

Policy that Speaks the People's Language: Embedding Indigenous Epistemologies in Public Policy Design¹

Dr. Awuor PONGE (Corresponding Author)
Senior Associate Research Fellow, African Policy Centre (APC)
and Adjunct Faculty, Development and Policy Studies,
Jaramogi Oginga Odinga University of Science & Technology (JOUST), Bondo, Kenya
Corresponding Author E-Mail: awuorponge@gmail.com
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6656-1818>

Cynthia Jebichii KERING
Associate Research Fellow, African Policy Centre (APC), Kenya
E-mail: cynthiajebichii0@gmail.com
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-5595-8708>

Abstract

Many African public policies remain disconnected from the socio-cultural realities of the communities they target, producing frameworks that feel linguistically and ideologically foreign and that struggle with legitimacy, ownership, and sustainability. This paper argues that Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) – locally grounded ways of knowing, validating evidence, and solving problems – can strengthen policy design, implementation, and evaluation, yet are routinely marginalised or reduced to symbolism. Situated within the pan-African EvalIndigenous initiative, the study pursues two aims: to show how Indigenous epistemologies and evaluative traditions contribute to contextually relevant policymaking, and to identify institutional pathways for embedding them within formal governance. Using an empowerment evaluation approach, the research conducted qualitative, participatory work in Kenya (2022–2024) among the Ogiek and Mijikenda communities – comprising workshops, key informant interviews, and community dialogues – complemented by a review of recent continental literature, including comparative illustration from Botswana's *kgotla* tradition. Findings show that Indigenous communities maintain sophisticated evaluative frameworks rooted in customary law, oral histories, and social accountability, and that policies co-created with Indigenous custodians gain stronger legitimacy and implementation outcomes. Persistent barriers include colonial administrative legacies, linguistic exclusion, and epistemic bias. The paper concludes that durable policy transformation in Africa requires plural, dialogic, culturally responsive institutions that treat Indigenous custodians as epistemic equals and craft policies that truly *speak the people's language*.

Keywords: *Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS), Epistemic Pluralism, Policy Legitimacy, Empowerment Evaluation, Decolonial Governance*

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1. Introduction and Problem Statement

Public policymaking across much of Africa continues to unfold within institutional and epistemic architectures inherited from colonial governance. Despite decades of political independence, the deep structure of policy processes – what counts as evidence, whose knowledge is authoritative, and which languages and interpretive frames shape decisions – often remains externally oriented, producing a persistent disjuncture between communities' lived realities and the policies meant to serve them. Many policy frameworks are experienced by citizens as linguistically and ideologically foreign, weakening legitimacy, ownership, and sustainability. This paper treats that disjuncture as both a governance problem and an epistemic injustice, arguing that durable transformation requires more than technical 'localisation': it requires systematic inclusion of Indigenous epistemologies as equal knowledge systems in policy design and evaluation.

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A growing body of scholarship shows that the marginalisation of African Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) is structurally produced through the coloniality of knowledge. Colonial regimes delegitimised Indigenous institutions, displaced local languages, and redefined knowledge as something validated through Western bureaucratic, scientific, and legal forms – hierarchies that remain durable in postcolonial states and development practice (Dei, 2014; Kamanzi, 2025). This endurance is visible in the continued privileging of technocratic models, donor templates, and standardised indicators that seldom emerge from local ontologies, a pattern that persists even in adjacent domains such as public administration curricula (Zvoushe & Uwizeyimana, 2025) and emerging digital-governance regimes (Effoduh, 2026). When policies are constructed through such externally anchored logics, they can be formally sound yet socially alien, unable to mobilise collective commitment – helping explain why implementation gaps and weak compliance remain chronic despite extensive policy production.

Indigenous knowledge systems, however, are not residual cultural artefacts. They are locally grounded ways of knowing, validating evidence, solving problems, and organising collective life within particular ecological and historical contexts (Dei, 2014), encompassing customary law, oral historiography, kinship-based social regulation, spiritual-ecological stewardship, and communal deliberation. These systems are dynamic and capable of generating robust public reasoning around land, natural resources, social protection, and conflict mediation (Oguamanam, 2023; Olaitan, 2024). Yet IKS are frequently excluded from official policy apparatuses or engaged only symbolically, through consultative rituals that do not shift epistemic power (Ncube et al., 2025).

