Rethinking Evidence: Emerging Tools, Methods, and Mindsets for Africa's MERL Future

by **D. Amabelle Nwakanma**[1,2], **Akolade Oladipupo**[2], **Adefunke Adeyeye**[2], **Abdullahi Ibrahim**[2], **Abisoye Ajose**[2] and **Aishat Jimoh**[2] *[October 2025]*

[1]Director of Programmes & Partnerships, LEAP Africa
[2]Monitoring, Evaluation, Research & Learning (MERL) Unit, LEAP Africa

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As part of LEAP Africa's 2025 Organisation-Wide Learning Series, an initiative designed to deepen a culture of reflection and evidence-based decision-making within the organisation, the Monitoring, Evaluation, Research, and Learning (MERL) team convened colleagues across departments to explore a timely theme: *New Directions for Evaluation and Research: Emerging Tools, Methods, and Thinking for MERL in Africa*.

The session, anchored by the MERL unit and drawing from recent scholarship and practice, posed a central question: *What does the future of evidence look like for African development actors?*

The ensuing dialogue surfaced a shared recognition, traditional monitoring and evaluation approaches, often slow, donor-driven, and compliance-oriented, can no longer keep pace with the complex realities of African development contexts.

Across the discussion, one theme resonated: MERL must evolve, from measurement to meaning; from accountability to learning; and from imported models to context-grounded innovation.

The Case for Change: Why Traditional MERL Is No Longer Enough

For decades, monitoring and evaluation in Africa have largely mirrored donor-prescribed frameworks. These systems, while valuable for accountability, often reduce success to outputs, counting participants trained or workshops held, without capturing whether real transformation occurred.

Traditional M&E, sometimes described as *linear and extractive*, emphasises indicators defined before programmes even begin. It privileges numbers over nuance and reports over reflection. This approach often struggles to detect emerging issues in real time or to capture the lived realities of communities.

Evidence must help us adapt, not just report, it must drive programming, influence policy, and inform learning.

The sector's landscape has changed. Donors increasingly value adaptive learning rather than rigid logframes; technology enables real-time feedback; and development programmes now operate within dynamic systems rather than predictable pathways. To remain relevant, African organisations must design MERL systems that prioritise *use, learning, and context* over compliance.

African Voices and Values: The Rise of Context-Driven Evaluation

The transformation of MERL in Africa is not only technical but philosophical. Scholars and practitioners have long questioned the dominance of Global North evaluation paradigms that marginalise indigenous perspectives.[1,2] In response, a growing movement champions African-led evaluation that centres African worldviews, values, and epistemologies.

At the heart of this movement lies the Made in Africa Evaluation (MAE) framework, spearheaded by the African Evaluation Association (AfrEA). MAE calls for evaluation systems grounded in Ubuntu, community participation, and narrative storytelling, emphasising that what counts as credible evidence is not confined to surveys or randomised data but extends to collective experiences and community voice.

African institutional centres such as the Centre for Learning on Evaluation and Results, Anglophone Africa (CLEAR-AA) and professional networks like AfrEA are driving this paradigm shift, training evaluators, and advocating for ethical and locally grounded standards. In this view, MERL is shifting, not just in what we measure, but in *how* and *why* we measure. It becomes a tool for empowerment rather than inspection, supporting social learning, strengthening accountability to communities, and amplifying African knowledge systems.

By aligning evaluation with cultural values and lived realities, organisations can produce evidence that is both credible and meaningful to the people it represents.

Emerging Methods: From Experimental to Adaptive Approaches

While contextual sensitivity is crucial, methodological rigour remains equally vital. One of the session's key insights was the growing relevance of experimental and quasi-experimental methods in understanding causal impact.

Traditional approaches, often limited to before-and-after comparisons, can reveal change but rarely clarify *why* or *how* it occurred. Quasi-experimental designs, which introduce comparison groups without random assignment, and randomised controlled trials (RCTs), which randomly allocate participants into treatment and control groups, provide stronger causal evidence of programme effects.[3]

[1] Tarsilla M. (2010). Being Blind in a World of Multiple Perspectives: The Evaluator's Dilemma Between the Hope of Becoming a Team Player and the Fear of Becoming a Critical Friend with No Friends. *J MultiDisciplinary Eval*, 6(13): 200–214.

[2] Chilisa B. (2012). *Indigenous research methodologies.* Thousand Oaks (CA): SAGE Publications.

[3] Patton M. Q. (2008). *Utilization-focused evaluation.* 4th ed. Thousand Oaks (CA): SAGE Publications.

