

From Data to Decision: How Africa Can Turn Evaluation Evidence into Action

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A New Conversation on Evidence and Impact

When Veronica Igube took the virtual stage during LEAP Africa's *Dissemination Wednesday Webinar*, her opening words were not about data points or methodologies. They were about stories.

"Every policy," she said, "has a story."

It was a quiet reminder that behind every dataset lies a farmer, a teacher, a young entrepreneur, people whose lives are shaped by policies that either work or fail. Across Africa, thousands of evaluation reports have been written, published, and stored. Yet for all this information, too little of it has been translated into action. The problem, as this LEAP Africa dialogue

made clear, is not scarcity of evidence — it is the *underuse of it*.

On 24 September 2025, LEAP Africa convened evaluators, researchers, practitioners and policymakers from across Africa under one bold theme: "[*Leveraging Evaluation Evidence for Effective Policy and Programming*](#)." The discussion, part of the *Dissemination Wednesday Webinar* series, the third of its kind in 2025, explored how to bridge the persistent gap between the generation of evaluation evidence and its actual use in policy and programme design.

What emerged from the session, beyond a technical debate, was a call to action for a new culture of

evidence use in Africa, rooted in collaboration, storytelling, inclusivity, and African-centred ways of knowing.

Why Evidence Still Sits on the Shelf

Evaluation has always promised to answer the timeless development questions: *What works? What doesn't? And why?*¹ Yet, as LEAP Africa's Executive Director, [Kehinde Ayeni](#), observed in her welcome address during the webinar, “We have gone past shelving reports, because in truth, there are no more shelves. The question now is, how do we stop burying insights in files and PDFs that no one reads?”

Across the continent, the evidence-to-action gap is wide. Development evaluation systems, from South Africa's National Evaluation Policy Framework² to Nigeria's sectoral monitoring units, produce extensive analyses on programme effectiveness, spending efficiency, and social outcomes. But too often, those insights do not travel far enough to inform real decisions.

[Veronica Igube](#)'s keynote presentation traced the cost of this disconnect. Drawing on literature review of an ongoing research study being conducted by LEAP Africa and SBM Intelligence, she described how the Nigerian government's fertiliser subsidy programme was designed to boost food security. “Only about 11 percent of subsidised fertiliser reached farmers,”^{3,4} she explained. “Evaluation evidence had shown this problem early on, that middlemen were hoarding or diverting supply, but the findings were ignored. Resources were wasted, and the programme's impact was diluted.”

A similar pattern appeared in the 2017 public health-care revitalisation policy, which aimed to build more primary health centres.^{5,6} “The data showed the

problem wasn't infrastructure,” she said. “It was the absence of qualified workers, stable electricity, and essential medicines. Yet the policy response focused on construction rather than quality.”

Her conclusion was strikingly simple: *data alone does not make change, decisions do.*

Translating Data into Decisions

If the first half of Africa's development journey was about collecting data, the next half must be about using it.

The keynote presentation highlighted vivid examples of what happens when evidence truly drives action. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Nigeria's government formed a Presidential Task Force that included researchers, scientists, and gender-rights advocates. Their evidence-based approach surfaced a “silent pandemic,” rising gender-based violence, and led to targeted responses that might otherwise have been overlooked.⁷

In Ondo State, the *Abiye Safe Motherhood* programme, guided by evaluation insights, improved maternal and child health outcomes and earned World Bank recognition.^{8,9} South Africa's *National School Nutrition Programme*, initially viewed with scepticism, has fed millions of children since 1994 because it was underpinned by strong evidence showing the link between nutrition, school attendance, and learning outcomes.¹⁰

These events show that evaluation, when integrated from the start, can save money, refine design, and strengthen accountability. But they also show something deeper: that *co-creation and ownership matter just as much as analysis.*

¹ Ibrahim, A. (2024). [Are Evaluations Truly Informing Programming or is it the Other Way Around?](#) LEAP Africa.

² South Africa Department of Performance Monitoring and Evaluation. (2011). [National evaluation policy framework](#).

³ Adaji, D. (2022). [Subsidized fertilizers fail to reach rural farmers in Kogi State](#). Kogi Reports.

⁴ Nnabuike, C. (2022). [Presidential fertiliser initiative has failed, should be disbanded—Fertiliser producers](#). Tribune Online.

⁵ Adebawale-Tambe, N. (2017). [Nigeria flags off scheme to revive 10,000 primary health care centres](#). Premium Times Nigeria.

⁶ Atoyebi, O. (2019). [Two years after, states await FG's 10,000 health centres project](#). Punch Nigeria.