This exclusion matters because policy legitimacy is produced not only through constitutional procedure but through cultural intelligibility. Communities are more likely to sustain policies when they see themselves inside the policy's framing of problems and solutions. Made-in-Africa and relational evaluation scholars show that African evaluative paradigms foreground relational accountability, reciprocity, and intergenerational continuity, which can clash with narrow, economistic indicators common in imported models (Chilisa et al., 2016; Asante & Archibald, 2023). When policy evaluation relies only on external metrics, it can misread local success and reproduce distrust; when Indigenous evaluation logics inform policy cycles, evaluation becomes a site of co-learning and local authorisation (Chilisa et al., 2016).

Despite rhetorical commitment to 'participation' and 'culturally responsive governance,' institutional pathways for embedding Indigenous epistemologies in policy remain underdeveloped. Existing participatory mechanisms tend to treat Indigenous knowledge as qualitative 'context' rather than as a structured epistemology with its own standards of validity and authority (Chilisa et al., 2016; EvalIndigenous, 2025). This conceptual and institutional gap is the core problem this paper addresses.

The study is situated within the pan-African EvalIndigenous initiative, which advances Indigenous evaluation as a legitimate foundation for sustainable development and governance, and holds that contemporary policy must learn from, rather than merely consult, Indigenous evaluators and knowledge holders (Ponge et al., 2025). The paper pursues two related aims: first, to demonstrate how Indigenous epistemologies and evaluative traditions contribute to contextually relevant policymaking by reshaping problem definitions, evidence standards, and accountability; second, to identify institutional pathways through which such epistemologies can be embedded in formal governance without being domesticated or reduced to folklore.

Methodologically, the study aligns with empowerment evaluation, a participatory tradition that shifts evaluative authority toward those most affected by policy (Fetterman, 1994, 2000), used here not only as a technique but as a decolonial stance in which communities are treated as theorists of their own development. The remainder of the article reviews relevant scholarship and builds a conceptual framework (Section 2), details the qualitative methodology (Section 3), presents findings on how Indigenous evaluative frameworks operate and what barriers persist (Section 4), and closes with a discussion of institutional pathways and conclusions (Sections 5–6) toward policy that genuinely speaks the people's language.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical/Conceptual Framework

2.1 Coloniality, epistemic injustice, and the policy–society disconnect

Decolonial scholarship argues that colonialism restructured not only political authority but the knowledge order itself. Indigenous institutions were systematically delegitimised, local languages displaced, and European epistemologies elevated as universal governance standards (Emeagwali & Dei, 2014). In postcolonial policy environments, these hierarchies persist through continued reliance on imported models and donor templates misaligned with local ontologies (Abrahams et al., 2022; Omosa et al., 2021). Coloniality persists in African evaluation because dominant methods, theories, and funding priorities largely originate in the Global North,

reproducing a *colonial power matrix* that sidelines African ways of knowing (Abrahams et al., 2022). Recent scoping work extends this critique to public administration training itself, finding that African curricula and pedagogy remain heavily anchored in Euro-American frameworks despite decades of reform pressure (Zvoushe & Uwizeyimana, 2025).

The result is what scholars describe as epistemic injustice in policy: communities are positioned as sources of data rather than producers of theory, and their interpretive frameworks are treated as 'culture' rather than knowledge (Chilisa et al., 2016). This positions Western epistemologies as default while African knowledge production is treated as secondary, undermining evaluations that should address root causes of underdevelopment (Abrahams et al., 2022). Made in Africa Evaluation (MAE) literature extends this critique to public-sector learning, arguing that policy cycles are frequently governed by Western assumptions about evidence and value that constrain locally grounded solutions (Abrahams et al., 2022; Chilisa et al., 2016). Implementation gaps are therefore not merely administrative failures; they are partly rooted in mismatches between official epistemic frames and lived community meaning.