An example of this is the "Teaching at the Right Level" (TaRL) initiative, first developed in India and later adapted in Botswana and Nigeria, which showed through RCTs how grouping children by ability rather than age led to measurable learning gains and influenced large-scale policy adoption.[4,5]

However, it was also noted in the session that *rigour need not mean rigidity*. African development contexts demand a balance between methodological depth and adaptive flexibility. Iterative learning cycles, embedded in programme design, enable teams to test assumptions, capture unintended outcomes, and adjust interventions in real time.

While many evaluations still rely on simple before–and–after comparisons, there is growing recognition that such designs reveal change but not causality. Introducing methodological designs such as matched comparison groups, phased implementation, or embedded reflection cycles, can help clarify the contribution of an intervention without sacrificing adaptability. This approach strengthens causal insight while preserving the flexibility needed in complex development settings.

Digital Transformation and the Promise of AI in MERL

Across Africa, digital tools are revolutionising how evidence is generated and used. Platforms such as KoboToolbox, ODK, and DHIS2 now enable real-time data capture, reducing both cost and lag in information flow.

Emerging technologies, machine learning, sentiment analysis, natural language processing, and AI notebooks, extend MERL's analytical reach. AI tools can automate data cleaning, summarise lengthy reports, and detect patterns across qualitative transcripts, freeing practitioners to focus on interpretation and strategy.

AI will not replace evaluators, but evaluators who use AI will replace those who don't.

Yet, enthusiasm must be balanced with caution. Digital innovation raises concerns about bias, privacy, and inclusivity. Without careful design and equitable access, the digital divide can entrench existing inequities, excluding rural or low-literacy populations from data systems and decision processes. Hence, AI should be seen not as a replacement for human judgment but as an amplifier of human insight, supporting evaluators to ask better questions, not merely process more data.

Responsible digitalisation also calls for *ethical frameworks* that ensure data sovereignty, cultural sensitivity, and equitable access. African MERL professionals are increasingly championing "responsible tech for learning", embedding ethics and inclusion into every stage of digital evidence generation.[6,7]

Participatory and Decolonised Approaches: Reclaiming Power in Knowledge Generation

A defining feature of new MERL thinking in Africa is the commitment to participation and decolonization, rebalancing who defines success and who benefits from evidence.

Participatory approaches such as Outcome Harvesting, Most Significant Change (MSC), and Participatory Action Research (PAR) move beyond extractive data collection toward shared inquiry. They invite beneficiaries, youth, communities, and marginalised groups, to co-interpret data and define what change matters to them.[8,9] In this paradigm, youth are not merely data sources but co-analysts and storytellers of their own change, shaping the

[4] Banerjee, A., Banerji, R., Berry, J., Duflo, E., Kannan, H., Mukherji, S., Shotland, M., & Walton, M. (2016). *Mainstreaming an Effective Intervention: Evidence from Randomized Evaluations of "Teaching at the Right Level" in India* (NBER Working Paper No. 22746). National Bureau of Economic Research. https://doi.org/10.3386/w22746

[5] Shandilya, A., & Nkwane, T. (2025). Designing for Responsiveness: What We Learned from Piloting Targeted Instruction Tools in Nigeria and Botswana. Teaching at the Right Level Africa.

[6] MERLTech. (2025). Beyond the Hype – AI Promise, Pitfalls, and Practical Pathways in African-Driven MERL.

[7] Vantage Africa. (2025). Building tech-enabled MERL systems for active learning and inclusion.

[8] Raimondo, E., & Bamberger, M. (2016). Gender equality in development evaluation : the intersection of complexities. In M. Bamberger, J. Vaessen, E. Raimondo (Eds.) *Gender Equality in Development Evaluation* (pp. 273-292). SAGE Publications, Inc, https://doi.org/10.4135/9781483399935.n14

[9] Eyre L, Farrelly M, Marshall M. (2017). What can a participatory approach to evaluation contribute to the field of integrated care? BMJ Qual Saf. Jul;26(7):588-594. https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjqs-2016-005777.

narrative of impact alongside researchers and practitioners.

In African contexts, these approaches align with communal traditions of dialogue and storytelling. Photovoice, narrative mapping, and community storytelling provide channels for beneficiaries to express outcomes visually and emotionally, forms of evidence that conventional logframes often miss.

Moreover, integrating feminist and intersectional lenses into MERL ensures that power dynamics: gender, age, class, are explicitly considered. The concept of data feminism[10] challenges assumptions of neutrality and urges evaluators to design indicators that reflect lived inequalities.

Together, these shifts mark a move from *evaluation as oversight* to *evaluation as co-creation*.

Impact Communication: Turning Data into Stories That Drive Action

One of the most striking evolutions in the MERL field is the recognition that evidence unused could be perceived as evidence wasted. The capacity to communicate insights effectively, across diverse audiences, is now a core MERL competency.