⁷ Guidorzi, B. (2020) “[11 The 'Shadow Pandemic' Addressing Gender-based Violence \(GBV\) During COVID-19](#)”, in P. Carmody, G. McCann, C. Colleran and C. O'Halloran (eds) *COVID-19 in the Global South: Impacts and Responses*. Bristol, UK: Bristol University Press.

⁸ Ajayi, A.I., Akpan, W. (2020). [Maternal health care services utilisation in the context of 'Abiye' \(safe motherhood\) programme in Ondo State, Nigeria](#). BMC Public Health 20, 362.

⁹ Ogunidipe, S. (2011). [World Bank seeks adoption of Ondo State's Abiye project as model for Africa](#). Vanguard Nigeria.

¹⁰ Government of South Africa. (n.d.). [What is the National School Nutrition Programme \(NSNP\)?](#)

The Human Face of Evaluation

When the conversation turned to the panel, the tone shifted from systems to people, from institutions to the human realities that evidence must ultimately serve.

For [Dr Ebenezer Osei-Jones](#), a Ghanaian academic and agricultural extension expert, the barriers to evidence use begin at the roots. “There is limited community engagement,” he said. “Before you evaluate well, you must collect the right information at the baseline, midline, and endline. If you don’t involve the community from the start, they will not own the findings.”

He described the “fractured link” between researchers, farmers, and extension officers in Ghana, a disconnect that hinders adoption of new agricultural practices. “Co-creation breeds responsibility,” he emphasised later. “When people are part of the knowledge process, they use it.”

Dr Jones’ point echoed a wider truth: evaluation is not just a technical act of measuring; it is a social act of listening. Evidence that does not speak the language of those it seeks to help will struggle to inspire change.

That’s why he advocates simplifying reports, translating them into local languages, and framing recommendations in actionable terms. “Don’t just give vague advice,” he said. “Make it specific, make it teachable, and build capacity for people to act on it.”

Stories that Move Donors and Decision-Makers

For [Seth Mathias Sunya](#), Development Director at Konexio Africa, the key lies in turning evidence into stories. “Numbers, when they stand alone, are robotic,” he said. “But when you combine data with human stories, you give life to the evidence.”

This is not sentimentality, it is strategy. In his experience, translating numbers into narratives helps funders, policymakers, and the public connect emotionally with what evaluation reveals. “When

donors see themselves in the story, when they can picture the young woman whose business survived because of a policy change, they act,” he explained.

But storytelling alone is not enough. Sunya stressed the importance of alignment. “You must link your evidence to donor priorities,” he said. “Don’t just drop data on their laps. Involve them early, make them co-owners of the process.”

This collaborative approach transforms evaluation from a post-hoc reporting exercise into an ongoing dialogue of learning. In Sunya’s words, “When donors feel part of the journey, you don’t have to convince them to act, they’re already invested.”

Learning, Not Just Accountability

The conversation soon turned to culture, the mindsets that either enable or inhibit evidence use. Sunya proposed a simple shift: stop calling it “monitoring and evaluation” and start calling it “learning and development.”

“It’s what the private sector calls R&D,” he said. “They don’t see data as a burden; they see it as innovation. If we reframe M&E as learning, we stop collecting data to tick boxes and start using it as a tool to think, adapt, and grow.”

This idea resonated with [Fernanda Matsinhe](#), Manager for Measurement and Impact at Caribou Digital. “I’ve stopped calling myself an accountability partner,” she said. “I prefer ‘learning partner’. Accountability can create fear; people think you’re coming to audit them. But learning is collaborative; it’s about growing together.”

For Ms. Matsinhe, who has led multi-country digital development evaluations, adaptability is key. “Effective evaluation starts at design,” she explained. “Don’t wait for an endline survey. Build feedback loops, mini-checkpoints, and space for reflection. Evidence should inform the programme while it’s running, not only after it’s over.”

She described projects where digital data allowed near-real-time learning across countries. “But beyond tools,” she added, “we must centre African perspectives in how we evaluate.”

Rethinking What Counts as Evidence

What does it mean to centre African perspectives?

For Ms. Matsinhe, it means “grounding evaluation in local knowledge systems, values, and languages.” She referenced the [Made in Africa Evaluation Handbook](#) launched by the African Evaluation Association, which challenges practitioners to decolonise their frameworks. “Sometimes we need to slow down,” she said. “Good evaluation is not always quick. It takes time to build trust and co-create with communities.”

Her words mirrored [Nurain Ahmed](#)’s reflections from the Graça Machel Trust, where she coordinates the *Women Creating Wealth* initiative. “Our evaluations helped us realise that women entrepreneurs don’t just need finance,” Ms. Ahmed said. “They need mentorship, networks, and access to markets.”