2.2 Indigenous Knowledge Systems as dynamic epistemologies for governance

IKS scholarship contests any portrayal of Indigenous knowledge as residual or pre-modern. African Indigenous epistemologies are locally generated, historically grounded systems for explaining reality and organising collective life (Emeagwali & Dei, 2014), transmitted through oral historiographies, customary legal traditions, spiritual-ecological codes, and communal deliberation (Emeagwali & Dei, 2014; Emeagwali & Shizha, 2016). They are adaptive, evolving with ecological, social, and political change (Emeagwali & Dei, 2014). Policy-oriented studies show IKS offers practical governance resources: local ecological stewardship and conflict-mediation norms frequently provide more culturally legitimate problem framings than state-centric tools, guiding socioeconomic development when properly engaged (Olaitan, 2024). Government-support studies in Southern Africa further show that where formal recognition exists – as in South Africa's Indigenous Knowledge Systems policy – Indigenous knowledge is more readily mobilised for livelihoods and legitimacy, whereas its absence, as documented in Zimbabwe, leaves valuable evaluative resources undocumented and institutionally invisible (Ncube et al., 2025). Yet despite this potential, IKS often enters policy spaces only symbolically, through consultation rituals that do not shift epistemic authority (Chilisa et al., 2016) – inclusion without epistemic equality reproduces coloniality under the language of participation.

2.3 Indigenous evaluative traditions and African relational evaluation

Indigenous evaluative traditions foreground evaluation as a culturally grounded, relational practice rooted in African worldviews – Ubuntu and related ethno-philosophical traditions – that emphasise interconnectedness among people, environment, and the living/nonliving (Chilisa et al., 2016). African relational evaluation positions knowledge as socially constructed through relationships, treating language, ritual, proverb, and story as legitimate ways to conceptualise what matters and how evidence is generated (Chilisa et al., 2016). Chilisa and colleagues argue for an *African relational evaluation paradigm* grounded in African ontologies of interdependence among people, land, ancestors, and moral worlds (Chilisa et al., 2016), reframing evaluation as ethical practice rather than detached technical audit. Within Made in Africa Evaluation, these traditions form part of a decolonial move to rebalance power over what is evaluated, by whom, and with which methods (Abrahams et al., 2022; Chilisa et al., 2016). When policies adopt external indicators that ignore relational or spiritual-ecological dimensions of wellbeing, they risk appearing alien even where materially useful; conversely, Indigenous evaluative frameworks shaping the policy cycle help policies 'speak the people's language' by aligning with community-defined realities (Chilisa et al., 2016).

2.4 EvalIndigenous and the call for institutional pluralism

EvalIndigenous, a global network advocating Indigenous peoples' leadership in evaluation, strengthens the argument for epistemic equality, holding that Indigenous evaluative knowledge is a living system of evidence and accountability and that state and donor evaluation must move beyond extractive engagement toward ethical partnership (EvalIndigenous, 2020, 2021). Recent Africa initiatives highlight practical pathways for co-developing Indigenous evaluation methodologies with communities (Ponge, 2025; Ponge et al., 2025). Taken together, this literature converges on two imperatives: Indigenous epistemologies must be recognised as structured, valid systems for public reasoning, and policy institutions must be redesigned for epistemic pluralism.

2.5 Conceptual framework: empowerment evaluation and epistemic pluralism

The study's conceptual framework integrates empowerment evaluation with decolonial epistemic pluralism. Empowerment evaluation, developed by Fetterman, is a participatory approach that positions stakeholders as evaluators of their own programmes, emphasising community ownership and learning-driven improvement over

externally imposed judgment (Fetterman, 2000, 2005). Applied to Indigenous governance contexts, it provides a practical route for shifting epistemic power, allowing Indigenous custodians to define what counts as a policy problem, what evidence matters, and how outcomes are interpreted – aligning with relational evaluation and MAE calls for epistemic equality (Abrahams et al., 2022; Chilisa et al., 2016). Table 1 summarises the framework's four guiding propositions.

