

Beyond Perception: Politics of Monitoring and Evaluation in African Anti-Corruption Programmes

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.51244/IJRSI.2026.1308000327>

Received: 06 September 2026; Accepted: 11 September 2026; Published: 25 September 2026

ABSTRACT

Background: Despite two decades of investment in anti-corruption agencies (ACAs) across Africa, measurable reductions in corruption remain elusive, suggesting that the monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems through which these institutions demonstrate accountability are themselves compromised. **Objectives:** This study critically examined the perceived political and institutional factors undermining M&E integrity in anti-corruption programmes across five African countries (Kenya, Nigeria, Malawi, Tanzania and Liberia) and proposed a framework for strengthening Afrocentric, participatory M&E systems. **Method:** A qualitative comparative documentary analysis synthesised evidence from peer-reviewed journals, institutional reports and policy documents published between 2004 and 2025, supplemented by key informant perspectives (n = 20) drawn from existing qualitative studies; data were interpreted through Braun and Clarke's six-phase thematic analysis, guided by political economy of evaluation and Made in Africa Evaluation lenses. **Results:** M&E systems were deeply entangled with political structures. Perceived political interference manifested as procedural obstruction, executive influence on case selection and fragmented institutional mandates; strategic underfunding operated as indirect political control over evaluation scope and independence; civil society participation remained nominal, constrained by financial limitations and role unawareness; and over-reliance on perception-based indicators created a perception–effectiveness gap that enabled governments to project commitment without substantive results, while donor-driven architectures reinforced upward accountability. **Conclusion:** Technical M&E reforms are insufficient without confronting the political economy of evaluation; the resulting self-reinforcing capture cycle erodes public trust and institutional effectiveness. The Participatory Afrocentric M&E Framework, integrating political economy awareness, mixed-methods measurement, multi-stakeholder governance, independent oversight, downward accountability and contextual grounding, offers a theory and finding-grounded pathway for reform. **Contribution:** The study extends political economy theory to M&E integrity and provides actionable, contextually relevant recommendations for African anti-corruption governance.

Keywords: monitoring and evaluation, anti-corruption, perceived political interference, Afrocentric evaluation, stakeholder engagement

INTRODUCTION

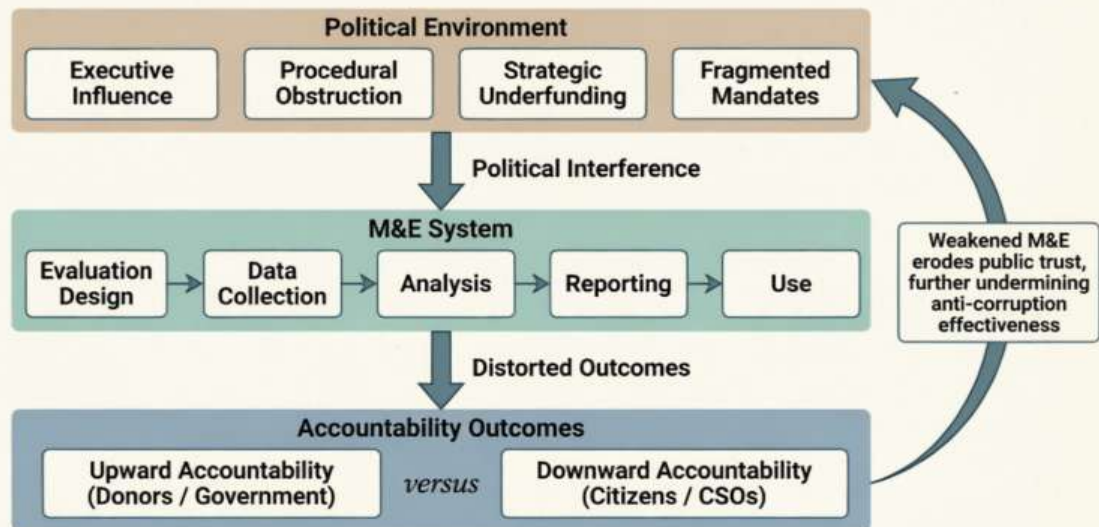
Corruption remains among the most corrosive threats to development across the African continent. The African Union [1] estimated that corruption costs Africa over USD 148 billion annually, diverting resources from essential services, undermining public trust and entrenching structural inequality [19; 30]. The dominant policy response has been institutional from the early 2000s onwards. States established dedicated Anti-Corruption Agencies (ACAs): Kenya's Ethics and Anti-Corruption Commission (EACC), Nigeria's Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), Malawi's Anti-Corruption Bureau (ACB), Tanzania's Prevention and Combating of Corruption Bureau (PCCB) and Liberia's Liberia Anti-Corruption Commission (LACC) each carrying legal mandates to investigate, prosecute and prevent corrupt practices [17; 12; 10]. On paper, this proliferation represented a significant commitment to governance reform. In practice, it invites a more critical question: why has so much institutional architecture produced so little measurable reduction in corruption?