By listening to women’s stories, not just counting their businesses, the programme evolved from a financing model to a holistic empowerment ecosystem operating in six African countries. “Qualitative evidence, like testimonies, shows the ‘why’ behind the numbers,” she explained. “When women tell us that banks reject their loan applications because they lack collateral, we can use that narrative evidence to advocate for policy change.”

Ms. Ahmed described how cross-country learning deepens this process. “In Senegal and Kenya, women reported higher confidence and policy awareness. In South Africa and Malawi, it was lower. That helps us share lessons between countries, what’s working here can inspire action elsewhere.”

Her insight buttresses a vital point: *not all evidence is numerical*. Stories, when systematically gathered, are evidence too. They can persuade policymakers in ways that spreadsheets cannot.

Making Evidence Accessible and Actionable

Despite the diversity of examples, from agriculture to digital innovation, a few common principles emerged from the dialogue.

- First, accessibility matters. “Simplify the findings,” said Dr Jones. “Take out the technical jargon. Translate it into the language that local officials and citizens understand.”
- Second, timing matters. Evidence must reach decision-makers *when* they are designing, not after. **Delayed dissemination is delayed impact.**
- Third, capacity matters. “We cannot assume people know how to use evidence,” he added. “We must train them, government officers, community leaders, youth, to interpret data and apply it.”
- Finally, technology offers new possibilities. Digital dashboards, open repositories, and platforms such as the [Development Evidence Portal](#) can democratise access. But as Igube reminded participants, awareness is still low. “Sub-Saharan Africa has over 4,000 evaluation studies,” she said. “The problem is not that we lack data, it’s that people don’t know it exists.”

From Policy Silos to Shared Learning

If the webinar exposed the problem, it also illuminated the path forward. Collaboration stood out as the strongest thread running through every conversation.

“Many organisations are doing good work,” Igube observed. “But when we work in silos, we limit our impact. When we collaborate, we multiply it.”

That collaboration must span sectors, bringing together governments, researchers, civil society, private actors, and the communities themselves. It must also move beyond project-by-project evaluation toward *institutionalising* evidence use in public administration.

Countries such as South Africa, Uganda, and Benin have already begun building national evaluation systems that link ministries, planning commissions, and parliaments. Nigeria's emerging National Monitoring and Evaluation Policy¹¹, developed by the Federal Ministry of Finance, Budget, and National Planning, is another step in that direction. But policies on paper need champions in practice, people who make evidence politically and socially relevant.

As one of the participants noted, "Data has no voice until someone speaks for it."

Building a Culture of Evidence

The deeper message of the 2025 *Dissemination Wednesday 3.0* was not just about tools or systems; it was about culture. A culture where data is not feared but embraced; where evaluation is not an external audit but a shared journey of discovery; where policymakers ask for evidence, and citizens demand it.

Creating that culture will require investment, not only in systems but in people. Evaluators across Africa, including the youth among them, are rising to the challenge, forming networks like SAMEA (South African Monitoring and Evaluation Association) and NAE (Nigerian Association of Evaluators). These communities are proving that evaluation can be local, innovative, and inclusive.

As the webinar moderator, LEAP Africa's [Abisoye Ajose](#), reflected at the end of the session, "The point is not just to measure impact, but to make meaning. Evidence should help us see people, their struggles, their progress, their aspirations, more clearly."

From Data to Decision: The Way Forward

If Africa is to turn data into decision, several shifts must occur:

- **Institutionalise evidence use** within government systems, linking evaluation findings directly to policy planning and budget cycles.
- **Invest in capacity-building** for policymakers and practitioners to interpret and apply evidence effectively.
- **Promote co-creation** by involving communities, youth, and marginalised groups in designing and validating evaluations.
- **Foster partnerships** that bridge the divide between researchers and policymakers, and between public and private sectors.
- **Simplify communication**, translate complex findings into stories and formats that inspire action.
- **Champion African-led methodologies**, ensuring that what is measured, and how, reflects African realities and values.

These shifts are not theoretical; they are already underway. The [From Data to Decision](#) research project by LEAP Africa and SBM Intelligence seeks to map barriers to evidence use and propose concrete strategies for uptake. "We want more evidence-informed policies, better resource allocation, and inclusiveness in how evidence is gathered," Igube explained. "This is one step toward that future."

A Shared Responsibility

As the session drew to a close, Ms. Ayeni's opening challenge still lingered: "Can we really say we are shelving reports when there are no shelves?"

The metaphor captures the paradox of our time: we are drowning in data but thirsty for insight. The problem is not information scarcity but information inertia. The responsibility now rests on all actors, policymakers, practitioners, funders, and citizens, to **move from evidence possession to evidence use.**

¹¹ Federal Government of Nigeria. (2022). [National monitoring and evaluation policy of Nigeria](#)