Table 1. Conceptual Framework: Four Propositions Linking Indigenous Epistemologies to Policy

Proposition	Core idea	Key source(s)
1. Indigenous epistemologies are policy-relevant evidence systems	Customary law, oral histories, ecological stewardship, and communal deliberation are legitimate forms of evidence, not supplementary 'context.'	Emeagwali & Dei, 2014
2. Evaluation is relational and culturally grounded	African relational paradigms define success through interdependence, reciprocity, and continuity, expanding evaluation beyond technocratic indicators.	Chilisa et al., 2016
3. Empowerment evaluation enables epistemic partnership	Centring community-defined goals and interpretive categories operationalises Indigenous co-authorship in the policy cycle.	Fetterman, 2000
4. Institutional pluralism is necessary for sustainability	Durable inclusion requires governance institutions redesigned for multilingual deliberation, shared authority, and ethical protocols.	EvalIndigenous, 2021; Ponge, 2025; Ponge et al., 2025

Note. The four propositions guide the analysis of how Indigenous evaluative traditions contribute to policy relevance and legitimacy, and what institutional pathways can convert Indigenous knowledge from a peripheral input into formal co-governance.

Together, these propositions guide the analysis of how Indigenous evaluative traditions in Kenya, read alongside comparative continental literature, contribute to policy relevance and legitimacy, and what institutional pathways can convert Indigenous knowledge from peripheral input into formal co-governance within policymaking systems.

3. Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative, participatory research design grounded in empowerment evaluation, which positioned Indigenous knowledge holders and community members as co-producers of knowledge rather than passive respondents. Fieldwork was conducted in Kenya between 2022 and 2024 among two Indigenous communities, the Ogiek and the Mijikenda, and was complemented by a focused review of recent continental literature on Indigenous Knowledge Systems, African-centred evaluation, and decolonial governance – including comparative illustration drawn from Botswana's *kgotla* tradition, used here as a literature-based reference point rather than a primary fieldwork site. The choice of qualitative inquiry followed from the study's focus on meaning-making, legitimacy, and culturally grounded evidence – phenomena requiring interpretive depth rather than variable measurement (Tomaszewski et al., 2020).

3.1 Research design and rationale

The study combined site-embedded qualitative research with empowerment evaluation as an overarching methodological stance. Embedding fieldwork within a single, carefully bounded national context strengthened contextual validity, while the literature review situated local findings within broader African patterns – a design consistent with recommendations for policy research where transferability depends on understanding variation across governance ecologies (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Hernaus et al., 2024). Empowerment evaluation served as both method and decolonial orientation: a stakeholder-involvement approach that equips communities to define goals, generate evaluative criteria, and assess progress themselves, emphasising self-determination and capacity building (Fetterman, 2000). This aligned with the study's commitment to treating Indigenous custodians as epistemic equals rather than informants (Ponge et al., 2025; Ponge et al., 2026).

3.2 Study setting and case selection

Kenya was selected purposively as a site where Indigenous knowledge practices remain active in community governance while policy systems are simultaneously engaged in modernisation and evaluation reform. The

Ogiek and Mijikenda communities were selected for their distinct ecological and administrative contexts – forest-dwelling and coastal, respectively – offering variation in land tenure, customary authority, and policy exposure while sharing broader postcolonial legacies. Fieldwork spanned 2022–2024, allowing engagement across multiple policy cycles (Ponge, 2026). Comparative illustration from Botswana's *kgotla* tradition, drawn from the literature, provided an external reference point for assessing whether the relational accountability mechanisms observed in Kenya reflect a broader continental pattern.

3.3 Participants and sampling

Participants were drawn from three groups: Indigenous knowledge custodians and traditional authorities; community members affected by targeted policies; and policymakers and technical officials engaged in policy design or evaluation. Sampling was purposive and relational, consistent with Indigenous and participatory research practice, which selects participants based on knowledge, role, and community legitimacy rather than statistical representativeness (Drawson et al., 2017). Recruitment proceeded through community entry protocols, beginning with consultations with local leadership, followed by snowball sampling to reach additional knowledge holders and policy actors.

