grounding evaluation in African realities, values, and knowledge systems while remaining open to insights from Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) and evaluation traditions across the globe. In this sense, the Made in Africa Evaluation approach is not inward-looking or exclusionary; rather, it is a dynamic and evolving enterprise that builds bridges between the Global South and the Global North.

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CRediT authorship contribution

Mark A. Abrahams: Conceptualisation, Writing – original draft and Writing – review & editing. Matshediso Moilwa: Conceptualisation, Writing – original draft and Writing – review & editing. All authors reviewed the article, contributed to the discussion of results, approved the final version for submission and publication, and take responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

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