

Made in Africa

Artificial Intelligence for

Monitoring, Evaluation,

Research and Learning:

A Practitioner Perspective
and Landscape Study

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The views expressed in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the positions of the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation. They aim to reflect a range of views from those we spoke with during the course of our research and do not represent an official shared position or viewpoint of the members of the AI+Africa Working Group as a whole. The MERL Tech initiative takes full responsibility for this publication and endorses the research findings and conclusions presented.

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Executive summary

Africa stands at a pivotal moment where rapid advances in artificial intelligence, the expansion of digital infrastructure, and the Made in Africa Evaluation movement intersect. This report examines whether and how AI might serve African monitoring, evaluation, research and learning (MERL) systems—or whether these technologies should be adopted at all. We argue that Africa's relationship with AI must be shaped through locally-defined priorities, community participation, and epistemic sovereignty rather than externally imposed technological agendas.

While AI promises enhanced data analysis and real-time insights, our research reveals fundamental misalignments between current AI tools and African contexts. The systematic absence of African languages from AI training data creates erasure, rendering entire communities invisible in evidence gathering. AI tools consistently fail to surface African research, instead reproducing Western evaluation frameworks inappropriate for African contexts. These are not merely technical limitations but political choices about whose knowledge matters.

Using a qualitative design, we interviewed 23 AI experts, technologists, evaluators, civil-society leaders, and policymakers from across Africa and the global MERL ecosystem, complemented by literature review and practitioner consultations with our AI in AfricaMERL Working Group.

Our findings

Technical and structural barriers	African MERL practitioners face interconnected challenges including limited digital infrastructure, fragmented data systems, and educational institutions unprepared to integrate AI with evaluation practice. Current regulatory frameworks focus on protecting against AI risks while risking failing to enable African-led innovation.
Reframing capacity deficits	The fundamental gap is not African practitioners' ability to use Global North AI systems, but rather these systems' lack of indigenous data, nuance, and contextual sophistication to capture African realities. Dominant evaluation frameworks themselves require capacity development to understand African epistemologies.
Made in Africa as resistance and creation	Practitioners define African AI approaches through community ownership, participatory design, African language inclusion, locally-controlled infrastructure, and Ubuntu values prioritizing collective benefit. This represents both resistance to epistemic hegemony and creation of alternative systems.

Environmental and human rights concerns

AI's development material and global supply costs, from conflict mineral extraction in the DRC to massive energy consumption, reveal how African resources fuel technological development controlled by and benefiting actors outside the continent.

Recommendations for action

1. **Develop African practitioner competency frameworks** that establish standards prioritizing cultural responsiveness alongside technical capabilities, created through inclusive processes addressing multilingual and gender representation.
2. **Center agency** by ensuring that what constitutes legitimate knowledge and meaningful outcomes is defined locally and collaboratively and by moving beyond passive adoption to co-creation of AI systems.
3. **Prioritize African languages in AI** that ensure language communities benefit economically while maintaining cultural authenticity, addressing the erasure of African voices in evidence ecosystems.
4. **Apply intersectional analysis** using Afrofeminism to examine how AI differentially impacts communities by gender, class, location, and tribe, developing ethics from African philosophical foundations rather than importing Western frameworks.
5. **Equip policymakers critically** to distinguish technological hype from genuine opportunities, developing autonomous capacity to evaluate AI on African terms rather than rubber-stamping donor-driven policies.
6. **Ensure critical assessment**, rejecting "Africa is behind" rhetoric to question whether AI genuinely serves African development or primarily opens markets for global corporations.

Moving forward

This research reveals that the question is not how Africa can adopt AI, but whether and under what conditions AI might serve African communities. Success requires more than technology transfer—it demands reimagining knowledge systems, confronting extractive patterns, and building genuinely equitable collaborations. We call on funders, policymakers, and practitioners to move beyond asking "how can Africa adopt AI?" to asking "what technologies genuinely serve African communities?". The path forward requires patience, investment in local capacity, and recognition that meaningful innovation emerges from African contexts, not despite them.

“We call on funders, policymakers, and practitioners to move beyond asking ‘how can Africa adopt AI?’, to asking ‘what technologies genuinely serve African communities?’”.

1. Introduction

The African continent stands at a critical technological and epistemological crossroads as artificial intelligence (AI) rapidly evolves and reshapes global systems of knowledge production, evidence generation, and decision-making. With an accelerating race for AI regulation and policy formulation by African governments, African monitoring, evaluation, research, and learning (MERL) practitioners face critical questions about their role in shaping and adapting to the AI landscape.

Our research emerges at a moment when three powerful forces converge: the Made in Africa Evaluation movement within evaluation practice, the rapid development of technology including AI, and Africa's growing digital infrastructure. This convergence creates opportunities for self-determination in how the continent adopts and utilizes technology, and for interrogating what this means for MERL and the wider context of evidence-informed policymaking across Africa.

The rapid development of AI represents a defining feature of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, characterized by the integration of advanced technologies including artificial intelligence, augmented reality, and the Internet of Things into human lives (Ross & Maynard, 2021; Schwab, 2016). The Stanford 2025 AI Index Report states that global investment in AI has experienced dramatic expansion, with corporate AI investment reaching \$252.3 billion in 2024, representing a more than thirteenfold increase since 2014 (Maslej et al., 2025). The frontier technology market, which includes AI alongside other transformative innovations, is projected to grow from \$2.5 trillion in 2023 to \$16.4 trillion by 2033 (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development [UNCTAD], 2025), reflecting a compound annual growth rate of approximately 20%. However, this rapid technological advancement has amplified existing global inequalities, with China and the United States dominating knowledge generation in frontier technologies, accounting for approximately one-third of peer-reviewed articles and two-thirds of patents (UNCTAD, 2025).

Within this global technological transformation, **Africa's digital infrastructure** is experiencing remarkable growth, creating unique opportunities for the continent's development trajectory. The widespread adoption of mobile technologies across Africa has established a foundation for widened AI technology acceptance, with AI applications already being deployed across diverse sectors including agriculture, healthcare, finance, education, and e-commerce (Kondo & Diwani, 2023; Okonkwo & Ade-Ibijola, 2022). Africa's potential for AI-driven economic transformation is substantial, with projections suggesting AI could contribute between \$2.9 and \$4.8 billion to the continent's economy by 2030 and potentially double GDP growth rates in African countries by 2035 (Munga & Quansah, 2025; Signé, 2025). Yet significant gaps persist in AI readiness and governance capacity, with only 30% of developing countries having established national AI strategies by 2023, compared to two-thirds of developed economies (UNCTAD, 2025). These disparities in infrastructure, data access, and technical skills represent critical leverage points that could either widen existing inequalities or enable transformational development cascades (UNCTAD, 2025).

The **Made in Africa Evaluation movement** represents the third convergent force shaping this moment, emphasizing locally-driven approaches to knowledge generation and evaluation practice that center African epistemologies, contexts, and priorities. When considered alongside rapid AI development and expanding digital infrastructure, the Made in Africa Evaluation movement creates a unique opportunity for African MERL practitioners to shape how AI technologies are adopted, adapted, and governed within evaluation contexts, ensuring these tools serve locally-defined development priorities rather than replicating global power imbalances.

To understand how this convergence shapes MERL practice, we must clarify what we mean by these key concepts. Artificial intelligence, broadly defined, encompasses computational systems capable of performing tasks that typically require human intelligence, including pattern recognition, language processing, prediction, and decision support (Li et al., 2024). Within MERL contexts—where monitoring refers to routine collection and analysis of information, evaluation assesses whether objectives have been achieved and why, research increases the evidence base, and learning incorporates knowledge into practice—AI applications range from natural language processing for transcription and sentiment analysis to predictive analytics for needs assessment. Additional operational applications include developing evaluation workplans, conducting budget comparisons, summarizing qualitative data, performing calculations, and sourcing information from diverse datasets. While AI's capabilities are expanding rapidly, their utility can only be assessed against the specific functions they aim to support.

In this research, we adopt a deliberately critical lens that questions both the assumption that AI inherently offers solutions and the notion that African-developed approaches are automatically appropriate simply by virtue of their origin. We interrogate the foundational question of relevance itself: under what conditions, if any, might AI meaningfully serve the needs of African MERL practitioners? This interrogation examines AI, evaluation practice, and evidence-informed policymaking from African perspectives to contribute practical insights that strengthen MERL work across the continent where appropriate.

Our research design reflects commitment to participatory processes and centering the African practitioner voice in knowledge production. Rather than imposing externally defined research questions, we facilitated an iterative consultation process with AI+Africa Working Group members to identify the most pressing knowledge gaps and priority questions facing practitioners. Through virtual convenings, surveys and interviews, the working group members articulated their experiences with AI tools, identified barriers to effective adoption, and debated what "Made in Africa" approaches to AI-enabled MERL might entail. This participatory design process shaped not only what questions we asked, but also how we envision the research being used.

Our findings can inform training programs, professional networks, and support systems that help African MERL practitioners make informed decisions about if and how to engage with AI in their evaluation work. For practitioners navigating AI adoption decisions in resource-constrained, context-specific environments, this research validates current AI tools' limitations and alignment concerns. The findings provide evidence that the question is not simply how to adopt existing AI systems more effectively, but whether these tools are appropriate at all, given their training data, embedded assumptions, and design priorities. We encourage practitioners to use these findings in advocating within the ecosystem for space to critically

assess AI technologies before adoption, resources to support thoughtful experimentation when tools show genuine promise, and agency to reject technologies that do not serve their contexts in a meaningful way.

Ultimately, this research supports African-led innovation in evaluation practices and contributes to more effective, evidence-informed policymaking that responds to local priorities and improves social outcomes. We envision this research as a catalyst for action rather than an endpoint, with multiple audiences engaging with these findings in distinct yet complementary ways, collectively advancing a more nuanced understanding of whether, how, and under what conditions AI might meaningfully serve African MERL practice.

About MTI. As a social venture that sits at the intersection of digital technology, human-centered information and communication, and the social sector, The MERL Tech Initiative (MTI) supports thoughtful tech-enabled program design, implementation, and MERL. We help organizations with responsible, ethical, realistic design, use, and governance of digital technologies and digital data to achieve better outcomes. We convene communities to share good practice and improve humanitarian, development, human rights and peacebuilding outcomes. We advocate for responsible, ethical, realistic approaches that center people, communities and societies.

About MTI's Community of Practice. MTI leads the Generative AI / Natural Language Processing Community of Practice (NLP-CoP), which explores opportunities and challenges with emerging AI applications for MERL. The NLP-CoP brings together MERL practitioners, artificial intelligence (AI) experts, and data responsibility advocates to learn and collaborate. We focus on responsible, appropriate, and effective applications of NLP (including Generative AI) to address demand-driven, real-world MERL challenges. We work together to influence the use of NLP and GenAI for MERL, and we advocate for a stronger role of MERL professionals in evaluating the effects of NLP and GenAI in social sector programming and wider society.