3.4 Data generation methods

Three complementary participatory methods were used. Participatory evaluation workshops functioned as collective spaces where custodians, community participants, and policymakers jointly surfaced local evaluative frameworks and pathways for epistemic inclusion, supporting democratic deliberation and shared indicator-setting (Fetterman et al., 2018). Semi-structured key informant interviews were conducted with policy officials, evaluation practitioners, elders, and Indigenous knowledge holders, exploring experiences of policy legitimacy and institutional barriers, with the format enabling comparability while allowing participants to prioritise culturally salient concerns (Tomaszewski et al., 2020). Community dialogues were convened to enable broader participation beyond workshop attendees and to validate emerging themes through storytelling and intergenerational input, methods congruent with Indigenous inquiry (Gordon et al., 2024), and doubled as member-checking opportunities.

3.5 Data analysis, trustworthiness, and ethics

Analysis proceeded iteratively: transcripts and notes were subjected to inductive thematic analysis; Indigenous categories generated in workshops were then used as analytic lenses, so that coding did not flatten local concepts into externally imposed frames; and cross-case comparison identified shared mechanisms and differentiated constraints. Co-interpretation sessions with community and policy stakeholders tested analytic accuracy and refined conclusions (Gordon et al., 2024). Credibility was supported through methodological triangulation (workshops, interviews, dialogues) and stakeholder triangulation (community members, custodians, policymakers); dependability through an audit trail of workshop outputs and analytic memos; transferability through thick description; and confirmability through returning interpretations to participants (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Ethical practice followed both formal research ethics and Indigenous protocols. Informed consent used culturally appropriate processes, including oral consent where literacy or language required flexibility. Community entry respected local authority structures and sacred knowledge boundaries, and dissemination plans were negotiated to avoid extractive publication practices, consistent with guidance that relationships, reciprocity, and community control over interpretation are non-negotiable ethical requirements in Indigenous evaluation (Gordon et al., 2024). Positionality was handled through reflexive practice: the researcher documented assumptions and interpretive influence, using co-interpretation to prevent unilateral meaning-making.

4. Findings / Results

This section presents findings from participatory fieldwork in Kenya (2022–2024), complemented by literature review, focusing on how Indigenous epistemologies and evaluative traditions function in practice and the institutional conditions shaping their inclusion in public policy. Consistent with empowerment evaluation, results were organised through co-interpretation with Indigenous custodians, community members, and policymakers (Fetterman, 2000; Ponge, 2026; Ponge et al., 2026).

4.1 Indigenous evaluative frameworks

Participants emphasised that Indigenous communities already possess coherent systems for defining public problems, monitoring collective wellbeing, and holding leadership accountable. These systems do not mirror formal monitoring-and-evaluation templates, yet they operate as legitimate evaluation structures rooted in customary law, oral histories, and relational accountability, summarised in Table 2.

Table 2. Indigenous Evaluative Traditions Identified in the Study

Tradition	Core mechanism	Illustrative example	Evaluative function
1. Customary law	Community rules define appropriate conduct, benefit-sharing, and decision-making authority.	Kenyan elders' councils apply land-use rules that prioritise intergenerational rights and clan-based reciprocity.	Living 'scorecard' for governance and resource decisions
2. Oral histories	Narrative transmission of policy consequences across generations.	Memories of an irrigation policy that raised yields but later triggered conflict over water-sharing.	Evidence trail for judging policy risk and social cost
3. Social accountability	Relational, continuous monitoring through moral sanction rather than periodic audit.	Public praise, shame, and restorative dialogue used to hold leaders accountable.	Sustains trust, reciprocity, and ecological respect
4. Deliberative assembly (comparative)	Consensus-based public forum rooted in <i>botho</i> /Ubuntu.	Botswana's <i>kgotla</i> tradition (literature-based comparison).	Judges leadership by harmony and collective dignity, not only material outputs

Note. Rows 1–3 are drawn from primary fieldwork in Kenya; row 4 is drawn from the comparative literature and included to illustrate that relational evaluative logic recurs across distinct African polities (Chilisa et al., 2016).

Elders and local councils in Kenya described customary law as a living 'scorecard' defining good governance: decisions about land use or resource distribution were evaluated using rules prioritising intergenerational rights, ecosystem protection, and clan-based reciprocity, contrasted by participants with state standards privileging short-term economic efficiency (Oguamanam, 2023; Omosa et al., 2021). Comparable dynamics appear in the literature on Botswana's *kgotla*, a traditional public assembly rooted in Tswana customary law and the philosophy of *botho* (Ubuntu), where citizens evaluate leadership by whether it maintains harmony and protects collective dignity rather than only by material outputs (Chilisa et al., 2016) – evidence that relational evaluative logic recurs across distinct African polities.