The evidence compels scepticism. Transparency International's [40] Corruption Perceptions Index has consistently indicated limited progress across the continent, suggesting that two decades of anti-corruption architecture have not translated into tangible reductions in corrupt practices [21; 28]. Three explanatory traditions compete in literature. The institutional-design tradition attributes weak performance to deficient mandates, independence and resourcing, and prescribes stronger legal frameworks [17; 35; 12]. The collective-action tradition argues that systemic corruption persists because no single actor has an incentive to deviate, rendering isolated institutional fixes ineffective [34; 28]. The political-economy tradition goes further, contending that ACAs operate within power structures and political settlements that determine whether their mandates are honoured or hollowed out [19; 39; 20]. This study contends that these traditions, despite their differences, share a common blind spot: each assumes that if institutions were properly designed or incentives properly aligned, credible evidence about performance would follow. None adequately interrogates whether the evidence-producing machinery itself -monitoring and evaluation (M&E)- is politically captured.

This omission is consequential because M&E is the primary mechanism through which ACAs assess performance, demonstrate accountability, and generate evidence for improvement [25; 14]. Yet, as Weiss [42] classically demonstrated, evaluation never operates in a political vacuum: it serves instrumental, conceptual and, most powerfully, political functions. In anti-corruption contexts, where findings directly implicate political elites and threaten powerful interests [39; 20], the political function tends to dominate. The critical implication, drawn from Klitgaard [23] and Rose-Ackerman [36], is that when M&E systems fail to produce credible, independent findings, the entire anti-corruption enterprise risks becoming performative rather than transformative, legitimising political narratives rather than driving substantive reform. Institutionalising anti-corruption agencies has therefore not yielded measurable corruption reduction in part because evaluation itself is politically captured: M&E functions as legitimisation rather than learning. Without independent evidence, reform remains performative, explaining Africa's stagnant perception trajectories despite two decades of architectural investment [40; 28]. Compounding this, the field's reliance on perception-based indicators means that the very metric used to declare success or failure can diverge from lived experience and be managed through publicity rather than performance [31; 22; 9].

Despite growing recognition of these dynamics, the literature exhibits three critical gaps. First, much scholarship remains confined to technical measurement difficulties, that is corruption's clandestine nature, attribution problems and indicator limitations [38; 18; 31] thus a framing that treats M&E as an apolitical exercise and obscures the power relations within which evaluation systems operate. Second, empirical work remains largely siloed in single-country analyses, limiting identification of cross-cutting patterns and regionally transferable solutions [6; 32; 13]. Third, there is limited systematic analysis of how perceived political and institutional dynamics specifically undermine M&E integrity in the anti-corruption sector, and even less attention to contextually appropriate, Afrocentric alternatives that reposition citizens as producers of evidence [34; 29]. This study addresses these gaps by providing a comparative analysis across five countries, explicitly foregrounding the political economy of M&E, and proposing a contextually grounded framework for reform.

Theoretically, the study is anchored in the political economy of evaluation [42; 33] and the Made in Africa Evaluation framework [29], both critically reviewed in the literature review section that follows. The Made in Africa Evaluation (MAE) framework challenges the dominance of Western, donor-centric models, insisting on evaluation rooted in African epistemologies, multi-stakeholder collaboration, downward accountability to citizens and contextual flexibility [29]. Read together, these lenses reframe the effectiveness gap not as a technical deficit but as a contest over who produces, validates and uses evidence about public performance.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework – The Political Economy of Anti-Corruption M&E

The aim of this study was therefore to critically examine the perceived political and institutional factors undermining M&E integrity in anti-corruption programmes across five African countries and to propose a framework for strengthening Afrocentric, participatory M&E systems. The specific objectives were:

1. To examine how perceived political interference and institutional dynamics undermined M&E integrity in anti-corruption programmes across Kenya, Nigeria, Malawi, Tanzania and Liberia;
2. To assess the nature and extent of multi-stakeholder engagement in M&E of anti-corruption programmes;
3. To analyse the limitations of perception-based M&E approaches in capturing anti-corruption programme effectiveness; and
4. To propose an Afrocentric, participatory framework for strengthening M&E of anti-corruption programmes in African contexts.

The study contributes theoretically by extending the political economy of evaluation to the integrity of M&E systems themselves, empirically by providing five-country comparative evidence rarely assembled in a single analysis. The remainder of the paper is organised as follows: the literature review synthesises theoretical and empirical scholarship; the research methods section details the comparative documentary design; the results present five-country evidence; the discussion theorises evaluation capture and engages alternative explanations; the implications section advances theory-grounded recommendations; and the conclusion synthesises answers to the four objectives.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section critically reviews the theoretical and empirical scholarship on which the study builds, and identifies the gap it fills. It is organised into three parts: theoretical literature, empirical literature, and a synthesising critique.