About the AI in African MERL Working Group. The NLP-CoP's AI+Africa Working Group focuses on creating space, structure and momentum for its diverse membership to work and learn together in order to take a more active role in the transformative power of AI in Africa. The working group brings together some 500 members, from over 40 countries across Africa and beyond, whose work focuses on the African continent. Our membership spans multiple sectors and includes professionals from NGOs and Civil Society Organizations, academic researchers, independent consultants, and practitioners from both public and private sector organizations. Members represent a wide range of roles, including monitoring and evaluation specialists, data analysts, program managers, technology specialists, policy advisors, and organizational leaders. In alignment with the decolonization agenda, the AI + Africa Working Group works to build relationships and connections across and within the continent, with an eye toward strengthening Majority World collaborations. This includes creating connections with African organizations who hold expertise in AI development and AI policy and closing gaps across social, public, and private sector organizations that are curious about using AI.

2. African MERL and AI: Countries and Contexts in Flux

MERL and Evidence-Informed Policy: Movement toward decolonization

MERL systems in Africa are shifting from externally imposed frameworks toward indigenously developed approaches that prioritize local ownership, contextual relevance, and epistemological sovereignty (Goldman & Pabari, 2020). These approaches differ from Western-derived frameworks not by asserting monolithic "African values" but by rejecting donor-driven accountability mechanisms. Instead, they favor country-owned systems that center affected populations in decision-making, honor diverse knowledge systems and indigenous languages, and employ locally appropriate evidence generation methods (Akwetey et al., 2022; Maikuri et al., 2022). This transformation reflects the maturation of Africa's digital and MERL ecosystems: as the number of practitioners and professionals in these fields grows, government institutions are increasingly taking responsibility for guiding, coordinating, and advocating for them, signaling a positive shift toward country-owned systems rather than historically donor-driven agendas (Akwetey et al., 2022).

Despite this positive shift toward country-owned systems, evidence utilization in policy formulation and practice remains challenging across African contexts. Research examining African policymakers' evidence use reveals a reliance on informal rather than rigorous evidence sources, though officials express strong commitment to improving evidence-informed decision-making (Goldman & Pabari, 2020).

MERL capacity development in Africa has historically been ad hoc, indiscriminate, and piecemeal, reflecting limited situational assessment and contextual understanding (Masvaure & Fish, 2022). Traditional capacity strengthening initiatives, largely funded and designed by international development partners, including the World Bank's series of evaluation capacity development initiatives from the 2000s through 2021, have predominantly focused on technical skill development among individual practitioners and have frequently failed to achieve extended meaningful institutional and systemic transformation (Akwetey et al., 2022; Masvaure & Fish, 2022). These interventions have prioritized donor accountability and efficient aid delivery over context-specific learning and local ownership of evaluation functions (Masvaure & Fish, 2022).

However, a landscape scan conducted by The MERL Tech Initiative and Data Innovators¹ reveals a growing shift in the ecosystem, with many African governments now calling for increased ownership of MERL practices. Governments increasingly recognize that The MERL Tech ecosystem requires functioning networks and infrastructure to enable modern technologies, alongside national and regional data standards and interoperability to ensure efficient communication and responsible data sharing (Akwetey et al., 2022). This represents a departure from conventional approaches and aligns with locally led development

¹ The Mastercard Foundation commissioned a landscape scan in order to better understand the MERL Tech sector in African contexts. This is an internal MTI report written in 2022.

paradigms that emphasize the critical importance of ensuring that affected populations remain central to all response agendas, decision-making processes, and actions.

Contemporary scholarship increasingly recognizes evaluation as a problematic instrument of epistemological imperialism in Africa, as it predominantly adopts Western approaches that reinforce donor-driven, accountability-based measurement systems (Masvaure & Motlanthe, 2022). Evaluation extends beyond reflecting colonial power dynamics to constitute, as Maikuri et al. (2022) argue, "part of a much larger cycle of harm," particularly when it operates within knowledge systems that conflate linearity and written documentation with rationality, thereby diminishing indigenous languages, knowledges, and modalities of accountability. The dominance of Global North perspectives in development programming perpetuates asymmetrical power structures that limit local community input in interventions designed to serve them, particularly through what Maikuri et al. (2022) describe as "uncritical, unidirectional translation" of concepts that neither apply to African contexts nor serve Africa's liberation. These "invisible imperial designs" continue to shape how international development is conceptualized, implemented, and evaluated, ultimately influencing how local populations understand development itself (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013). The linguistic dimensions of this harm are particularly acute. When evaluation privileges colonial languages and linear argumentation, it implicitly questions the rationality of indigenous knowledge-bearers who struggle to convey nuanced local concepts within frameworks designed for white-dominant institutions. This dynamic allows subjugated epistemologies to atrophy while risking co-optation of indigenous ideas (Maikuri et al., 2022).

The integration of artificial intelligence into African MERL contexts introduces additional complexity to these decolonization challenges even as it offers potential for enhanced evidence generation and analysis.

The field has learned crucial lessons that must inform AI integration. First, technology's effects depend on the global and local social and technological structures that underpin it. Second, practitioners must address the power dynamics inherent in conducting MERL with vulnerable populations. Third, technological optimism must be tempered with social realities and grounded in actual problems (Akwetey et al., 2022).

Without such considerations, AI applications risk exacerbating problems of language representation, algorithmic bias, data sovereignty, and cultural appropriateness, potentially further entrenching externally imposed frameworks rather than supporting the continued strengthening of Africa's digital MERL ecosystem.

Africa's Technology Landscape: Optimism that lacks foundations and investment

The technology governance landscape has witnessed significant progress through continental leadership initiatives, most notably the African Union's adoption of the Continental AI Strategy in July 2024, which establishes a governance blueprint emphasizing local-first approaches, people-centered design, and human rights protection (Kwarkye, 2025). This strategic framework fundamentally differs from AI strategies developed in other regions through its explicit emphasis on five core principles that reflect African epistemologies and values: prioritizing African-developed solutions, ensuring AI serves African

communities, protecting human rights and dignity, contributing to peace and prosperity, and addressing digital divides through inclusion and diversity (Centre for Intellectual Property and Information Technology Law [CIPIT], 2025).

Figure 1: Snapshot of Artificial Intelligence Governance Frameworks in Africa

Framework	Country or Body	Scope
Continental Artificial Intelligence Strategy	African Union	Africa
National AI and Big Data Strategy (Stratégie Nationale d'Intelligence Artificielle et des Mégadonnées 2023-2027)	Benin	National
National Artificial Intelligence Strategy (Stratégie Nationale de l'Intelligence Artificielle – SNIA 2030)	Côte d'Ivoire	National
Egypt National Artificial Intelligence Strategy Second Edition 2025-2030	Egypt	National
National Artificial Intelligence Strategy 2024	Ethiopia	National
Republic of Ghana National Artificial Intelligence Strategy 2023-2033	Ghana	National
Artificial Intelligence Policy And Implementation Plan Second Draft	Lesotho	National
National Policy for Artificial Intelligence for the State of Libya 2024	Libya	
The National Artificial Intelligence Strategy Of Mauritania 2025-2029	Mauritania	National
Mauritius Artificial Intelligence Strategy 2018	Mauritius	National
National Artificial Intelligence Strategy 2024	Nigeria	National
The National AI Policy	Rwanda	National
National strategy on artificial intelligence (AI) (Stratégie nationale et feuille de route du Sénégal sur l'Intelligence Artificielle 2023)	Senegal	National
The National Artificial Intelligence Strategy of Tunisia	Tunisia	National
Kenya National AI Strategy 2025 - 2030	Kenya	National
South Africa National AI Policy Framework	South Africa	National
National Artificial Intelligence Strategy 2024-2026	Zambia	National

** Only publicly available frameworks at the time of writing are referenced in this table. Most African countries have announced that they are in the development stages of their AI strategies and policies.*

However, this technological optimism may largely live on paper, given the complex landscape of persistent challenges that illuminate critical gaps in policy versus practice. Fundamentally, the development space remains characterized by what Ade-Ibijola and Okonkwo (2023) identify as data scarcity and algorithmic bias, where most AI systems are trained on datasets that do not adequately reflect African demographic variables or experiences. These technical challenges intersect with broader connectivity barriers. According to the Centre for Intellectual Property and Information Technology Law (2025), only 37% of Africans were online in 2023. Historically, poor infrastructure, lack of high quality data, and high computational costs have restricted AI development and scalability (Mienye et.al 2024, CIPIT 2023). Infrastructure development has accelerated over the past few years, however, with investments in cloud infrastructure and data center expansion in countries including South Africa and Nigeria. The report documents approximately 140 operational data centers throughout the continent, creating foundations for what they term "sovereign AI."

Data governance presents additional complexities for AI deployment in African contexts. Effoduh et al. (2024) observe that "high-tech entities mostly driven by market needs benefit at the detriment of less powerful actors such as data subjects, civil societies, and even states"; a power asymmetry intensified by major technology companies' extraterritorial operations.

Recent policy developments demonstrate growing awareness of these challenges. The Centre for Intellectual Property and Information Technology Law (2025) reports that as of February 2025, "40 African countries have passed data protection legislations, with Kenya, Nigeria, Ghana, and South Africa taking the lead in enforcement." Nevertheless, significant "gaps persist in safeguarding citizens from AI-enabled surveillance and profiling, particularly by state actors." This tension between domestic regulatory progress and persistent vulnerabilities is exacerbated by Africa's limited representation in global AI governance forums, such as those at Bletchley Park², where Kenya, Rwanda and Nigeria were the only African countries present. African AI thought leader Philip Thigo highlights this exclusion and further advocates for a multilateral approach in which sovereignty promotes global cooperation rather than serving as justification for isolationism, emphasizing that Africa must not be left behind in shaping the technological frameworks that will govern its future(Rutkowska, 2025) .

AI-enabled evaluation in African contexts

While emerging technologies have begun to revolutionize the types of data that can be accessed and the methodologies through which data can be processed (Bruce et al., 2020), the application of AI within African contexts presents unique opportunities and challenges that remain underexplored in current academic discourse.

² The Bletchley Park AI Safety Summit (1-2 November 2023) brought together 29 governments, multinational technology companies, and industry experts, culminating in the Bletchley Declaration—an international agreement affirming collective commitment to developing AI "in a manner that is safe, in such a way as to be human-centric, trustworthy and responsible." <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/ai-safety-summit-2023-the-bletchley-declaration/the-bletchley-declaration-by-countries-attending-the-ai-safety-summit-1-2-november-2023>

The landscape of AI implementation in Africa is characterized by both promise and complexity.

The landscape of AI implementation in Africa is characterized by both promise and complexity. As Ade-Ibijola and Okonkwo (2023) observe, AI as an emerging innovation will enhance existing job functions while simultaneously creating new roles, a reality that extends directly to the MERL ecosystem across the continent. However, this technological evolution is marred by capacity gaps and structural inequities at both individual and institutional levels that fundamentally shape how AI tools are developed, deployed, and utilized for evaluation purposes.