Oral narratives were repeatedly framed as historical datasets allowing communities to track policy consequences over time. Participants in Kenya narrated how earlier agricultural and settlement policies were remembered through stories of drought cycles and changing social cohesion; in one composite vignette, community members recalled how an earlier irrigation policy improved yields initially but later triggered conflict because it disregarded customary water-sharing norms – a memory that functioned as a real-time evaluation of why technical success can still mean social failure. These histories align with scholarship recognising oral historiography as a valid evidence system with its own standards of credibility (Emeagwali & Dei, 2014).

Rather than periodic audit, both the Kenyan fieldwork and the comparative literature described accountability as relational and continuous: communities monitor policy by tracking whether it sustains trust, reciprocity, and social dignity, using public shame, praise, and restorative dialogue as evaluative tools that work through moral legitimacy rather than legal coercion (Abrahams et al., 2022; Chilisa et al., 2016).

4.2 What 'policy that speaks people's language' looks like

Policy that speaks people's language does not mean translation alone; it points to *epistemic co-creation*. Three features were especially visible. First, co-creation from Indigenous problem definitions: Kenyan workshop participants reframed what officials had labelled 'low uptake of conservation rules' as a problem of broken moral relationship with land, shifting the conversation from enforcement to restoration. Second, indicators grounded in local meaning: participants proposed community-defined indicators such as 'restored respect between youth and elders' and 'revival of communal labour systems,' treated seriously in co-interpretation as evidence of epistemic equality rather than token consultation (Ponge et al., 2025). Third, decision spaces that shift authority: legitimacy emerged when custodians were positioned as authorities in deliberation, not cultural guests.

4.3 Effects on legitimacy and implementation

Evidence suggests policies shaped by Indigenous evaluative traditions gain stronger legitimacy and more durable implementation. Where communities recognised their evaluative standards inside policy design, compliance was described as moral commitment rather than forced obedience; a natural resource policy co-designed with elders and youth councils was said to 'belong to us,' leading to peer enforcement and reduced conflict, in contrast to earlier imposed policies requiring heavy policing. Co-created social protection adaptations incorporating communal caregiving norms reportedly reduced exclusion errors, as community-defined criteria helped identify vulnerable households that formal registries missed. Participants repeatedly described trust as the 'real infrastructure' of implementation, confirming the relational legitimacy argument in African evaluation theory (Chilisa et al., 2016).

4.4 Barriers to embedding Indigenous epistemologies

Despite these gains, participants identified durable institutional barriers. Colonial administrative systems persist through bureaucratic templates, reporting formats, and donor indicators that leave little space for Indigenous validity standards (Emeagwali & Dei, 2014). Linguistic exclusion functions as a structural rather than logistical barrier: English policy documents and technocratic jargon exclude elders and rural communities even where 'consultations' occur, and some policy terms do not translate cleanly because they presuppose foreign ontologies such as individual property entitlement. Epistemic bias and tokenism persist where Indigenous knowledge is accepted only when it confirms existing state priorities, while knowledge that challenges state assumptions is sidelined as 'unscientific'; comparative Southern African evidence shows that without formal policy recognition, Indigenous knowledge remains institutionally invisible even where communities actively use it (Ncube et al., 2025; Chilisa et al., 2016).

These findings show that Indigenous evaluative frameworks function as robust systems of evidence, accountability, and legitimacy, and that policies co-created through Indigenous problem framings generate higher ownership and implementation strength – though colonial bureaucratic legacies, linguistic exclusion, and epistemic bias continue to limit durable embedding, setting the stage for the discussion of institutional pathways below.

5. Discussion and Policy Implications

This section interprets the findings in relation to decolonial policy debates, IKS scholarship, African relational evaluation theory, and empowerment evaluation. Results demonstrate that Indigenous epistemologies function as coherent evidence and accountability systems, that co-created policy gains legitimacy and implementation strength, and that colonial institutional designs continue to restrict durable epistemic inclusion (Ponge, 2026).