Organisations like UNICEF[11] are leading this change by embedding impact communication into evaluation lifecycles. Instead of static PDF reports, evaluators now craft interactive dashboards, animated data visualisations, infographics, and short narrative videos that translate complex findings into actionable insights.

Evidence has no impact until it meets its audience.

Research shows that visual and story-based evidence improves comprehension and decision uptake.[12] Importantly, these communication products must be co-designed with local users to ensure cultural resonance, using accessible imagery, local languages, and low-bandwidth versions for inclusive dissemination.

African organisations are increasingly embedding communication metrics (views, downloads, decision uptake) within MERL frameworks, transforming reporting from a compliance exercise into a tool for advocacy, learning, and influence.

If We Ignore Evidence: Lessons from Global and Local Cases

The consequences of overlooking evidence were vividly illustrated during the learning session through the PlayPump case study.

In this initiative, merry-go-round pumps were installed across parts of Southern Africa with the intent that children's play would draw water for their communities. Traditional M&E, focusing on output metrics, number of pumps installed, declared the project a success and spurred rapid scaling. Yet within months, communities reported malfunctioning pumps, exhausted children, and cultural resistance: women bore the burden of operating pumps, children abandoned the site, and the intervention collapsed.[13,14]

Had participatory, adaptive MERL methods been applied, engaging communities in design, testing usability, and monitoring contextual fit, these issues could have been detected early.

Adaptive MERL would have flagged usability issues within months, turning a failed innovation into a learning opportunity rather than a cautionary tale.

This case mirrors challenges familiar to many African programmes, when evidence is treated as an afterthought, unintended consequences multiply. It reinforces a simple truth: ignoring evidence is costly, not only in wasted resources but in eroded trust.

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[10] D'Ignazio C., Klein L.F. (2020). *Data feminism.* Cambridge (MA): MIT Press.
[11] UNICEF (2024). Evaluation Communication and Advocacy Strategy, New York: United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF).
[12] Eberhard, K. (2023). The effects of visualization on judgment and decision-making: a systematic literature review. *Manag Rev Q* 73, 167–214. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11301-021-00235-8
[13] Stellar, D. (2022). *The PlayPump: What went wrong?* State of the Planet. https://news.climate.columbia.edu/2022/07/28/playpumps-what-went-wrong/
[14] Uysal, S. (2024). The PlayPump illusion: How a well-meaning project became a symbol of humanitarian disconnect. *Effective Humanitarian.*

Implications for Development Organisations in Africa

The insights from this organisational learning session extend beyond LEAP Africa. They point to a wider continental imperative: development organisations must reimagine MERL as a culture, not a department, a mindset that values curiosity, reflection, and continuous improvement. This cultural shift positions evidence not merely as a reporting requirement but as a catalyst for better design, smarter learning, and stronger accountability.

1. **Design for Learning from the Start:** Programmes should embed evaluation logic into their design, articulating testable hypotheses, integrating baseline and comparison data, and building in reflection loops. Evaluation must be seen not as a post-hoc audit but as a design principle.

2. **Leverage Technology Responsibly:** Digital tools and AI can democratise evidence generation, but only if practitioners prioritise inclusion, ethics, and data sovereignty. Partnerships with African tech innovators can bridge gaps between innovation and context.

3. **Foster Organisational Learning Agendas:** Development organisations should craft learning agendas, shared questions that guide evidence use across programmes (e.g., *What drives sustained youth engagement? What makes leadership training translate into civic action?*). Such agendas align research, programming, and strategy.

4. **Invest in Local Evaluation Capacity:** Building strong national and regional evaluation ecosystems is essential for sustainable evidence systems in Africa. Through initiatives and networks such as CLEAR–Anglophone Africa, the LEAP Africa Young & Emerging Evaluators (YEEs) Scholarship, and continental platforms like AfrEA, African evaluators are gaining the skills, mentorship, and collaboration spaces needed to lead Africa's evidence agenda. Investing in such capacity-building efforts ensures that evaluation remains locally grounded, contextually relevant, and responsive to African development priorities.

5. **Prioritise Equity and Inclusion in Evidence Systems:** Integrating feminist, participatory, and decolonial lenses in MERL safeguards against reproducing power imbalances in data and decision-making.

The Future of Evidence in Africa

The future of MERL in Africa will not be defined by technology alone, but by mindset, a shift from seeing evidence as a donor requirement to viewing it as a catalyst for transformation.

The next generation of evaluators must be systems thinkers, storytellers, and ethicists, fluent in data yet rooted in context. Development organisations that invest in adaptive, inclusive, and technologically enabled MERL systems will be better positioned to navigate complexity and deliver sustainable impact. Ultimately, the goal is not just to prove that change happened, but to understand *how* it happens, *for whom*, and *why* it matters.