Theoretical literature

The dominant theoretical anchor is the political economy of evaluation. Weiss [42] classically argued that evaluation serves instrumental, conceptual and political functions, and that in contested policy domains the political function of demonstrating commitment and legitimising action and thus tends to displace learning. Patton [33] extended use-oriented evaluation theory, contending that evaluation has value only insofar as it is

actually used by real decision-makers. Applied to anti-corruption, where findings implicate political elites and threaten powerful interests [39; 20], these theories yield a testable proposition: M&E systems will be designed, funded and used in ways that protect power rather than expose it. This study treats that proposition as its core theoretical premise.

A second theoretical stream explains why anti-corruption institutions struggle. Klitgaard [23] framed corruption as monopoly plus discretion minus accountability; Rose-Ackerman [36] and Rothstein [37] located it in incentive structures and the quality of impartial institutions; and Johnston [21] identified syndromes of corruption tied to configurations of power. The collective-action critique advanced by Persson, Rothstein and Teorell [34] and Mungiu-Pippidi [28] goes further, arguing that systemic corruption persists because no individual actor gains by deviating alone, rendering isolated institutional fixes ineffective. Critically, all these accounts presuppose an accountability ecosystem in which evidence about performance circulates; none systematically theorises the M&E machinery that produces such evidence as the precise locus this study examines.

A third theoretical debate concerns what corruption metrics actually measure. Governance indicators and CPI-type instruments rely on perceptions [22; 40], yet Olken [31] and Charron [9] demonstrate systematic divergence between perceived and experienced corruption, while Heywood [18] and Sampford et al. [38] show that measurement choices are themselves normative and political. The theoretical implication for M&E is direct: an evaluation system built on perception indicators measures beliefs about governance rather than governance itself, creating a validity gap that political actors can exploit.

Finally, the Made in Africa Evaluation (MAE) framework offers a normative and epistemic corrective, insisting that evaluation be rooted in African priorities, philosophies and knowledge systems, with downward accountability to citizens and contextual flexibility [29]. Participatory theory reinforces this: Chambers [8] asked whose reality counts, Whitton and Farrington [43] positioned citizens as legitimate producers of M&E evidence, and Morkel and Sibanda [27] cautioned that co-production must not be romanticised absent institutional transformation. Together, MAE and participatory theory reframe M&E integrity as a question of epistemic justice, not merely technical quality.

Empirical literature

Comparative studies of ACAs establish persistent performance deficits. Doig, Watt and Williams [14] measured 'success' across five African commissions and found mandates outstripping demonstrable results; Heilbrunn [17], De Speville [12] and Chêne [10] identified independence, resourcing and political protection as success conditions; and Quah [35] contrasted effective Asian agencies with weaker African counterparts. Country studies confirm the pattern: Dike [13] on Nigeria's EFCC documents executive capture, while Kpundeh [24] on Liberia's LACC documents capacity constraints. These studies evaluate agencies, however, not the integrity of the M&E systems through which agency performance is known.

A smaller empirical stream examines M&E practice directly. Bwire [6] found Tanzanian civil society organisations dissatisfied with their involvement in monitoring the National Anti-Corruption Strategy, citing financial constraints and role unawareness; Oyugi [32] assessed a Kenyan civil society M&E system and found weak partnerships and survey capacity; and Barasa [2] traced accountability failures in Kenyan county projects. On the promise of participation, Whitton and Farrington [43] and Chambers [8] provide evidence that citizen-generated evidence improves targeting and legitimacy when genuinely financed and used. Masetu and Awere [26] offer the closest empirical anchor to this study, documenting procedural interference in Malawi, executive influence in Nigeria and decentralised pressure in Kenya yet, without analysing how these patterns distort evaluation financing, measurement and use.

System-level evidence highlights donor ambivalence. Morkel and Sibanda [27] show that African M&E systems were historically built for upward accountability to funders; Mutsikiwa and Mazongonda [29] link donor-driven perceptions to weak evaluation cultures; UNDP [41] documents Liberia's fragmented data and coordination capacity; and the EU and UNDP [15] Gambia certification programme demonstrates that coordinated, locally owned capacity building is feasible. Transparency International's [40] stagnant continental scores and the

African Union's [1] cost estimates provide the macro-empirical backdrop against which these micro-findings accumulate.