There are significant gaps in literature and in practice particularly for understanding how AI technologies can be effectively adapted to serve the specific needs and contexts of African MERL practitioners. Bruce et al. (2020) emphasize that clearly defining specific problems and MERL needs is critical to selecting appropriate technology systems, yet existing frameworks predominantly reflect Northern hemisphere perspectives and may not adequately address the realities of African development contexts. This disconnect is amplified further by the fact that many technology-related training opportunities remain geographically concentrated in the global North, creating barriers to meaningful engagement with AI tools for practitioners based in African institutions. **There is a tendency for AI development to mirror the realities and biases of its creators, who may lack deep understanding of structural inequities in regions where their technologies will be implemented (Bruce et al., 2020).** This highlights the importance of developing AI approaches that are not merely transplanted from other contexts but are genuinely co-created with and by African MERL practitioners and communities.

3. Our Research: Exploring gaps and ways forward

AI holds promise for strengthening MERL work in several ways: it could help practitioners analyze large datasets more efficiently, identify patterns across complex programs, generate insights from diverse sources of evidence, support real-time monitoring and adaptive management, and potentially make evaluation processes more accessible and cost-effective. However, the jury is still out on the overall utility of AI for MERL work globally. Beyond questions of effectiveness, there are substantial concerns about AI's implications including issues of bias, data privacy, algorithmic transparency, and power dynamics.

These challenges become even more pronounced when examining AI use in African contexts. AI tools used in Africa are predominantly designed and developed outside the continent, meaning they are not built for African realities and priorities. As we note later in this paper, this predominance reflects and reinforces existing global power imbalances, raising fundamental questions about whether their adoption serves African interests or simply extends patterns of technological dependency, challenging the mainstream assumption that AI represents an unqualified benefit for African MERL practitioners.

Building on earlier work on decolonization of evaluation in Africa, our research explores whether a "Made in Africa" approach, one that builds on existing evaluation frameworks while addressing unique contextual needs, could enable a more grounded way to assess whether and how AI might support MERL work and enhance evidence use. Rather than assuming that AI will solve problems or that a "Made in Africa" AI would automatically be beneficial, we seek to understand the fundamental question: what would it take for AI to be relevant and appropriate for MERL practitioners on the continent?

We unpack questions related to the needs, gaps, and priorities of MERL practitioners in Africa to define a starting point for any future development and application of AI tools and approaches. By better understanding how a Made in Africa approach to AI could potentially combine with Made in Africa approaches to MERL, we aim to create an informed foundation for the African MERL sector as it navigates these emerging technologies with appropriate caution and criticality.

We hope this work can support African practitioners and organizations to further strengthen their capacity to lead with a critical perspective in this space, one that questions whether, when, and how AI adoption serves African interests rather than simply assuming its benefits.

Beyond questions of effectiveness, there are substantial concerns about AI's implications including issues of bias, data privacy, algorithmic transparency, and power dynamics. These challenges become even more pronounced when examining AI use in African contexts.

By examining AI, evaluation practice, and evidence-informed policymaking from African perspectives, we aim to contribute practical insights that strengthen MERL work across the continent where appropriate. Our findings can inform training programs, professional networks, and support systems that help African MERL practitioners make informed decisions about if and how to engage with AI in their evaluation work. Ultimately, this research supports African-led innovation in evaluation practices and contributes to more effective, evidence-informed policymaking that responds to local priorities and improves social outcomes.

The sections that follow outline our research approach and theoretical foundations. We begin by presenting our research questions, which frame our inquiry into AI and MERL in African contexts. We then describe our qualitative methodology, including our interview-based data collection with MERL practitioners across multiple countries. Following this, we introduce the Made in Africa Evaluation framework that serves as our analytical lens for examining AI framings in MERL. These components establish the conceptual and methodological foundation for our investigation into Made in Africa approaches to AI for MERL.

Research Design and Analytical Framework

Research questions

Our research seeks to answer the following questions to gain insights into the state of AI in MERL in African contexts with the goal of further understanding what characteristics a Made in Africa approach to AI for MERL might have.

1. What knowledge and capacity gaps are there in relation to data, AI, and evidence-informed decision-making among members of the AI+Africa Working Group and the wider MERL Tech and Evidence in Policy networks?
2. What are the most effective ways to fill AI knowledge and capacity gaps among MERL Practitioners through training and convening? What other supports are needed?
3. What does an emerging concept of ‘Made in Africa AI & Evaluation’ look like? How does it build from “Made in Africa Evaluation” concepts? What is unique about it in comparison to AI for MERL in other contexts?
4. How do AI+Africa Working Group members and the wider MERL Tech network see AI-enabled MERL contributing to MERL and eventually to evidence-informed decision-making?
5. How equipped are current AI models and tools to work effectively for this purpose in African contexts? Which AI tools or methods do MERL Practitioners find useful for better or more frequent use of evidence gathering and analysis, and evidence use, especially for policy-making?
6. How might partners and networks continue to come together to collaborate on “Made in Africa AI & Evaluation” after this grant period is over (if at all)?

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research approach to explore and examine the current state of artificial intelligence in Monitoring, Evaluation, Research, and Learning (MERL) practices, with the objective of informing a "Made in Africa" approach from a practitioner perspective. The primary data collection method

consisted of semi-structured interviews designed to gain comprehensive insights into capacity strengthening approaches, their impacts, and the measurement frameworks employed to assess capacity-building activities within the AI-MERL nexus.

Study participants were strategically selected from nine countries spanning three continents. African nations represented included South Africa, Egypt, Nigeria, Kenya, Zimbabwe, Burkina Faso, and Uganda, with additional comparative perspectives drawn from Canada and the United States. All interviews were conducted virtually via Zoom to accommodate geographical constraints and ensure broad participation. A notable limitation of our study is the underrepresentation of West African, particularly Francophone African, perspectives in our key informant interviews. While our sample included one participant from Burkina Faso, West African and Francophone African viewpoints remain underrepresented in our primary data. Concentration in East and Southern Africa means that certain regional experiences and linguistic contexts are less fully represented in our practitioner-centered findings. We acknowledge this limitation as it affects the comprehensiveness of our findings, though our secondary data sources help mitigate this gap.

Participant recruitment was facilitated through established professional networks, specifically leveraging The MERL Tech Initiative's Natural Language Processing Community of Practice. The sample comprised four distinct categories of experts: members of the AI in Africa Working Group, Civil Society Organizations, AI Africa specialists, and MERL sector experts. Selection criteria for participants included demonstrated involvement and experience in monitoring and evaluation capacity development, current engagement with artificial intelligence applications, and active participation in The MERL Tech Initiative's NLP-CoP AI in Africa Working Group. The study initially targeted 30 respondents across Africa, yet data saturation was achieved after conducting 23 interviews, indicating sufficient depth and breadth of information had been captured to address the research objectives. To complement the primary data collection, a comprehensive secondary data analysis was conducted through systematic review of institutional reports, peer-reviewed academic literature, and relevant policy documents focusing on the intersection of artificial intelligence and MERL practices. This triangulation of data sources enhanced the validity and comprehensiveness of the research findings.

AI Disclosure

Claude.ai was used to edit portions of the report text for clarity, grammar and reduce repetition. Substantive ideas, analysis, and conclusions were developed entirely by the authors.

Made in Africa Evaluation: Analytical Framework

Having outlined our research questions and methodology, we now turn to the theoretical framework that guides our analysis. The concept of "Made in Africa AI for MERL" builds upon the "Made in Africa Evaluation" school of thought. Understanding this framework is essential because it provides the principles and values against which we assess whether AI integration serves African priorities while preserving indigenous evaluation practices. However, as we discuss below, operationalizing MAE as an analytical framework requires moving beyond general principles to articulate specific, concrete ways that African-rooted tools, frameworks, and approaches might be applied or should inform AI adoption in MERL contexts.

Made in Africa Evaluation (MAE) represents a paradigmatic shift from Western-dominated evaluation practice toward African-centered epistemological approaches that prioritize indigenous knowledge systems, relational ontologies, and Ubuntu philosophical foundations (Chilisa et al., 2016; Masvaure & Motlanthe, 2022). This framework serves as the analytical lens through which we examine AI adoption and capacity building in African MERL contexts.

The MAE framework challenges the "doomsday" and "crisis" narratives that position Africa as perpetually deficient, instead asserting African agency in knowledge production and evaluation design.

The MAE framework challenges the "doomsday" and "crisis" narratives that position Africa as perpetually deficient, instead asserting African agency in knowledge production and evaluation design. Made in Africa Evaluation has been gaining traction since 2007 and represents a decolonial and political stance by African evaluators and researchers protesting the imposition of Euro-American standards for measuring culturally sensitive programs in Africa. Chilisa et al. (2016) define this approach as requiring "African resistance from blindly borrowing Western values and standards" while promoting "evaluation tools, instruments, strategies, theories, and models to ensure relevancy in African settings" (p. 320). African-rooted evaluation encompasses "evaluation approaches, frameworks, methods, and tools that are informed by African philosophies, indigenous knowledge systems (IKS), cultural values, and worldviews" (Boadu, 2022, p. 4).

Fish (2022) identifies key characteristics including philosophical foundations grounded in Ubuntu, integration of oral traditions and storytelling, community participation throughout evaluation processes, decolonization of Western-centric practices, cultural responsiveness, and transformative goals addressing systemic injustices. These characteristics provide concrete criteria for value-based assessment of the alignment and appropriateness of AI tools and approaches.

Masvaure and Motlanthe (2022) extend this critique to the entire "carousel of international development," arguing that decolonized evaluation demands restructuring power relations across the complete development cycle. **MAE scholarship emphasizes that evaluation cannot be decolonized in isolation but requires transformation of underlying epistemological assumptions that govern knowledge production and validation. This systemic perspective is particularly relevant when examining and framing Made in Africa AI for MERL, as it requires us to consider not just the tools themselves but the power dynamics embedded in their development, deployment, and governance.**

For this study, we recognize that Made in Africa Evaluation comprises different frameworks, tools and approaches, underpinned by Ubuntu and other African philosophies. To use MAE as an analytical framework means we are seeking to identify how specific African-rooted tools and frameworks were applied or should be applied in the context of AI for MERL. This requires moving beyond simplified characterizations of MAE to articulate concrete, practical examples of what we mean when we refer to concepts like "participatory," "relational," or "culturally responsive" approaches—a need highlighted by critiques that MAE can be overly general or vague.

For instance, the integration of *lekgotla* as a model of discussion and decision-making as opposed to a Western-style focus group discussion exemplifies an MAE approach because it considers cultural norms and existing ways of engaging with information and co-creating solutions. Lekgotla is an ancient oral African Indigenous Knowledge System that continues to be practiced in various communities in South(ern) Africa. The process involves calling community members together to address a community concern, whether positive or negative, or to resolve a community problem. As Tsima (2018) notes, lekgotla is "a very useful method to provide a voice, recognition and power to the previously disadvantaged communities. Adopting it when conducting research, especially in rural communities will reduce hierarchical order that currently exists between researchers and participants." This is also fundamentally a relational approach in that it honors existing community structures and relationships through which knowledge is validated and decisions are made collectively.