5.1 Extending and challenging scholarship

The findings reinforce decolonial scholarship locating African policy failures partly in epistemic injustice (Emeagwali & Dei, 2014; Omosa et al., 2021), but advance the debate by showing that Indigenous communities are not merely under-consulted stakeholders: they actively maintain evaluative infrastructures – customary legal reasoning, oral historiographic evidence, social accountability practices – that already perform the core functions of monitoring legitimacy and wellbeing (Ponge et al., 2025; Ponge et al., 2026). This moves IKS scholarship from describing Indigenous knowledge as cultural heritage toward verifying it as *policy-relevant evidence architecture*. Second, the study strengthens Made in Africa Evaluation and African relational evaluation theory by showing that relational criteria – interdependence, reciprocity, dignity, ecological continuity – are not abstract philosophical claims but living standards communities use to judge policy performance, challenging technocratic scholarship that treats effectiveness as separable from cultural legitimisation (Abrahams et al., 2022; Chilisa et al., 2016). Third, the findings complicate the 'participation' literature: broader participation does not automatically yield legitimacy; inclusion becomes transformative only when Indigenous custodians are recognised as theorists and evaluators co-authoring the standards by which policy is judged (EvalIndigenous, 2021; Ponge, 2025; Ponge et al., 2025) – echoing recent calls in adjacent domains, such as AI governance, for epistemic sovereignty rather than the mere translation of external frameworks into African contexts (Effoduh, 2026).

5.2 Implications for policy design

Treating Indigenous custodians as epistemic equals reshapes the policy cycle in at least four ways: problem definitions become culturally grounded, addressing root causes rather than symptoms (Ponge, 2026); evidence standards broaden beyond technocratic templates to include oral histories and customary jurisprudence (Emeagwali & Dei, 2014; Chilisa et al., 2016); indicators of success shift toward relational wellbeing – dignity, harmony, continuity – that better capture local outcomes (Abrahams et al., 2022); and implementation is

sustained through moral legitimacy rather than coercion, making legitimacy an implementation resource rather than a soft outcome (Ponge, 2026; Ponge et al., 2026).

5.3 Institutional pathways toward plural, dialogic policymaking

The persistence of colonial administrative structures, linguistic exclusion, and epistemic bias – patterns also documented in recent scoping reviews of African public administration training (Zvoushe & Uwizeyimana, 2025) – indicates that institutional reform is necessary if Indigenous epistemologies are to be embedded durably. Table 3 summarises three mutually reinforcing pathways proposed on the basis of the findings.

Table 3. Institutional Pathways for Embedding Indigenous Epistemologies in Policy

Pathway	Key mechanisms	Expected outcome
Co-governance structures with epistemic authority	Indigenous–state policy councils at county/national level; <i>kgotla</i> -embedded forums or Councils of Elders integrated into statutory policy cycles.	Indigenous epistemologies shape policy from inception rather than as an advisory afterthought
Multilingual, multi-epistemic policy processes	Key documents drafted first in Indigenous languages and conceptual frames; policy concept validation workshops with communities.	Legitimacy grounded in cultural intelligibility, not procedural translation
Indigenous evaluation councils in national M&E systems	Define Indigenous validity criteria and indicators; train public officials; review national evaluation reports for epistemic bias.	Institutionalised relational standards; reduced tokenism (EvalIndigenous, 2020; Abrahams et al., 2022)

Note. M&E = monitoring and evaluation. Together, the three pathways enable a policy architecture in which multiple knowledge systems co-produce evidence and authority, fulfilling the need for plural, dialogic institutions.

5.4 Contributions of the study

The study makes three contributions. Theoretically, it demonstrates empirically that Indigenous epistemologies are structured public-policy evidence systems with their own standards of validity, strengthening decolonial and MAE arguments for epistemic freedom in African governance (Emeagwali & Dei, 2014; Abrahams et al., 2022; Chilisa et al., 2016). Methodologically, it shows empowerment evaluation can be adapted as a decolonial methodology that redistributes interpretive authority, with co-interpretation and community-defined indicators providing credibility rooted in local validity systems rather than external audit distance (Fetterman, 2000; Ponge et al., 2025). Practically, by tracing how co-created policies generate ownership, trust, and stronger outcomes, the study identifies actionable routes to legitimacy through epistemic partnership rather than top-down technocracy (Chilisa et al., 2016; Ponge, 2026).