Synthesis and research gap

Theoretically, Weiss's [42] political use of evaluation and Patton's [33] use-oriented theory explain why evidence serves power, and MAE [29] supplies a normative corrective; empirically, studies from Tanzania [6], Kenya [32; 2] and Liberia [41] document underfunded, donor-dependent and participation-poor M&E. As foreshadowed in the introduction, three gaps persist; it is siloed in single-country analyses that obscure transferable patterns [6]; and it lacks systematic analysis of how perceived political dynamics undermine M&E integrity specifically, alongside Afrocentric, citizen-centred alternatives [34]. No existing study theorises or empirically traces the financing–politics–measurement nexus in anti-corruption M&E across multiple African jurisdictions. This study fills that gap.

RESEARCH METHODS AND DESIGN

Research design and paradigm

This study employed a qualitative comparative documentary analysis design, situated within an interpretivist–critical paradigm that treats evaluation not as a neutral technical instrument but as a political practice shaped by power [42; 33]. Documentary analysis was selected as the most appropriate method for examining the complex, context-dependent dynamics of M&E in anti-corruption programmes across multiple jurisdictions, enabling systematic interrogation of existing evidence, identification of cross-national patterns and generation of theory [4; 11]. The five countries function as bounded comparative cases: each provides a distinct configuration of legal mandate, institutional history and political settlement, allowing the study to distinguish context-specific manifestations from structural regularities in the politics of M&E [11]. The design is therefore explicitly comparative, critical and theory-informed, rather than descriptive.

Setting and case selection

The study focused on Kenya, Nigeria, Malawi, Tanzania and Liberia, purposively selected on four criteria: established ACAs with legal mandates; documented evidence of M&E challenges in anti-corruption programming; regional representation across East, West and Southern Africa; and diversity in legal and institutional frameworks yielding comparative analytical value [35; 7]. Purposive selection follows case-study logic in which cases are chosen for theoretical, not statistical, relevance: the five configurations maximise variation in interference patterns (procedural, executive, decentralised) while holding constant the continental institutional context [26].

Documentary corpus, sampling and inclusion criteria

Data were drawn from published documentary sources rather than a defined human population. The corpus comprised peer-reviewed articles (including the African Evaluation Journal and the International Journal of Research and Scientific Innovation); institutional reports from ACAs, international organisations (UNDP, EU) and civil society bodies; national anti-corruption strategies and policy documents; and academic theses examining M&E in governance contexts. Documents published between 2004 and 2025 were retrieved through systematic searching using combinations of 'monitoring and evaluation', 'anti-corruption', 'perceived political interference', 'stakeholder engagement', 'Afrocentric evaluation' and individual country names. Inclusion criteria were: empirical or analytical focus on anti-corruption M&E; coverage of at least one case country; and availability in English. Exclusion criteria were: opinion pieces without an evidence base; documents addressing corruption without M&E content; and duplicate reports. Screening proceeded in three stages; title, abstract and full text with disagreements resolved by consensus between the two authors. Additionally, key informant perspectives (n = 20) were extracted from existing qualitative studies, comprising ACA officials (n = 6), civil society representatives (n = 5), M&E practitioners (n = 4), development partners (n = 3) and academics (n = 2), cited under the source documents' anonymity protocols (P1–P20). Using published testimonies provided

ethically clean, comparably documented insider accounts across all five countries, and sampling was treated as saturated when successive documents ceased to yield new thematic properties [4; 11].

Data collection and extraction

Each included document underwent repeated reading and was entered into a structured extraction matrix aligned to the four objectives, capturing country, institution, M&E function addressed, and evidence on interference, financing, participation, measurement practice and use of findings. The matrix constitutes the audit trail linking every reported finding to its documentary source [4].

Data analysis

Data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's [5] six-phase thematic analysis: familiarisation; generation of initial codes; searching for themes; reviewing themes; defining and naming themes; and producing the report. Coding followed a hybrid deductive–inductive approach: deductive codes derived from the political economy of evaluation and MAE frameworks, and inductive codes generated from unanticipated patterns such as strategic underfunding [16]. Themes were cross-referenced across countries to separate common patterns from national variations, and disconfirming cases were actively sought to test emergent interpretations [11].

Rigour and trustworthiness

Credibility was established through triangulation across document types, countries and informant categories [22; 11]. Transferability was supported by thick description of each national institutional context. Dependability was ensured through the extraction matrix, coded schema and consensus screening, which together constitute an audit trail [4]. Confirmability was addressed through reflexive positionality: both authors are M&E practitioners within an African anti-corruption institution, a position that grants interpretive insight but demands disciplined neutrality hence the study's declared political neutrality, its exclusive reliance on publicly available evidence, and its explicit critical stance towards all institutional actors, including the authors' own [11].