Similarly, embedding *sankofa* in an evaluation approach by engaging with the past to understand the future through lines of questioning or storytelling represents another concrete application of MAE principles. "With its nonlinear representation of time and its salience for sociopolitical liberation frameworks (especially in the African diaspora), Sankofa has been framed as an 'Afrocentric methodological practice of historical recovery' (Karenga, 2001, p.14), which thus has an important foundational place among African epistemological concepts" (Asante and Archibald, 2023). These examples illustrate how MAE is not merely about stating commitment to African values, but about practically applying specific African-rooted methods and epistemologies in evaluation work.

We use MAE principles to examine whether AI tools and approaches reinforce or challenge existing power imbalances, whether they accommodate diverse ways of knowing and knowledge production, and whether they enable African practitioners to maintain agency and control over evaluation processes. Through this lens, **we aim to move beyond vague assertions about what Made in Africa AI for MERL might mean to articulate concrete characteristics and requirements grounded in specific, practitioner-led examples and definitions of how African-rooted evaluation frameworks could inform AI adoption, if relevant and desired, in MERL contexts.**

Relevance of Study

This research responds to a critical gap in understanding how AI can be developed and deployed in ways that serve African MERL priorities. As Shao (2024) argues, AI development in Africa follows a different trajectory from the Global North because of the need to develop unique AI ecosystems that address continent-specific socio-economic, geographic, and humanitarian challenges. This observation connects directly to our research questions about what makes AI tools appropriate and relevant for African contexts. This study contributes to both the evaluation literature and broader discussions of responsible AI development through providing structured, novel understanding of how MERL practitioners can effectively integrate AI in practice while maintaining local ownership and control. By grounding our investigation in the Made in Africa Evaluation framework and centering African practitioner perspectives, we offer insights that can inform more equitable and contextually appropriate approaches to AI adoption in MERL work.

4. Key Dimensions of AI Integration in African MERL

While global discourse emphasizes AI's potential to enhance evidence-informed decision-making, scholarship emerging from African contexts prioritizes grounding these technologies in local epistemologies, languages, and governance frameworks. **Rather than questioning whether African practitioners can adopt AI, the critical inquiry focuses on how AI might transform evaluation practice on African terms.**

Our literature review examined five key dimensions of AI integration in African MERL contexts outlined below: the technological evolution of MERL practice, evaluator competency requirements, decolonizing frameworks for AI governance, empirical evidence of AI contributions, and emerging benchmarking approaches.

The Evolution of AI in Monitoring, Evaluation, Research and Learning

Raftree (2020) describes three waves of MERL Tech: Wave 1 focused on digitization of traditional practices, Wave 2 introduced big data integration through IoT devices and satellites, and Wave 3 represents advanced AI integration that fundamentally transforms both methodology and the composition of MERL practitioners (see Figure 2).



Figure 2

Nielsen, Mazzeo Rinaldi, and Petersson (2024) argue that evaluators can no longer remain peripheral to AI developments, noting that emerging technologies will challenge evaluation practice by displacing some human tasks, facilitating others, and generating entirely new responsibilities such as drone operations and sensor data management.

African Context and Technological Adoption

Within these three waves, the African context reveals distinct dynamics. While the MERL Tech community generally comprises early adopters, many African practitioners demonstrate what Raftree (2020)

characterizes as resistance to "unquestioning adoption of technology and the 'techno-utopia'" prevalent in innovation spaces. **Rather than label those who resist as luddites, it is important to understand what underlies refusal and resistance.**

African Evaluator Competencies for AI Integration

The literature reveals substantial gaps in African evaluator competencies required for effective AI integration, operating across cultural, technical, institutional, and ethical dimensions. Research ICT Africa documents indicate that African higher education institutions lack adequately trained lecturers and researchers in AI, while public and private research funding remains insufficient (Sey & Mudongo, 2021). These challenges are compounded by limited infrastructure and poor representation of women and persons with disabilities in AI training pipelines.

Technical Competencies	Mazzeo Rinaldi and Nielsen (2024) propose a comprehensive framework emphasizing digital literacy as foundational, requiring evaluators to understand AI technologies, software, data analytics, and emerging technologies. Data analysis competencies encompass skills in collecting, analyzing, and interpreting data from new sources, including statistical analysis, data visualization, working with large datasets, and using AI tools such as machine learning algorithms, natural language processing, and predictive analytics.
Ethical Competencies	Ethical competencies receive particular emphasis in African contexts. Evaluators must understand ethical issues related to data privacy, security, bias, and responsible data handling (Greenstein & Cho, 2024). Adams et al (2025) highlight critical gaps in understanding AI system bias, with African populations systematically underrepresented in training datasets, introducing structural bias that undermines reliability for MERL applications.
Linguistic Competencies	CEIMIA (2024) notes that "Anglophone African countries have a notable advantage in AI adoption, partly due to their linguistic ties with global AI hubs," while "Francophone African countries have less access to AI-related resources in French" (p. 14). This creates systemic disadvantages for non-Anglophone communities and highlights the need for multilingual AI development.
Cultural Competencies	Cultural competencies are centrally positioned in the Made in Africa Evaluation scholarship, with scholars emphasizing the fundamental inadequacies of dominant evaluation frameworks to adequately respond to African epistemologies, worldviews, and community realities. Chilisa argues that evaluation must be contextualized and made culturally responsive to Africans because "knowledge and dominant Euro-Western paradigms in evaluation are based on Western culture." (Chilisa et al 2016)
Institutional Change Management	The literature emphasizes that competency development requires moving beyond individual skill acquisition to institutional transformation. Bayoh (2025) articulates this through principles of "Context before Code" and "Capacity before Commercialization," suggesting that organizational change management capabilities are as critical as technical coding skills.

Decolonizing AI: Made in Africa Approaches

An emerging school of thought challenges dominant AI development models through explicitly decolonizing approaches rooted in African epistemologies and values. Ayana and colleagues (2024) define

decolonizing AI governance as "the critical examination, restructuring and transformation of the policies, practices, and structures governing AI development, deployment, and regulation, with the aim of challenging colonial legacies, addressing systemic biases and centring diverse voices."

The concept of "Made in Africa AI for MERL" builds upon the "Made in Africa Evaluation" school of thought (Chilisa, 2019), drawing from African philosophies including Ubuntu, indigenous evaluation traditions, and Afro-feminist critiques. Ubuntu as a principle emphasizes relationality and communal well-being, countering Western individualist logics of privacy and consent.

Afro-feminist frameworks provide particularly sharp critique of dominant AI ethics discourses. Sinha and Zulfa (2023) highlight how **frameworks centered on "fairness, accountability, and transparency" often obscure deeper structural harms including exploitation of annotators, algorithmic colonialism, and data extractivism**. In their Afrofeminist AI Handbook, Sinha & Zulfa (2023) advocate for co-regulation, collective data rights, and governance frameworks rooted in Afrofeminist lived realities.

AI Contributions to MERL Practice

Empirical evidence of AI's contributions to African MERL contexts demonstrates both significant potential and important limitations. Applications span natural language processing for transcription, translation, and coding; AI-enhanced chatbots for program engagement; and predictive analytics for needs assessment. However, adoption remains uneven across regions, with significant disparities between countries with established AI strategies and those facing infrastructural constraints.

A practical example is the integration of generative AI into the Big Sis chatbot by Girl Effect to test how generative AI can improve sexual and reproductive health outcomes for girls (Amazon-Brown, 2025). Compared to a traditional classification-based system, the GenAI-enabled version significantly enhanced user engagement with key health messaging, increased access to service information, and fostered higher return usage, demonstrating the value of AI in strengthening digital interventions (Amazon-Brown, 2025). Natural language processing has enabled transcription, translation, and sentiment analysis, broadening inclusivity across multilingual contexts. Microsoft Africa (2023) reports successful AI-driven diagnostic support implementations, while GSMA (2024) highlights agricultural applications improving crop yields and resilience.

However, significant limitations persist. **AI systems struggle to explain why interventions work and the conditions necessary for continued success, essential considerations for evaluation practice that prioritizes understanding causal mechanisms and contextual factors (Bruce et al., 2024).** These explanatory gaps are particularly problematic within African evaluation traditions that emphasize relationality and Ubuntu principles.

Benchmarking and Good Practices

The literature reveals emerging consensus around good practices for implementing and evaluating AI when used for MERL, though standardized assessment frameworks remain underdeveloped. CEIMIA (2024) advances a comprehensive approach centered on three pillars: ethical AI principles adapted to African contexts, human-centered design prioritizing African values and needs, and continuous risk assessment addressing contextual harms.

Montrosse-Moorhead's (2023) evaluation criteria for the use of AI in evaluation provide operational benchmarks for assessing AI appropriateness, including design and implementation appropriateness, process efficiency, equity considerations, effectiveness compared to alternatives, stakeholder trust, methodological validity, transparency and understandability, and equity of resulting evidence.

Effective assessment of the use of AI for MERL requires multi-stakeholder collaboration involving African governments, international organizations, and development partners. This approach ensures participation by engaging diverse perspectives and stakeholders to align AI development with local context, specific needs, and cultural norms (CEIMIA, 2024). This collaboration should be rooted in community to foster trust and ownership of processes.

This assessment must extend beyond technical performance metrics to include justice-oriented indicators. Afro-feminist frameworks insist that readiness assessment must include data sovereignty, recognition of hidden labor, and agency of marginalized groups (Sinha & Zulfa, 2023).

Conclusion

The literature reveals that AI integration in African MERL systems operates at the intersection of technological possibility and the decolonizing imperative. While three waves of technological evolution, digitization, big data integration, and advanced AI, demonstrate progress, **African contexts demand approaches prioritizing epistemic sovereignty and community control alongside technical efficiency.**

Critical gaps operate across interconnected dimensions. Human evaluator competencies remain underdeveloped in technical skills, ethical understanding, and linguistic capacities, with Francophone practitioners particularly disadvantaged. These deficits reflect institutional challenges including inadequate training infrastructure and insufficient research funding. Simultaneously, AI systems exhibit fundamental limitations: algorithmic bias from underrepresented African populations in training datasets, infrastructure constraints, and epistemological inability to explain why interventions work, understanding central to African evaluation traditions emphasizing relationality and Ubuntu principles.

The emerging decolonizing paradigm, drawing from "Made in Africa Evaluation" traditions and Afro-feminist critiques, offers essential frameworks for building African-centered alternatives. By interrogating extractive data practices, exclusionary algorithms, and externally imposed governance structures, this approach resists technocolonialism while operationalizing ethical AI principles adapted to African contexts. **Evidence demonstrates AI's contributions through multilingual natural language processing, enhanced program engagement, and diagnostic and agricultural applications, yet realizing this potential requires critical implementation grounded in community priorities rather than techno-utopian narratives.**

While there has been some progress, for example, Collective Intelligence's open source Weval³ tool for evaluating AI models includes those in various languages; most current benchmarking frameworks remain underdeveloped for assessing AI appropriateness within African MERL contexts. Emerging good practices

³ See <https://weval.org/>

balance technical performance with justice-oriented indicators including data sovereignty, stakeholder trust, and agency of marginalized groups, requiring multi-stakeholder collaboration that fosters community ownership rather than top-down technology transfer.