6. Conclusion

This study has responded to a persistent policy–society disconnect in African governance by arguing that policies often fail not only for technical reasons but because they remain linguistically and epistemically foreign to the communities they target. Guided by the EvalIndigenous Africa initiative, the paper's objectives were twofold: to demonstrate how Indigenous epistemologies and evaluative traditions strengthen policy relevance by reshaping problem definitions, evidence standards, and accountability, and to identify institutional pathways for embedding these epistemologies in formal governance without reducing them to symbolism.

Drawing on qualitative, participatory fieldwork in Kenya (2022–2024) among the Ogiek and Mijikenda communities, complemented by continental literature, the study used empowerment evaluation as both method and decolonial stance, positioning Indigenous custodians as co-producers of knowledge and validity. The findings show that Indigenous communities already maintain coherent evaluative infrastructures – rooted in customary law, oral historiography, and relational accountability – that function as legitimate systems for judging policy performance and collective wellbeing. Policy that speaks people's language is not translation but epistemic co-creation: where Indigenous problem framings and indicators shape the policy cycle, communities describe stronger ownership and compliance, and trust becomes a practical implementation resource.

These gains, however, are constrained by durable barriers – colonial administrative templates, linguistic exclusion, and epistemic bias – that restrict Indigenous validity standards from being treated as equal to

technocratic evidence. Future work should move from demonstrating value to testing and institutionalising mechanisms of epistemic pluralism at scale. Building on the pathways proposed here, research should pilot and evaluate co-governance structures where Indigenous custodians hold formal authority in problem framing; multilingual, multi-epistemic policy drafting processes that begin with Indigenous conceptual frames rather than end-stage translation; and Indigenous evaluation councils embedded in national M&E systems to define validity criteria and review products for epistemic bias. Methodologically, future studies can strengthen the evidence base by comparing how these reforms function across sectors – land, conservation, social protection – and administrative levels, tracking measurable outcomes such as legitimacy, implementation durability, and dispute resolution over time.

Durable policy transformation in Africa requires epistemic pluralism and policymaking that genuinely speaks the people's language. When Indigenous epistemologies become co-authoring foundations of policy, legitimacy strengthens and implementation becomes sustainable; without institutional reform – co-governance structures, multilingual policy cycles, and Indigenous evaluation councils – IKS will remain marginalised within colonial bureaucratic designs. Embedding Indigenous epistemologies is therefore not an optional cultural flourish; it is a governance necessity for building policies that are credible, owned, and enduring in African contexts.

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Authors Note

Dr. Awuor Ponge is the Co-Chair of EvalIndigenous Global Network and also a Senior Associate Fellow in-charge of Research, Policy and Evaluation at the African Policy Centre (APC). He is a former Vice-President of the African Evaluation Association (AfrEA). He holds a PhD in Gender and Development Studies from Kenyatta University's Department of Sociology, Gender and Development Studies, and is Adjunct Faculty at the Jaramogi Oginga Odinga University of Science and Technology (JOUST), where he teaches Development and Policy Studies. He was awarded the International Organisation for Collaboration in Evaluation (IOCE) and EvalPartners Award in 2015 for his contribution to Evaluation in Africa and for Mentoring Young and Emerging Evaluators (YEEs).

Cynthia Jebichii Kering is a Research Associate and Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) Specialist, currently serving as Kenya Co-Lead at the Africa Gender and Development Evaluators Network (AGDEN). She holds an MSc in International Development (Distinction) from Keele University and a First Class BA in Gender and Development Studies from Kenyatta University. She is a Young and Emerging Evaluator (YEE) and serves as the volunteer Abstract Lead for the UK Evaluation Society (UKES) 2027 Conference, with research interests in gender-responsive and feminist evaluation, participatory methodologies, and national evaluation systems strengthening across African contexts.