Ethical considerations

This study constituted a documentary analysis drawing exclusively on publicly available published materials and de-identified key informant perspectives from existing studies. No primary data collection involving human or animal subjects was conducted, and the study was therefore exempt from institutional ethical review. The informant perspectives cited were drawn from previously published studies in which informed consent had been obtained and anonymity observed by the original researchers. All sources are acknowledged through citation; no confidential or classified materials were accessed or used.

RESULTS

Perceived political interference and institutional dynamics

Findings across the five countries revealed consistent patterns of perceived political interference in anti-corruption programme M&E, though with distinctive national manifestations. Masetu and Awere [26] identified three patterns: procedural interference in Malawi, overt executive influence in Nigeria, and decentralised political pressure in Kenya. These patterns systematically undermined M&E integrity at every stage of the evaluation cycle, from design through implementation to the use of findings.

Table 1 presents a comparative summary of the five Anti-Corruption Agencies examined, their primary M&E challenges, and the dominant pattern of perceived political interference identified in each national context.

Table 1. Comparative summary of Anti-Corruption Agencies, primary M&E challenges, and dominant perceived political interference patterns across five African countries

Country	Agency	Primary M&E Challenge	Perceived Political Interference Pattern
Kenya	Ethics and Anti-Corruption Commission (EACC)	Fragmented mandates; weak coordination	Decentralised political pressure
Nigeria	Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC)	Executive influence on case selection	Overt executive influence
Malawi	Anti-Corruption Bureau (ACB)	Prosecutorial dependence on DPP	Procedural interference
Tanzania	Prevention and Combating of Corruption Bureau (PCCB)	Underfunded M&E; weak CSO participation	Resource-based constraint
Liberia	Liberia Anti-Corruption Commission (LACC)	Weak institutional capacity; poor data systems	Institutional fragmentation

In Malawi, the ACB operated with strong investigative powers but relied on the Director of Public Prosecutions to conduct prosecutions, creating what Masetu and Awere [26] described as 'a standing susceptibility of being subject to political pressure'. Bayley [3] and Rothstein [37] argued that this structural arrangement created opportunities for perceived political interference in case selection and prosecution decisions, with direct implications for M&E findings – cases that might demonstrate programme effectiveness could be delayed or abandoned before evaluation, rendering performance data incomplete and misleading. The prosecutorial dependence meant that even where the ACB conducted rigorous investigations, the ultimate outcomes upon which M&E relied were subject to external political calculus.

Nigeria's EFCC faced overt executive influence, with the presidency reportedly dictating leadership appointments, case selection, and prosecution severity [13]. This executive control extended to the evaluation of EFCC performance, enabling leadership to shape which cases were pursued and how outcomes were reported. As one practitioner observed, 'governments often alter or inflate statistics to create the illusion of progress, particularly during election periods' (P4). In practice, this manifested in selective emphasis on low-level corruption prosecutions while high-profile cases involving politically connected individuals were deferred or dropped, creating a distorted evidence base upon which programme effectiveness was assessed [24].

Kenya's EACC operated within what Masetu and Awere [26] characterised as a 'disjointed' chain of command that made the institution 'slow and open to bargaining with politics'. The EACC shared jurisdiction with the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions, the Judicial Service Commission, and the Auditor-General, creating multiple channels through which political actors could influence M&E findings [2]. This fragmentation allowed political actors to exert pressure at different institutional nodes, complicating efforts to maintain evaluation independence.

Strategic underfunding as perceived political control

Evidence across countries indicated that perceived political interference extended beyond direct intervention to the strategic manipulation of resources allocated to M&E functions. One practitioner explained that 'robust M&E requires adequate funding, but many African governments chronically underfund these processes' (P4). Another elaborated that this underfunding was 'often intentional', noting that 'well-resourced evaluations risk exposing inefficiencies, corruption and policy failures, outcomes that some political actors seek to avoid' (P5). This pattern was documented in Tanzania, where Bwire [6] identified financial constraints affecting both the PCCB and civil society organisations seeking to participate in M&E of the National Anti-Corruption Strategy and Action Plan II (NACSAP II). In Liberia, despite LACC and UNDP calls for a robust national M&E system, 'significant challenges remain, including weak institutional capacity, poor data systems, and inadequate coordination among public institutions' [41]. Multiple informants concurred that strategic underfunding 'allows governments to influence the conduct and the findings of M&E, maintaining the appearance of accountability while suppressing genuine oversight' (P2, P4, P5). The strategic character of this underfunding distinguished it from general budgetary constraints; it represented a deliberate mechanism through which political actors controlled the scope, depth, and independence of evaluation without overtly obstructing anti-corruption mandates.