Future research priorities should develop comparative evaluation methodologies across diverse African contexts, establish community-benefit frameworks for data governance preventing extractive practices, and create training programs integrating technical competencies with indigenous evaluation philosophies. Such research must center African scholars and communities as knowledge producers.

5. Practitioner perspectives on AI for MERL

Having explored how the literature theoretically frames Made in Africa Evaluation and its role in shaping approaches to technology and unpacked the waves of technological transformation and integration in MERL, we now turn to examine how these concepts manifest in the practical realities facing MERL practitioners across the African continent. The following analysis draws from key informant interviews (KIIs) conducted with civil society organizations, AI experts, and members of the AI in Africa Working Group to understand the lived experiences, challenges, and opportunities they encounter while navigating the integration, adoption and understanding of AI for MERL

a) Knowledge and capacity gaps

To strengthen MERL practice in Africa and ensure that any use of AI serves rather than undermines locally-driven evidence generation and use, practitioners require comprehensive capacity development. We found that **knowledge and capacity gaps manifest across multiple dimensions, creating systemic barriers that extend beyond simple individual technical skills to encompass infrastructure limitations, data governance challenges, policy framework inadequacies, and cultural misalignments.**

Africa's position in technology development raises critical questions about whose purposes AI tools ultimately serve and what problems they are designed to solve. As one AI expert observed, "the continent is largely AI deployers and not developers",⁴ positioning Africa as predominantly consumers rather than creators of AI solutions. This is reinforced by significant formal training gaps, with participants noting that "very few have formal training [in AI evolution and social impacts]; we in the evaluation [sector] are just getting used to AI",⁵ suggesting that the intersection of AI technical knowledge and MERL expertise remains underdeveloped. Educational institutions appear inadequately equipped to address these gaps: "I am still [questioning] maybe people that we have coming from universities when it comes to their AI acumen. I think I have questions around their knowledge of machine learning [and] data visualization and just leveraging AI".⁶

The lack of African language support infrastructure further undermines efforts to build capacity in the MERL sector. **While small and open-source language models could help address these needs, progress is hindered by fragmented, non-African-centric regulatory frameworks that external actors readily exploit in the absence of a unified continental policy voice.**⁷ This policy gap extends beyond regulatory absence to insufficient institutional commitment. While there may be "government buy-in because [AI] started to be everywhere," there remains a lack of "policy frameworks that adopt and integrate use of AI" with

⁴ KII Participant 11, Civil Society Organization.

⁵ KII Participant 9, MERL Practitioner, AI in Africa Working Group Member.

⁶ KII Participant 12, MERL Practitioner, AI in Africa Working Group Member.

⁷ KII Participant 7, MERL Practitioner, AI in Africa Working Group Member

actionable implementation strategies.⁸ The disconnect between policy development and implementation is problematic: "it's so easy to draft a policy in a day and a night. You can have the policy paper and also have an action plan. But implementing and enacting this action plan is completely different".⁹

Data governance is often narrowly equated with data protection, yet critical issues such as data quality and accuracy remain neglected. As KII Participant 13 noted:



"If you look at questions around data quality and accuracy, we see a lot of our data is not cleaned up, accurate, efficient in a way that you'd be able to use it with the trade models and even models that have been trained on some of this data have very negative outcomes. We've seen it in Kenya with how social health insurance scoring and even higher education loan scoring is data that we suspect the quality was not as good."

(KII Participant 13, Civil Society)

The prevalence of unclean and unreliable datasets not only limits their usability but also contributes to harmful outcomes when embedded into AI models.

Organizational and individual-level barriers identified by interviewees include resistance to change and inadequate understanding of AI applications: "AI, for most people, is novel knowledge so they feel that AI is just some kind of abstract knowledge. Some sectors think AI is coming to take away their jobs not knowing that that's probably what can be leveraged upon to make MERL activities easy as well".¹⁰ This resistance is influenced by limited understanding of AI's potential applications: "for many people AI is just used for writing, for reports, for emails, but they don't know that it can be a huge brainstorming tool, and it can be a great tool to manage content to enhance messaging and enhance creativity".¹¹

The evaluation community's approach to AI adoption appears cautious, or at times bordering on uninformed. One interviewee described it as "hopping on to this train without even interrogating the implications. And I don't know if this is based on the fear of being left out or it's just us not really paying attention to what needs to happen in the evaluation context itself".¹²

This interconnectedness suggests that addressing any single capacity gap requires holistic interventions that simultaneously address technical skills, infrastructure development, policy formation, and cultural adaptation. There is a shortage of skills, but those skills do not exist in a vacuum. This is further exacerbated by the lack of the right connections being made between AI technical experts and MERL practitioners, indicating that solutions require not only capacity building but also improved coordination and knowledge sharing mechanisms. These complexities validate the premise that effective AI for MERL in Africa necessitates approaches that prioritize localized development, cultural sensitivity, and contextual relevance over Global North technology transfer models that have proven inadequate in addressing Africa's needs.

⁸ KII Participant 5, AI in Africa Working Group Member.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ KII Participant 10, MERL Practitioner, AI in Africa Working Group Member.

¹¹ KII Participant 5.

¹² KII Participant 14, MERL Practitioner, AI in Africa Working Group Member.

b) Barriers to AI adoption for MERL in African contexts

Our findings reveal multi-layered barriers impeding AI integration within African MERL contexts, extending beyond technical capacity to encompass infrastructure, institutional, and contextual dimensions. Digitalization, described by participants as an "entry point to AI adoption," emerged as a foundational challenge. **With MERL digitalization lagging across Africa, a cascading effect occurs where infrastructure gaps intensify AI integration challenges.**

MERL practitioners require enhanced understanding of artificial intelligence functionality, algorithmic processes, data collection methods, and the interaction between algorithms, data, and outputs. As one expert noted:



"There is a range of skills and evaluation competencies that evaluators need to develop. In addition to fundamental technical foundations of evaluation, evaluators increasingly need to expand their toolkit to address complex challenges—AI being one of them."

(KII Participant 3, MERL Sector Expert, Personal Communication, 2025)

The interviews revealed concerning institutional adoption patterns, particularly within government sectors that demonstrate minimal engagement with AI tools despite policy-level discussions. One participant observed, "governments focus on service delivery; they don't really prioritize efficiency".¹³

Current frameworks require revision to develop more contextually appropriate evaluation approaches for the AI era. Participants emphasized this gap:



"Current indicators and data structures do not address our unique requirements but speak to global goals like the SDGs. While we cannot reinvent the wheel, we should be bold enough to identify data indicators that reflect our realities. When we build AI systems—which depend on data—they must speak to our unique contexts."

(KII Participant 15, MERL Practitioner, AI in Africa Working Group Member, Personal Communication, 2025)

MERL practitioners recognize that AI systems reproduce existing inequalities, acknowledging their responsibility in addressing these concerns:



"There's substantial evidence showing the inequalities, systemic biases, and extractive systems involved. With AI, we cannot look the other way or bury our heads in the sand. AI exhibits the full spectrum of bias and inequality. As evaluators, we cannot address only one dimension while ignoring others."

¹³ KII Participant 11, Civil Society Representative, Personal Communication, 2025.

(KII Participant 14, MERL Practitioner, Personal Communication, 2025).

c) Defining Made in Africa AI

A Made in Africa AI approach in MERL, as first defined by Matimba (2025) is rooted in community-driven, participatory methods that prioritize indigenous definitions of success, rather than relying on Western-centric, colonial metrics. In conversation with our research participants, the concept of Made in Africa AI for MERL emerges as a multidimensional framework that transcends technical specifications to embody decolonial aspirations and contextual imperatives.



"It would be very localized. When we say 'made in Africa', we mean efforts that are responsive and nuanced towards the African context, as unique and as diverse as it is, recognizing that there are significant capacity gaps, human capacity gaps. It wouldn't be 'made in Africa' if it doesn't recognize that only one-third of the continent is actually online. 'Made in Africa AI' would definitely have to be cognizant of those gaps as well as opportunities"

(KII Participant 8, Civil Society Representative, Personal Communication, 2025).

As a movement, Made in Africa Evaluation represents an effort to resist the epistemological hegemony of Western evaluation frameworks while constructing alternative systems that foreground African values and agency in global development evaluation (Masvaure & Motlanthe, 2022). Decoloniality is central to this emerging framework:



"It shouldn't be subsumed or consumed by the notion of producing skills that can just be used by the West to further their progress to sort of be a contributor and leverage further progress in the West. How do we use these new technologies, new tools, new ways of thinking to support the transformation that's needed for Africa? I'm scared that we're going to be stuck with creating training courses for people just to become better evaluators – to produce more evidence for others to use – rather than for Africa's own progress"

(KII Participant 3, MERL Sector Expert, Personal Communication, 2025).

In alignment with this vision, Made in Africa AI for MERL emphasizes the intentional development, design, and use of AI in ways that originate from, are accountable to, and serve African communities. Respondents demonstrated consensus around participatory approaches in Fish's (2022) theoretical framework, which highlights decolonization, participation, cultural relevance, and transformation as central to the Made in Africa AI approach. They emphasized alignment with Ubuntu principles, which prioritize human-centered design and emphasize fairness, transparency, accountability, and ethics:



"I'd think through how we have AI and MERL systems that are designed with our cultural context, our African values which, of course, is always debated. What is an African value? But AI designed in this way would mean that in the spirit of accountability and transparency, we engage the people we work with, communities understand what we are trying to work on so that they help in either the design, development, and deployment of some of these AI solutions"

(KII Participant 13, Civil Society Representative, Personal Communication, 2025).

The centrality of African language representation and data sovereignty emerged as fundamental to Made in Africa AI as well as acknowledgment of Africa's linguistic diversity and cultural complexity:



"What really makes Made in Africa AI as an approach—it's about a lot of decoloniality. There are a lot of participatory approaches. So the tools should come from Africa. The tools should be African because of African datasets, African information"

(KII Participant 17, MERL Practitioner, AI in Africa Working Group Member, Personal Communication, 2025).



"An African-rooted AI approach would be contextual and community design-centered. Our voices must shape the AI tools that are developed and used in MERL methods and embrace data sources from community feedback to traditional knowledge, to support multiple African languages".

(KII Participant 9, AI in Africa Working Group Member, Personal Communication, 2025).

Participants emphasized avoiding repetition of colonial harms through new technology adoptions. As one interviewee argued, Made in Africa AI must understand language patterns and accommodate different cultures and backgrounds while remaining sustainably viable beyond external funding dependencies.¹⁴

However, tensions in the framing were apparent. **Our findings exposed significant conceptual questions regarding continental adoption coherence versus localized specificity, with some participants questioning whether "Made in Africa" oversimplifies the continent's needs, given Africa's 54 countries with distinct cultural and linguistic variances.** A notable dissenting perspective challenges the premise of African exceptionalism:

¹⁴ KII Participant 12.



