KEYNOTE ADDRESS

Reimagining Africa's Evidence-to-Action Ecosystem

9th Evidence to Action (E2A) Conference

Friday, 26 June 2026

University of Ghana, Legon

Organised by the International Centre for Evaluation and Development (ICED)

SPEECH ARCHITECTURE AT A GLANCE

This keynote addresses Session 14's mandate, scalability and transferability of what works, institutionalisation of best practices, and the future of evidence, technology, and innovation. Agriculture and rural development serve as the primary lens throughout.

SECTION	TITLE	KEY FUNCTION
I	Opening & Context	Acknowledge ICED, discussant; frame the ecosystem challenge
II	The Honest Diagnosis	Structural failures holding back evidence-to-action
III	What Is Already Working	Proven, scalable models of evidence-to-action in practice
IV	The Structural Shifts	The policy heart: scalability, institutionalisation, technology, future
V	The Compact & Closing	Commitments, charge to action, closing

SECTION I: OPENING & CONTEXT

Distinguished guests, conference co-chairs, policymakers, researchers, practitioners, and development partners from across our continent, good morning.

Before I begin, let me express my genuine gratitude to Dr. David S. Ameyaw, President of the International Centre for Evaluation and Development, ICED, for the honour of this invitation. I accepted because the invitation was not merely to speak, it was to contribute to something consequential on the last day of what has already been a consequential gathering.

And let me say a word about ICED itself. The International Centre for Evaluation and Development has, with consistency and conviction, occupied a space that is both critically important and chronically undervalued: the space between evidence and decision. While

others have produced research, ICED has asked the harder question, why does that research not move? Nine editions of the Evidence to Action Conference is not just an anniversary. It is proof of concept. Dr. Ameyaw, thank you for building what you have built.

I also want to warmly acknowledge Professor Phillip O. Nying'uro of the University of Nairobi, who will serve as discussant for this session. Professor Nying'uro, your presence enriches what I hope will be a genuinely useful session.

Now, we are gathered this morning under a theme of profound ambition: reimagining the evidence-informed policy and decision-making ecosystem in Africa. That word, reimagining, means doing serious intellectual work. It does not ask us to repair what exists. It asks us to conceive something structurally different. Something that works not just in pilot projects and conference papers, but at scale, across borders, across budget cycles, and across the full diversity of contexts that make up this continent.

> ***"Reimagining is not redesigning. It is deciding that the architecture itself must change, and that we, in this room, on this day, are the architects."***

Let me begin where the ecosystem begins, not in a ministry, not in a research institution, not in a development partner's country office. Let me begin in a field.

A smallholder farm, say, in the Rift Valley, or the Sahel, or the Eastern Highlands of Zimbabwe. The farmer there, let us call her by what she is: an entrepreneur, a knowledge producer, an evidence generator, wakes before dawn. She has been observing her land for decades. She knows which rains come early, which slopes drain badly, which varieties resist the dry spells arriving more frequently in the last ten years. She is, in every meaningful sense, a producer of agricultural knowledge.

Now: a research team arrives from a capital city, or from abroad. They conduct soil tests, run surveys, build models, and eighteen months later publish findings that largely confirm what she already knew, and some findings she could have contributed if anyone had thought to ask. The resulting policy brief recommends an intervention. By the time that intervention is designed, procured, and delivered, if it ever reaches her, it no longer fits the season, the soil, or the market reality she faces.

> ***"Africa holds sixty percent of the world's uncultivated arable land, and somehow remains a net food importer. That is not an agronomy problem. That is an evidence-to-action problem."***

This is the paradox at the heart of our gathering. The continent that holds the greatest agricultural potential on earth is also the continent where the evidence needed to unlock that potential is most consistently generated in the wrong places, controlled by the wrong actors,

and converted into action too slowly to produce structural change. That is what we mean when we talk about reimagining the evidence-to-action ecosystem.

SECTION II: THE HONEST DIAGNOSIS

Before we can reimagine, we must diagnose, honestly. Four structural failures hold back evidence-to-action in Africa.

Failure One: The Scalability Gap

Africa does not lack evidence of what works. The challenge is that effective interventions remain stubbornly local. A community health programme that transforms one district, an extension model that triples yields in one region, a social protection system that demonstrably reduces poverty in one country, are documented, evaluated, and celebrated at conferences. And then they stop.

They stop because the conditions that made them work, a committed district officer, a particular donor relationship, a specific political window, are not part of what gets documented. The evidence captures outcomes, not the ecology that produced them. When the intervention is transferred without that ecology, it fails and the lesson drawn is that the model does not work, rather than that the transfer was uninformed. Scalability is not replication. We have not yet built the evidence systems to make that distinction systematically.

Failure Two: Institutionalisation without Institutional Commitment

Best practices are routinely identified. They are compiled in reports, presented at workshops, endorsed in policy frameworks. And then, when project funding ends or the champion leaves office, they vanish. The pattern we see is a proliferation of best practice documents and a poverty of institutional memory. In fact, governments often run the same pilot in the same communities under three different project names because each new project was unaware of its predecessors.