Stakeholder engagement and civil society participation

Findings revealed limited and often ineffective civil society participation in M&E of anti-corruption programmes across all five countries. Bwire's [6] study of Tanzania found that CSOs were 'dissatisfied with the extent of their involvement', identifying financial constraints and 'unawareness of their role in M&E' as key barriers. The study concluded that effective CSO involvement from initial planning stages could have positively impacted strategy implementation [43; 8]. Similar patterns emerged elsewhere. In Kenya, Oyugi [32] assessed the M&E system of Haki Africa, finding that 'the organisation had not facilitated effective partnerships' despite clear job descriptions and defined M&E duties. In Nigeria, while Abia State's anti-corruption strategy included civil society representation on monitoring committees, concerns about potential compromise during field monitoring persisted, requiring 'multiple layers of accountability' to safeguard credibility. Morkel and Sibanda [27] argued that M&E systems designed for upward accountability to funders were 'not particularly focused on learning for course-correction and performance improvement from the perspective of citizens', thereby marginalising CSO and citizen voices. The cumulative effect was that anti-corruption M&E operated as a closed, technocratic exercise disconnected from the communities most affected by corruption, undermining both the legitimacy and the learning potential of evaluation processes.

Limitations of perception-based M&E

A significant finding concerned the gap between perception-based M&E and objective measures of anti-corruption effectiveness. Perception indicators measured beliefs rather than actual corruption experiences, could be influenced by media messaging and political discourse, and changed in response to factors unrelated to anti-corruption efforts [31; 22; 9]. The over-reliance on perception indicators created incentives for agencies to manage perceptions rather than address substantive corruption. Public relations campaigns, selective prosecution of visible corruption cases, and media engagement could improve perceptions even while systemic corruption persisted. The Haki Africa assessment in Kenya illustrated this limitation, finding that 'the component on survey and surveillance had the lowest outcome of 48%', suggesting fundamental weaknesses in data collection and analysis capacity [32].

The ambivalent role of international partners

International partners played a significant yet ambivalent role in shaping anti-corruption M&E across Africa. UNDP's involvement in Liberia and The Gambia exemplified this dynamic by providing resources and technical expertise while simultaneously shaping M&E priorities according to donor agendas. Morkel and Sibanda [27] argued that M&E systems in Africa were 'introduced for the (re)building of African states during the post-independence era', creating 'upward systems of accountability' that privileged donor interests over citizen needs. Mutsikiwa and Mazongonda [29] found that 'perceptions of M&E as donor-driven' were compounded by 'limited professional training, a weak evaluation culture', and perceived political interference. The Gambia provided a contrasting example of coordinated capacity building, where the EU and UNDP implemented a certification programme bringing together participants from 13 institutions, enabling a 'shared results-based approach that strengthens planning, accountability, and performance across institutions' [15]. This example demonstrated that constructive international engagement was possible when it prioritised local ownership and institutional capacity over compliance-driven reporting.

DISCUSSION

Key findings in summary

This study set out to examine how perceived political and institutional dynamics undermine M&E integrity across five African countries. The analysis yielded four core finding clusters, each directly answering a research objective: (i) perceived political interference compromised evaluation integrity at every stage through procedural obstruction, executive influence, and fragmented mandates [26]; (ii) strategic underfunding operated as a deliberate, indirect mechanism of political control over evaluation scope and independence [6; 41]; (iii) civil society participation remained nominal, constrained by financial exclusion and architectures

designed for upward donor accountability [6; 32]; and (iv) an over-reliance on perception-based indicators generated a perception–effectiveness gap that enabled the projection of reform commitment without substantive results [31]. Collectively, these clusters demonstrate that M&E in the anti-corruption sector functions not as a neutral technical exercise, but as a highly contested political arena.

Theorising evaluation capture: four sites of politics

The findings confirm and extend the political economy of evaluation reviewed earlier in this paper. Consistent with Weiss [42] and Patton [33], the political function of M&E consistently displaced its instrumental and conceptual functions. The analysis distinguishes four sites at which politics captures evaluation. The first is the politics of design: what is measured, how and by whom reflected power relations, with the preference for perception indicators expressing political convenience rather than technical necessity [18; 38]. The second is the politics of implementation: interference shaped which evaluations were conducted, what data were collected and who participated [26]. The third is the politics of use: findings were mobilised to demonstrate commitment regardless of results, while the perception–effectiveness gap allowed perception gains to stand in for substantive progress [38; 14]. The fourth as the study's principal theoretical extension, is the politics of financing: strategic underfunding emerges as a deliberate, deniable mechanism through which political actors control the scope, depth and independence of evaluation without overtly obstructing anti-corruption mandates. Financing thus constitutes the missing link in political-economy accounts of evaluation [42] and in collective-action explanations of reform failure [34; 28]: where the evidence machinery is starved by design, accountability cannot emerge even where mandates formally exist.