"There's a kind of framing that I'm not a huge fan of, which is that things in Africa need to be different. I think that's often positioned in a way that almost implies that Africa needs to justify what it does as opposed to the rest of the world, which is like, 'oh, we can just do more. But Africa has to do special African MERL in AI,' and I tend to reject that framing. People will say, 'oh, wow, you're doing AI in Africa, that's really cool,' and then inevitably the question is: What's the African angle on AI? Having to justify your angle is almost relegating you to a second tier of people thinking about this. To some extent, 'What's the African angle on this' it's important, and we need these things. We need our people to be working on it as well because we're not just happy to only consume things developed elsewhere. I mean, if the thing developed elsewhere is good enough for what we need, we'll use it, but if it's not, then we should be driving the discussions as well".

(KII Participant 18, NLP Developer, AI Africa Expert, Personal Communication, 2025).

Ultimately, Made in Africa AI for MERL represents an Afrocentric model with ownership from the communities it intends to support, where beneficiaries have direct involvement in leading and designing frameworks and indicators that reflect indigenous African perspectives.

d) Language exclusion and erasure

This research interrogated the appropriateness of AI tools that MERL practitioners use for evidence-informed decision making. The findings reveal that weak language resources, rather than model choice alone, constrain AI utility for MERL in African contexts. The exclusion of African languages from AI datasets risks creating a compounding silence in evidence systems, where communities become invisible because their languages are not represented. AI tools function effectively only when trained on data that reflect the realities and languages of the people they serve. Yet such data are often missing, poorly structured, or scattered across multiple sources. Without proper collection and curation, these languages remain absent from systems that drive decision-making.



"In natural language processing, [we need to have] datasets that are in languages that are specific to the problem that the system is trying to solve. If it's an education system, it's datasets that can be trained to respond to an education problem. Those datasets are missing."

(KII Participant 16, Africa AI Expert, Personal Communication, 2025)

Beyond the scarcity of datasets themselves, translation challenges further complicate this landscape, as key technical terms especially in health and education lack reliable equivalents in African languages. This gap reinforces dependence on colonial languages:



"The more we can build some of these tools, the more it will make the use of artificial intelligence in this part of the world more unique to our cultural values... I was trying to translate one or a few technical words in SRHR [Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights] into Yoruba and other Nigerian languages. It was very difficult. Even the translator tool [that we developed] could not perform very well, because our languages are not easily available for them to interpret. But if you want to translate something from English to French, or from English to Portuguese, or from English to Spanish, they have apparently almost everything for it seamlessly, and even to Chinese and other languages.."

(KII Participant 19, NLP Developer, AI in Africa Working Group, Personal Communication, 2025)

This asymmetry creates a practical dilemma for practitioners navigating multilingual African contexts, however, and some potential concerns about fragmentation considering that across the continent, colonial languages tend to be used for professional communications:



"We have our own languages. Unfortunately, we can't all speak them. I mean, we won't understand each other if we have to come to the table with our own local languages. So for me, it's about how do we go about this without really reinforcing the very cycle that we're trying to run away from."

(KII Participant 14, MERL Practitioner, Personal Communication, 2025)

African initiatives including Data Science Nigeria, Data Science for Social Impact (DSUP), Masakhane, Lelapa AI and EqualyzAI are leading efforts to systematically include African languages in AI data and models. Yet for MERL practitioners, donor-imposed language requirements persist, with M&E processes ultimately reported in English, French or Portuguese. As noted in an article discussing the absence of African languages from the internet, "When a language isn't in the data, its speakers aren't in the product, and AI cannot be safe, useful or fair for them. They end up missing the necessary language technology tools that could support service delivery. This marginalises millions of people and increases the technology divide" (Marivate et al., 2025). The strides being made by natural language processing developers in Africa need to correspond with efforts to loosen the tensions of colonial language dependence in MERL processes.

e) Afrocentric AI regulation and Digital Public Infrastructure investment

Africa's path toward locally developed, contextually relevant AI solutions for MERL requires both protective regulation and strategic investment in digital public infrastructure. Current AI policies across the continent focus heavily on protecting citizens from potential harms such as privacy violations, surveillance, and consumer rights. Although these protective measures are necessary, the policies fail to actively support the people and communities seeking to build AI solutions for Africa.



"A lot of governments have policies that are looking at AI... [but they don't] speak to how they can really harness those communities within the country who are in the know.... The rules to protect privacy, to protect against surveillance, the rules like consumer rights, those rules are important. But the other part also – it is important to make sure that small communities have the funding for whatever they want to invent, innovate. "

(KII Participant 16, AI Africa Expert, Personal Communication, 2025)

This regulatory-innovation disconnect manifests in concrete ways. Current approaches treat AI as a technology to be controlled rather than as a development tool requiring nurturing and support for community-driven applications. Regulations designed primarily for large technology companies inadvertently create barriers for small communities, startups, and research institutions—the very innovators who could develop solutions for local challenges. Policies regulate AI deployment without supporting the research, development, and testing phases crucial for building local capabilities that serve African priorities rather than extractive interests. **The result is that Africa may develop strong AI governance rules but few African-made AI systems to govern.**

Regulatory unpredictability compounds these challenges, with Africa described as an "undecided market" where shifting or fragmented rules discourage long-term investment. Africa increasingly functions as a single digital market, yet AI regulations remain fragmented across countries:



"Looking at the nature of investment that has to be made for AI, it becomes very difficult for someone to invest in a very undecided market or a market that has no predictability, because I don't know if the laws will change tomorrow and negatively affect my business. That's a huge thing that needs to be sorted out on the African continent. And then, a lot of the conversations are at a continental level, so how do we marry the crop of countries that have far advanced into developing their AI strategies, some of them even contemplating laws, and those that have not? Because we are more or less a single market. Digitally now, and increasingly, we are becoming that. Without clear continental regulations or frameworks, it becomes very difficult for those deployers..."

(KII Participant 13, Civil Society Representative, Personal Communication, 2025)

Regulation must also tackle data sovereignty while avoiding isolation. African countries rightfully demand control over their data given historical resource extraction, yet sovereignty should enable responsible sharing according to community-defined protocols that support innovation and public-interest uses serving African priorities. Afrocentric regulation must protect citizens while creating enabling pathways through sandboxes, grants, and public procurement of local AI solutions demonstrating accountability to affected communities.

Beyond regulatory reform, infrastructural deficits represent critical barriers. Africa lacks basic technological foundations needed to develop, train, and deploy AI systems effectively. The shortage of data centers

where AI models are trained has far-reaching implications. Training sophisticated AI models requires enormous computational resources, yet data centers carry significant environmental costs—massive energy and water consumption, electronic waste, and potential health impacts on surrounding communities through noise, heat, and electromagnetic radiation.

The scale of investment required is enormous. When major technology companies invest in African data center infrastructure, investments often run into billions for single facilities. As one participant noted regarding Microsoft's investment in Kenya¹⁵, such facilities represent investments of "probably 1 billion dollars", but "Kenya cannot actually utilize a 1 billion data center on its own."¹⁶

This highlights key challenges: the mismatch between infrastructure scale and individual countries' capacity, and fundamental questions about whether foreign corporations should control critical digital infrastructure or whether African institutions should develop infrastructure under public ownership and community governance models. Such collaboration must address difficult questions: Should digital infrastructure be treated as a public good? What environmental standards and health protections are required? How can infrastructure development avoid patterns where foreign corporations control critical resources? What mechanisms ensure infrastructure serves locally-defined priorities rather than extractive interests?

These investments are deeply political, determining whether Africa will be a passive consumer of imported AI systems or an active producer of solutions grounded in its contexts and governed according to African values. For AI-enabled MERL, strengthening digital public infrastructure under models prioritizing public ownership, environmental sustainability, and community accountability is critical to making evidence generation timely, lawful, cost-effective, and oriented toward African-defined priorities.

f) Suitability of AI tools for MERL in Africa

A critical disconnect exists between the promise of AI-enabled MERL tools and their actual performance in African contexts. MERL practitioners consistently report difficulty retrieving Africa-relevant evidence, even when such research demonstrably exists. Practitioners are forced to add precise country or regional identifiers to obtain marginally relevant results, a strategy that yields limited success.



"They still tell you every time you have to go in and really specify. Give me something South African. Give me something Zimbabwean, or give me something African, and sometimes it still doesn't get it right. Maybe this is because a lot of our data as Africans is not available where AI goes to find it to pull it in. But yeah, I think it's not [equipped]."

(KII Participant 17, AI in Africa Working Group Member, Personal Communication 2025)

¹⁵ See <https://news.microsoft.com/source/2024/05/22/microsoft-and-g42-announce-1-billion-comprehensive-digital-ecosystem-initiative-for-kenya/>

¹⁶ KII Participant 13, Civil Society Representative..



"When you ask specifically, 'Can you find me any literature on research particular[ly] in Africa[?]' It doesn't come up at all. Despite the fact that the research is not as much as the West, it should come up because it should be representational....But it's not there at all."

(KII Participant 20, AI in Africa Working Group Member, Personal Communication 2025)

These experiences reflect inadequacies in AI tools used by African MERL practitioners, revealing the ingrained systemic privilege of data-rich Western contexts that deprioritize and invisibilize African realities. The structural roots of this problem lie in the composition of datasets powering these tools. When exported to Africa with the intent to enhance sectors such as agriculture, these tools instead produce compromised data quality and create capacity constraints in data storage and processing, resulting in erroneous conclusions.



"The jury is still out on these.... We struggled with capacity in terms of storage of data, because you need maybe some data warehouses that are big. You also need lots of data to actually effectively train this. These applications actually end up getting more data from other countries where our climate isn't as similar. For us, it then takes time to train these models with our own plants or crops. It means that in the meantime you'll be getting wrong conclusions or evaluations. That cuts across all sectors in terms of data, whether it's health or mining, whatever sector. For now, our AI models tend to struggle in Africa because we don't have sufficient data that we can use".

(KII Participant 12, MERL Practitioner, AI in Africa Working Group Member, Personal Communication 2025)

Furthermore, participants expressed concern that current market tools predominantly come from international Global North providers that draw from diluted, non-African data sources. This dynamic demonstrates how current AI tools may actively undermine efforts to develop contextually appropriate MERL approaches.



"...Whatever has been fed into it before is not from the African perspective. Even when I ask for frameworks, for example, give me a framework of a business model for something... obviously, it's going to draw what's existing, you know, at your Harvards and your big international multinational companies, and so forth. That's not going to be African related. If I want to design a course or a training program that's specifically related to the African context, I will have to draw on more traditional sources."