Engaging alternative explanations and contradictory evidence

A critical discussion requires engagement with rival readings of the evidence. First, strategic underfunding might reflect general fiscal constraint rather than political intent. Three considerations weigh against this: informants across countries described underfunding as 'often intentional' (P4, P5); underfunding selectively targeted evaluation and verification functions rather than programme implementation [6]; and the pattern recurred across fiscally diverse settings, including resource-rich Nigeria [13; 24]. Second, perception indicators are defensible as pragmatic proxies where administrative data are weak [22; 40]. This study does not reject them but shows that, unaccompanied by objective measures and citizen-generated evidence, they create gaming incentives and a validity gap that political actors can exploit [31]. Third, interference narratives might reflect disgruntled institutional actors rather than systemic capture; against this, the convergence of independent scholarly accounts [26], official assessments [41] and informant testimony across all five countries makes a purely anecdotal reading implausible, and the study's triangulation protocol was designed precisely to test such convergence [11; 16]. Finally, the Gambia certification programme stands as apparent counter-evidence to the donor-distortion thesis [15]. Read carefully, it refines rather than refutes it: constructive external engagement occurred where financing prioritised local ownership and institutional capacity over compliance reporting, confirming that upward-accountability bias is a design choice, not a donor necessity [27; 29].

The governance–trust nexus and the performativity cycle

The findings give empirical content to the governance–trust nexus. Where M&E is perceived as manipulated, trust in anti-corruption institutions erodes and citizen cooperation as the informational foundation of enforcement declines [36; 23; 37]. This generates a self-reinforcing performativity cycle: interference degrades evidence quality, degraded evidence masks ineffectiveness, masked ineffectiveness legitimises further interference, and perception management substitutes for reform [31]. Rothstein's [37] insistence on impartiality as the core of government quality explains why the cycle is hard to break: once evaluation is perceived as partial, its outputs lose the credibility required for both enforcement and learning. Breaking the cycle therefore requires financing and governance arrangements that restore impartiality thus the task the Participatory Afrocentric M&E Framework takes up.

Strengths and Limitations

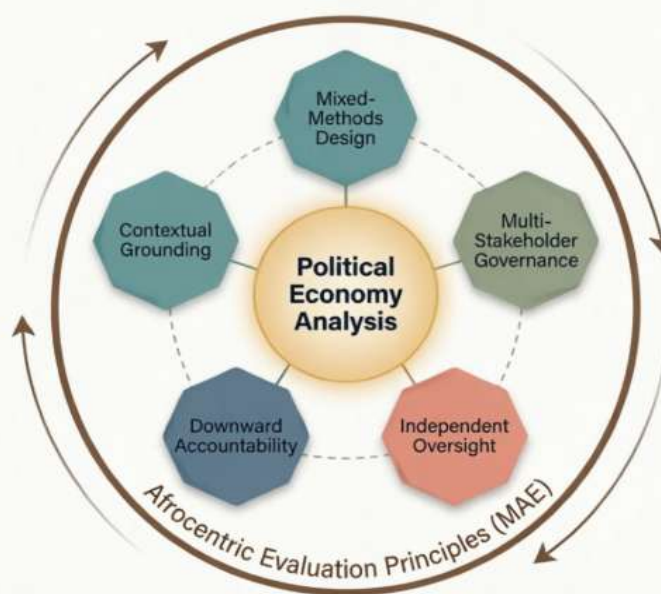
The study's principal strength lay in its comparative design across five countries spanning three African regions, enabling identification of both common patterns and national variations, and in the triangulation of peer-reviewed literature, institutional reports, policy documents and practitioner perspectives [11; 16]. The explicit application of the political economy lens to anti-corruption M&E represented a theoretical contribution beyond the predominantly technical framing in existing literature. Limitations remain: reliance on documentary sources introduces potential publication bias, with challenges more likely documented than successes; source quality varied; informant perspectives were secondary, limiting depth; the qualitative design precludes statistical generalisation; and the absence of political actors' own accounts means the interference analysis rests on institutional and civil society evidence. Future research incorporating primary data collection, longitudinal tracking and participatory action research would strengthen and extend these findings.

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

From findings and theory to reform design

The implications of this study follow directly from its theoretical anchors and empirical results. Because evaluation capture operates at four sites; design, implementation, use and financing. Reform that addresses only one site will fail: collective-action dynamics reward defection from accountability wherever any lever of capture remains intact [34; 28]. Accordingly, this study proposes the Participatory Afrocentric M&E Framework for anti-corruption programmes, whose six principles are each derived from a specific finding and theoretical stream rather than from generic good-practice lists: explicit political economy analysis responds to the interference findings and to Weiss's [42] demonstration that the political function of evaluation dominates; mixed-methods evaluation design responds to the perception–effectiveness gap and to measurement theory's warning that perceptions are beliefs, not experiences [31; 22]; multi-stakeholder governance responds to nominal participation and to participatory theory's insistence on co-production with safeguards against tokenism [8; 43; 27]; independent oversight with legal mandate and financial autonomy responds directly to the politics of financing, removing the deniable lever of strategic underfunding [6; 41]; downward accountability responds to the marginalisation of citizen voices and to the MAE corrective [29]; and contextual grounding responds to the epistemic critique of donor-centric evaluation [2].

Figure 2: The Participatory Afrocentric M&E Framework Model



For ACAs, the findings supported strengthening M&E independence through legal and financial autonomy, adopting mixed-methods approaches beyond perception indicators, establishing multi-stakeholder evaluation forums, and investing in professional M&E capacity through partnerships with universities and professional

associations [17; 35]. For governments, the findings pointed toward enacting legal protections for M&E independence including budget autonomy and mandatory publication of evaluation reports, supporting multi-stakeholder governance structures, promoting transparency and open data, and aligning M&E with long-term development goals rather than short-term political cycles [12; 10]. For international partners, the findings underscored the need to shift from donor-driven to locally led M&E, invest in long-term capacity building through sustained partnerships rather than short-term training, and reduce upward accountability bias by balancing donor requirements with learning and citizen accountability [27; 15]. For civil society, the findings supported advocacy for M&E independence, capacity development in evaluation methodologies and policy engagement, coalition building among anti-corruption CSOs, and the production of shadow reports where government M&E was limited or biased [6; 25].

CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine how perceived political and institutional dynamics undermine M&E integrity in anti-corruption programmes across Kenya, Nigeria, Malawi, Tanzania and Liberia, and to propose a contextually grounded framework for reform. In relation to the first objective, the evidence established that perceived political interference compromised M&E integrity at every stage of the evaluation cycle through procedural obstruction in Malawi, executive influence on case selection in Nigeria and fragmented mandates in Kenya [26]. Also, interference extended beyond overt intervention to the strategic underfunding of evaluation itself, a deliberate and deniable mechanism of political control [6; 41]. Regarding the second objective, civil society participation was nominal across all five countries, constrained by financial exclusion, role unawareness and M&E architectures designed for upward accountability to funders rather than downward accountability to citizens [6; 32; 27]. Addressing the third objective, the study demonstrated that reliance on perception-based indicators produced a perception–effectiveness gap that enabled perception management to substitute for substantive reform [31; 9; 32], while donor-supported systems reinforced the same distortion even where locally owned alternatives, as in The Gambia, proved feasible [15]. In response to the fourth objective, the study proposed the Participatory Afrocentric M&E Framework, integrating political economy awareness, mixed-methods measurement, multi-stakeholder governance, independent oversight with financial autonomy, downward accountability and contextual grounding [29; 8; 43].

Theoretically, the study extended the political economy of evaluation [42; 33] in two respects: it identified financing as a fourth site of evaluation capture alongside design, implementation and use, and it modelled the self-reinforcing performativity cycle through which captured evaluation erodes the public trust on which anti-corruption enforcement itself depends [37; 36]. These conclusions are bounded by the study's documentary design, which precludes statistical generalisation and lacks political actors' own accounts; primary, longitudinal and participatory research should test and refine them. The study's overall conclusion is nonetheless precise: technical M&E reform cannot succeed where the perceived political and financial conditions for credible evidence are absent; conversely, where independence, participation, mixed-methods measurement and contextual grounding are deliberately financed and protected, evaluation can resume its proper function in African anti-corruption governance not as legitimization of power, but as collective learning [42; 29].

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors gratefully acknowledge the contributions of the practitioners, researchers, and civil society representatives whose perspectives, drawn from existing published studies, informed this analysis. The authors also acknowledge the African Evaluation Association for advancing the Made in Africa Evaluation discourse that provided the theoretical foundation for this work.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationship(s) that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Author contributions

Everton Tunduwe was responsible for the conceptualisation, methodology, data analysis, and writing of the original draft. Onesmus Nyaude contributed to the literature review, data analysis, and critical revision of the manuscript. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability

All data analysed during this study were drawn from publicly available published sources. The documents reviewed are accessible through their respective publishers and institutional repositories as cited in the reference list.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated institution or funder. This research is politically neutral and undertaken exclusively for educational and policy-reform purposes.

Declaration of Political Neutrality and Research Purpose

The authors declare that this research is conducted in a strictly politically neutral and non-partisan capacity. No affiliation, endorsement, or alignment with any political party, government administration, or ideological movement is implied or intended. This study is undertaken solely for educational, scholarly, and policy-informative purposes, with the aim of contributing evidence-based insights that may influence policy reforms, strategic institutional reviews, and the strengthening of effective anti-corruption governance structures across Africa. All findings, interpretations, and recommendations presented herein are derived exclusively from publicly available documentary evidence and published scholarly sources.

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