(KII Participant 3, MERL Sector Expert Personal Communication, 2025)

AI models and tools are not neutral instruments but are fundamentally shaped by their training data. When African voices, perspectives, and epistemologies are absent from these datasets, the tools reproduce Global North paradigms at the expense of African realities.

g) The extractive nature of AI

The findings revealed the need for a human rights intersectional approach when framing Made in Africa AI for MERL. Participants repeatedly emphasized the necessity of centering climate and its impact on human rights, while expressing concerns about the environmental and social impacts of AI in Africa. The extractive nature of current AI development trajectories particularly regarding natural resource extraction and conflict perpetuation in Africa, especially in the Democratic Republic of Congo and labor exploitation in the global AI supply chain cannot be emphasized enough.

In framing Made in Africa AI, conventional capacity-building approaches that focus primarily on technical skill development prove inadequate. There is a need to articulate deeper structural concerns about the extractive nature of AI development, particularly emphasizing the environmental costs of energy-intensive data centers, computational processes and the exploitation of resources from conflict-affected regions.

One participant described an "AI related knowledge gap" related to resource use, noting that while AI uses exorbitant amounts of resources, "the solutions that people are proposing aren't necessarily including people at the bottom of the tech pipeline. You know I think about the cobalt, in the Congo. I think about mining, about energy. And I think about all these things. And I think that as we are pushing AI forward, we're not really having the conversations about the implications that it has for the environment, and that, I think, is a large gap in the MERL sector."¹⁷

AI is embedded within global power structures that perpetuate colonial extractive relationships, challenging the mainstream assumption that AI adoption represents an unqualified benefit for African MERL practitioners. Participants demonstrated awareness of AI's environmental implications, with one respondent directly challenging narratives that position digital technologies as dematerialized solutions:



"The first step that we need to take as African evaluators and the evaluation community is understanding that we are complicit in the extractive system, right? AI is not weightless. It actually has a lot of weight. The hardware that carries the language models that we want to use in evaluation are coming from zones of conflicts. Some of them coming from where I am in the DRC! And there are a lot of human rights violations in terms of digging the minerals that are powering these language models. You have to look at the labor that is involved in this. You have to realize that there's actually a lot of extractivism happening"

(KII Participant 14, AI in Africa Working Group Member, Personal Communication, 2025).

¹⁷ KII Participant 21, AI in Africa Working Group Member

Tension between complicity and agency emerges clearly, as MERL practitioners acknowledge their embeddedness within extractive systems while simultaneously asserting their capacity for ethical positioning. What emerges as an urgent need for African MERL practitioners is the transition from complexity to accountability in framing Made in Africa AI.

Made in Africa AI is not exempt from the power imbalances that exist in the global AI race. There is a need for intentional consciousness in understanding the correlation between infrastructural limitations resulting from Africa feeding the global AI supply chain and ongoing patterns of resource extraction from the African continent.



"I think there's a variety of different gaps. Maybe just to frame it, starting with the tech itself and the infrastructure gaps and the energy requirements and all of the investment required to even come close to what some of the large commercial actors are doing in developed countries – the big gang of 5 – I think is one material element. When you unpack that, the energy infrastructure is probably one of the biggest items that, to me, is of concern that could accelerate the gap. I think there are tremendous gaps, risks, concerns in data extraction, large actors coming in taking the actual data away"

(KII Participant 7, AI in Africa Working Group Member, Personal Communication, 2025).

The sentiments across all participants align with decolonial approaches to technology that emphasize the importance of interrogating power relations embedded within ostensibly neutral technical systems. Made in Africa AI integration into MERL contexts requires reconsideration of technological adoption frameworks, moving beyond conventional capacity development to address questions of sovereignty, environmental justice, and ethical positioning within global AI ecosystems.

h) Potential risks, harms, or downsides of AI for MERL in Africa

The integration of AI into MERL practice across Africa faces structural challenges that extend beyond technical limitations to encompass cultural, economic, and democratic concerns. Respondent input reveals four interconnected risks for AI in African MERL: misaligned systems, weak governance, extractive data practices, and operational fragility.

Participants consistently identified cultural bias as the most pressing risk, arguing that current AI systems are designed primarily for Western contexts and fail to adequately represent African languages, cultures, and social dynamics. The most pervasive concern relates to the fundamental cultural and contextual bias embedded within existing AI tools, with participants problematizing the data underlying current systems. Many tools are trained on non-African data and assumptions, which nudges evaluators toward imported theories and undermines the authentic framing of a Made in Africa approach.



"AI is not using our data. A lot of what you get is feedback based on Western cultures, Western nuances, Asian nuances. That's a big risk. Especially if you're talking about 'Made in Africa Evaluation', you end up gravitating towards those theories, evaluation theories and approaches that are already set, and from the west or from other places. We lose the Made in Africa because we need a tool to use, and the only tool available or the only tools available are not made by Africans for Africans, specifically."

(KII Participant 17, MERL Practitioner, AI in Africa Working Group Member, Personal Communication, 2025)

This cultural misalignment extends beyond simple representation issues to reveal deeper epistemological concerns, necessitating constant refinement of prompts to achieve culturally appropriate outputs. The misalignment not only threatens to dilute Afrocentric evaluation approaches but also perpetuates cultural invisibility, particularly when systems fail to recognize African languages, contexts, or identities.



"It doesn't even understand African nuance. It doesn't understand culture. It doesn't understand the black color. So you have to keep rephrasing or refining your prompts to get that. For me, that's the concern: bias in terms of understanding the African context and culture."

(KII Participant 1, AI in Africa Working Group Member, Personal Communication, 2025)

AI is often used informally and without validation, with privacy and quality assurance left to individuals. This poses risks of over-reliance, especially among youth, potentially leading to deskilling and uncritical evidence use.



"The huge risk for me is the over dependence on AI which we have seen in some workplaces. Young people overuse [it] for research without validating... to craft messages and also write whatever they need to write. Which again, doesn't help our own intelligence as humans."

(KII Participant 1, AI in Africa Working Group Member, Personal Communication, 2025)

"This idea of bias and western context is also, again, risking the dangers of over reliance on AI as a support and research tool, data sensitivity, data, confidentiality and privacy rights."

(KII Participant 6, AI in Africa Working Group Member, Personal Communication, 2025)

Perhaps the most pressing concern relates to data ownership and commercialization dynamics. While African researchers and communities generate vast amounts of language data, funders often mandate open

licenses with no restrictions, enabling external actors to commercialize datasets and sell products back to African governments. This creates a gap between local data collection and external model development, combined with open-license mandates that enable appropriation of African language datasets and re-sale of derived tools to African governments, shifting costs to the public while limiting sovereignty.

Participants described a pattern where African data is extracted through open licensing requirements, only to be commercialized by external entities who then sell AI products back to African governments and organizations at premium prices. This extractive cycle undermines African data sovereignty and positions Africa as a consumer rather than co-creator in AI innovation, creating a neo-colonial dynamic that undermines local economic development while perpetuating dependency on foreign technology providers exploiting the very data that Africans generate openly.



"Most immediate harm that I can see is in the collection of data that would be used to come up with algorithms and models. We are collecting a lot of data... those who are funding the collection of these language datasets are saying that they must be shared under open licenses. Without any requirements as to who can commercialize or use the data sets, which means that we are essentially giving up valuable data for others who are fast movers in the market to develop, only for them to turn around and sell those to us at a premium price... African languages are only spoken by Africans... Somebody is going to develop the tool and sell it back to our governments in order for us to have access... Our taxpayer money is what we'll pay for access to those tools. Yet we have lent our very voices into it."

(KII Participant 2, Civil Society Representative, Personal Communication, 2025)

This exploitation pattern further aggravates the systematic exclusion of marginalized populations from both AI development processes and training datasets. Participants noted that inclusive data collection is prohibitively expensive, resulting in datasets that predominantly represent privileged demographics. Cost pressures mean that datasets often over-represent urban, younger, and male populations, leaving women, elders, and rural groups unaccounted for.



"One of the risks is bias because of the data that is used... Collecting inclusive data is more expensive... Data will be left out because it's just expensive... We collected voice data and then realized we just collected data from men or from people aged between 18 and 40. If I want to collect data on women who are above 65, there's a deliberateness around it and it costs money. The bias would be that they are left out of the data collection, so they are not represented in the tech."

(KII Participant 22, AI Africa Expert, Personal Communication, 2025)

The growing use of AI also potentially impacts participatory approaches, particularly youth involvement in shaping the technology they will inherit. Young Africans, who comprise more than half of the continent's population, are often excluded from setting the terms of AI use in MERL. This creates intergenerational risks, where today's decisions lock young people into futures shaped by imported tools and external priorities.



"If we talk about AI for MERL, and who sets the terms... of MERL? Young people are not part of setting those terms. The world population median is 30.9 years, so there's 50% of the population who's less than 30, and Africa has the largest population of young people... It creates huge risks and it also impacts them obviously because it's the legacy that is set to their own failure basically."

(KII Participant 7, AI in Africa Working Group Member, Personal Communication, 2025)

These risks suggest that without deliberate intervention to prioritize local ownership and cultural relevance, AI expansion in African MERL contexts may inadvertently reinforce inequalities, ultimately undermining the principles that motivate the Made in Africa approach to evaluation and evidence-informed decision-making.



"From what I've managed to understand regarding these things from a theoretical point of view, there are issues... [with how AI models] can to some extent promote inequality. And they can also reinforce the issue of dependence on Western models."

(KII Participant 23, AI in Africa Working Group Member, Personal Communication, 2025)

i) Collaboration and sustaining growth of a Made in Africa AI for MERL movement

Four coherent requirements emerged for collaborating and growing the Made in Africa AI movement among MERL practitioners. These requirements are categorized as follows:

Multistakeholder Networks

The analysis reveals that sustainable collaboration within the African AI in MERL movement fundamentally depends on establishing comprehensive multistakeholder networks. These networks ensure broad-based, contextually grounded collaboration, with respondents emphasizing the necessity of inclusive approaches that avoid siloed AI integration efforts.



"We must carry all stakeholders along. We must not walk in silos. We need to also escalate that in this our advancing sustainable collaboration for AI enabled MERL in Africa having more stakeholder networks, build consortia with universities, grassroots organizations, local government areas and tech hubs to collaborate in contextual solutions.... and this can only be achieved if we build networks with different stakeholder universities, collaborate with them to ensure that we integrate context cultural awareness and context awareness into any solution we are bringing on board."

(KII Participant 9, AI in Africa Working Group Member, Personal Communication 2025)

However, multistakeholder network approaches must balance aspirational collaboration with practical implementation realities. Power imbalances within these networks can undermine collaborative sustainability when local expertise is extracted without reciprocal benefit or recognition.



"I think the kind of collaboration that would help would be for practitioners and academics to really form a genuine engagement and funding of academics and practitioners to show interest.Should you create scenarios where their work can be researched in project or research agendas for universities not for camera ops, but for genuine impact. To take their work to academics and say, look do research on this as against, doing research on abstract academics, doing research on abstract things that do not serve our environment..."

(KII Participant 15, AI in Africa Working Group Member, Personal Communication 2025)



"Supporters of this dream should support interventions that give room for exploring new frontiers within Africa, and what can be done beyond just adapting or translating or customizing, or to genuinely, organically build things out of Africa. The kind of collaboration we also have in MERL Tech that is genuinely and empowering collaboration as well. There's some collaboration I see on the Continent that is so heartbreaking. People come and pick your brains. At the end of the day you just see all the ideas they took from you in these international NGOs, and you are not acknowledged, which makes it tiring to continuously support."

(KII Participant 15, AI in Africa Working Group Member, Personal Communication 2025)

The growth and sustainability of the Made in Africa AI for MERL movement requires more than mere inclusion, it demands meaningful participation where African voices maintain agency in collaborative processes. These perspectives highlight that diverse, structured networks form the backbone of a Made-in-Africa AI in MERL movement.

Capacity Development

Capacity development emerged as a recurring theme, encompassing AI literacy, ethical practice, and technical knowledge transfer. Consensus emerged around locally rooted capacity development and audience prioritization as pillars for sustainable collaboration.



"A peer learning ecosystem whereby we are using networks of already existing organizations, like AFReA, SAMEA, then this other M&E Association so that you can then, if some kind of enabling close country sharing of tools, and a cross pollination of ideas as well. Another most important thing is to do capacity building both from those practitioners in other beneficiaries that are directly affected by this process in terms of AI literacy, and also issue of ethical AI use and data governance."

(KII Participant 23, AI in Africa Working Group Member, Personal Communication 2025)

Respondents insisted that effective capacity development training must emerge from existing capacities within the MERL sector and adopt intergenerational and intersectional approaches.



"We need mainly a capacity building between us and also information sharing networks. Who would we get these training from? I think the best way.it's people inside the network....[to] conduct those training."

(KII Participant 4, AI in Africa Working Group Member, Personal Communication 2025)



"...to expand that to helping communities understand, helping young people understand the downside and the good side as well. I think we need to open this space to more young people in universities having a collective in those spaces....We need to find ways to incorporate them...in all of these conversations we're having beyond the regular people who stay in the space like professionals, but again building and expanding that to them give us more more chance and opportunity to help young people understand and view them into the networks and coalitions we have around"

(KII Participant 1, AI in Africa Working Group Member, Personal Communication 2025)

This intersectional and intergenerational approach must create space for vulnerability, acknowledging differentiated entry points in technology literacy and adoption.



"I think the hubs obviously are the strongest point of convergence for all of us in evaluation, that's where a lot of community building is happening. When it comes to AI, people like myself – I feel like I don't know enough, so I can't engage at the level where other people are further along in the journey. There needs to be spaces created for that, a space for the vulnerability of being able to say, 'Look, I don't really know that much about this. Can you tell me what you know? It's about getting evaluators engaged in the conversation in that community of practice, building different levels. I think, in community building and in building knowledge around this, there needs to be a creation of spaces for people at different levels to engage and for it to be made part of the mainstream of evaluation practice and evaluation education."

(KII Participant 3, MERL Sector Expert Personal Communication, 2025)

Capacity development for Made in Africa AI for MERL hinges on peer-to-peer learning mechanisms that address current practitioner needs and future pipeline development through educational institution engagement. Sustainable collaboration requires intentional design of multiple entry points and participation mechanisms that accommodate diverse expertise levels and learning preferences.

Infrastructure Development

Sustaining collaboration requires tangible infrastructure including digital platforms, guidelines, and physical convenings.

One respondent adopted an optimistic perspective, suggesting that "building a platform. These platforms just to be clear. They're not that hard like... maybe that's something that we could do... I just feel like there's probably some really good techies around".¹⁸ However, another respondent cautioned that without financial infrastructure to scale, such outputs risk remaining symbolic, arguing: "being able to articulate the economic returns is now more critical than ever... otherwise it... won't be deployed at scale".¹⁹ Innovation-focused infrastructure development was positioned as a pathway toward collaborative technical development that leverages African data and contextual knowledge while acknowledging technical skill limitations among some participants.



"I think what we have so far is a good start. Virtual [collaboration] works, because it's cheap and you can connect with so many people. But once in a while you need physical. You connect better with people, and you collaborate better when you once in a while can have that.... I'm not a geek [but] the geeks maybe can be encouraged to do a hackathon where they are coming up with things that use African information or African data. And for this made for Africa would be very useful."

(KII Participant 17, AI in Africa Working Group Member, Personal Communication 2025)

¹⁸ KII Participant 6.

¹⁹ KII Participant 7.

Language for Inclusive, Intergenerational, and Multilingual Participation

Language barriers emerge as perhaps the most significant structural challenge to achieving truly inclusive collaboration within the Made in Africa movement. Respondents consistently identified the danger of reproducing linguistic and generational exclusion in African AI collaborations.



"One of the hard things with Africa is, it's a big continent with so much diversity. Is it possible for us to accommodate every single diversity that we have out there in the Continent? When we're talking about evaluation and collaboration, it's usually done in blocks. You have the English speaking block, and then you have the French speaking block, and then you have other countries that speak Portuguese on the Continent, but you always have the English speaking bloc at the forefront. Then you have the French speaking communities who try to catch up, but they are always left out. How do we implement or go into this collaboration without repeating the same cycle, like using a decolonized approach into collaboration for our community?"

(KII Participant 14, AI in Africa Working Group Member, Personal Communication 2025)

Colonial language divisions continue to fragment collaborative spaces and reproduce exclusionary dynamics within supposedly inclusive frameworks. Language choices in collaborative spaces can inadvertently perpetuate colonial power structures that the "Made in Africa" movement explicitly seeks to challenge.

The four themes multistakeholder networks, capacity development, infrastructure, and inclusive language practices form an interdependent framework for sustaining the growth of a Made-in-Africa AI-in-MERL movement. The analysis reveals that successful sustainability cannot be achieved by addressing any single dimension in isolation; rather, it requires a holistic approach that recognizes how structural barriers in one area undermine progress across all dimensions. The sustainability of the African AI in MERL movement depends not merely on technical capacity building or resource mobilization, but on the community's willingness to engage in transformative practices that actively dismantle exclusionary structures while building genuinely equitable collaborative frameworks that can adapt to Africa's linguistic, cultural, and geographic diversity. This integrated approach positions the AI+Africa Working Group and allied communities to move beyond grant cycles toward a durable, self-sustaining movement that both reflects and advances African values in global conversations on AI and evaluation.

6. Recommendations

1. Developing an African practitioner competency framework

There is an urgent need to develop a context-specific African practitioner competency framework informed by Made in Africa approaches to AI in MERL and led by the African MERL practitioner community. Current approaches are inadequate, with African evaluators facing challenges including insufficient AI training in higher education institutions, underrepresentation in global AI datasets creating structural bias, linguistic barriers that disadvantage non-Anglophone practitioners, and fundamentally Eurocentric evaluation paradigms that fail to accommodate African epistemologies. An African-centered competency framework would establish contextualized standards that prioritize cultural responsiveness alongside technical and ethical capabilities, ensuring that AI integration in MERL strengthens locally relevant evaluation practice. Such a framework must be developed through inclusive processes that center African practitioners' experiences, incorporate multilingual considerations, and explicitly address gender and related socio-economic-political representation gaps.

2. Centering agency in Made in Africa AI for MERL

The sustainability of Made in Africa AI depends on cultivating practitioner agency and digital kinship, a trust-based ecosystem where communities are co-creators shaping AI's design and application in MERL. This requires fundamentally reframing whose knowledge is deemed deficient. Rather than positioning African MERL practitioners as lacking capacity to adopt Global North developed AI systems, we must recognize that dominant Global North evaluation frameworks lack the indigenous data, nuance, and contextual sophistication to capture Made in Africa realities.

Trust-building mechanisms must include transparent governance structures where African MERL communities maintain agency over defining how AI technologies are integrated, what constitutes legitimate knowledge, valuable data, and meaningful evaluation outcomes. This ensures AI adoption serves community-defined priorities rather than externally imposed efficiency metrics, aligning with the Ubuntu ethic of relationality. Critics may caution that participatory processes risk slowing innovation; however, community-driven design produces greater adoption, contextual fit, and trust than externally imposed solutions. By embedding agency in the governance of AI-enabled MERL tools, practitioners can move beyond armchair adoption toward locally owned systems that are socially legitimate, transparent, and responsive to African realities.

3. Shifting to Afrocentric AI data through African languages in AI

To ensure epistemic justice, Made in Africa AI for MERL must prioritize the deliberate creation, curation, and governance of African language AI datasets. This requires investment in community-led data trusts that safeguard against extractive practices while strengthening cultural fidelity and contextual accuracy

in AI tools. As research on natural language processing in African contexts shows, linguistic inclusion is central to equitable evidence production. The risk of continuing with Global North-trained models is not only technical misalignment but erasure, as African voices and values are rendered invisible in evidence ecosystems. Community-led data trusts must ensure that language communities benefit economically from AI systems trained on their linguistic contributions while maintaining cultural authenticity in representation.

4. Intersectional considerations for a Made in Africa approach: Afrofeminism, decolonizing tech, and ethics

AI integration in African MERL contexts must systematically address how technological adoption differentially impacts African identities by gender, spatiality, class and tribe. Afrofeminism should inform mandatory intersectional impact assessments that examine how AI systems reproduce or challenge existing power structures. Western-centric ethical frameworks, with their focus on abstract fairness or transparency, often conceal structural harms including extractive labor, surveillance, and epistemic silencing. A Made in Africa AI ethic must be dynamic, intersectional, and situated, informed by epistemic justice principles. Ethical guidelines must emerge from African philosophical foundations, developing adaptive systems that maintain core principles of Ubuntu, community benefit, and social justice that prioritize collective well-being over individual efficiency gains.

5. Leaving no one behind: Making the case for equipped evidence-informed policymakers in Africa

Equipping policymakers with comprehensive AI literacy is critical, enabling them to distinguish between technological hype, practical limitations, and genuine opportunities. Evidence shows that African governments risk becoming rubber-stamp adopters of donor-driven AI policies without sufficient understanding of their societal implications. Training programs must address policy development driven by donor requirements rather than genuine national priorities, ensuring African governments develop autonomous capacity to evaluate and adopt AI technologies on their own terms. This involves creating capacity development that integrates technical knowledge with understanding of how AI systems can serve African development priorities while avoiding colonial dependencies through technological adoption that primarily benefits external actors.

6. Critical approaches and responsible adoption (or not!) of AI

The current AI discourse replicates patterns from previous technology cycles where exaggerated promises generate speculative investment while communities bearing costs remain invisible. Rather than succumbing to "Africa is behind" rhetoric that positions the continent as perpetually catching up, practitioners need frameworks for critically assessing whether AI tools genuinely serve African development priorities or primarily benefit global technology corporations seeking new markets.

Responsible adoption requires honest assessment of current AI tool limitations, including documented failures to surface African research, inappropriate cultural assumptions, and inadequate representation of African perspectives in training data. For MERL practitioners, balancing hype is not merely measuring efficiency against risks but a political responsibility to question whose futures are being promised, whose voices are excluded, and who benefits from framing AI as inevitable.

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