Failure Three: Technology Serving Tools, Not Decisions

Digital platforms, agricultural data systems, AI applied to social data are genuinely transformative tools, but in many cases, genuinely underperforming. Not because the technology is wrong, but because it has been deployed without grounding in the decision-making contexts it is meant to serve. What we often see is dashboards designed for donors, repurposed for ministers, AI models trained on global data, applied to local contexts with fundamentally different parameters. The question is not whether to use technology. It is whether our technology choices are guided by the decisions that need to be made and the people who need to make them.

Failure Four: Africa Absent from the Future of Evidence

As the global conversation about AI, large-scale data systems, and automated policy analysis accelerates, Africa's contribution to shaping that future is systematically underweight. The result is that the future of evidence is being built around priorities and data environments that do not reflect Africa's realities. The evidence systems of the future will be built on the data of today. If African data, particularly data about rural communities, smallholder farmers, and informal economies, is absent from the foundations, the systems built on those foundations will be less useful, and potentially actively harmful, in African contexts.

SECTION III: WHAT IS ALREADY WORKING

But here is what I also know, because I have seen it with my own eyes and in the documented record of what African institutions have built.

I have seen what happens when evidence systems achieve genuine scale, genuine institutionalisation, and genuine technological integration. I have seen it in enough places, across enough contexts, that I can tell you with confidence: this is not a question of whether it is possible. It is entirely possible. It is a question of whether we are willing to build the conditions under which it becomes normal.

On Scalability and Transferability

The Alliance of Bioversity International and CIAT in East Africa has built evidence systems linking climate data, soil analysis, crop variety performance, and market price information in partnership with national agricultural research systems and farmer organisations. The result is a decision-support tool used by farmers, by extension workers, and by government planners in real time, in local languages, on affordable devices. And critically, the model has transferred across six countries because the transfer process itself was treated as an evidence problem: what needs to change, what must stay the same, and who needs to own it in each new context.

Rwanda's comprehensive land registration and rural infrastructure evidence system produced the kind of feedback loop that rural development policy everywhere needs: implementation data fed back into programme design, with measurable outcomes tracked at the household level. This is Policy adjustment in near-real time. The model has been studied and adapted with appropriate modification by nine other countries on the continent.

The ECOWAS agricultural policy process represents one of the most serious attempts to build a regional evidence architecture: harmonised statistics, shared market information, coordinated research priorities. Imperfect and uneven in implementation, but here is a regional institution acting on the belief that evidence at regional scale has returns that national systems alone cannot produce.

On Institutionalisation

Ethiopia established an Agricultural Transformation Agency with an explicit mandate to generate the evidence needed to accelerate agricultural transformation, and to translate that evidence directly into government policy and programme design. Whatever its limitations, the model of an institutionalised bridge between evidence production and policy action is one that the rest of the continent should study seriously.

On Technology and Innovation

Kenya's agricultural market information platforms, Nigeria's agricultural sector digitisation initiatives, Senegal's rural connectivity infrastructure are all proof that African governments can build agricultural intelligence systems when the political priority is present and the institutional investment follows. And emerging from our universities and innovation hubs, are African-built AI tools trained on African data, addressing African evidence gaps. The same for Automated policy brief generation in local languages, Satellite-ground-truth integration for smallholder crop monitoring, Community-based data systems that recognise farmer organisations as evidence producers.

> ***"The evidence for Africa's transformation is not missing. It is scattered, undervalued, and systematically excluded from the decisions it should inform. Our task is connection, recognition, structural inclusion, and the will to scale what works."***

SECTION IV: STRUCTURAL SHIFTS

What does reimagining actually require? Let me suggest the following five structural shifts that should generate changes in the architecture of how evidence is produced, owned, and converted

into action.

Shift One: From Replication to Contextualised Scaling

Scaling is not copying. For every intervention we seek to scale, we need transferability evidence: what are the active ingredients that actually produce the outcomes? What contextual conditions are required? What must adapt when the context changes, and what must remain constant? This means building the evidence base for scale into the original design of interventions, not as an afterthought in a final evaluation report, but as a core component of the research architecture from the beginning. It means investing in implementation science as seriously as we invest in impact evaluation.

Shift Two: From Documentation to Institutionalisation

The distinction between documenting best practices and institutionalising them is everything. Institutionalisation requires things that documentation does not: financial commitment through domestic budget allocation that does not depend on external funding; structural embedding

through integration into standard operating procedures and professional training; accountability mechanisms that hold institutions responsible for evidence uptake, not just evidence production; and political championship through leaders willing to defend evidence-informed practices against political pressure.

Our governments should look at their current evidence systems and ask simply: which of the best practices are institutionalised by this definition, and which are simply documented? The gap between those two counts is the reform agenda.

Shift Three: From Technology Projects to Technological Ecosystems

Technology must be treated not as a collection of tools to deploy, but as an ecosystem to build, characterised by interconnection, adaptation, and African ownership. In 2026, the most transformative technologies available to us are also the most dangerous if deployed without deliberate governance. AI systems that can process evidence at unprecedented speed can also entrench the biases of the data on which they were trained. The future of evidence in Africa will be shaped by whether African institutions lead the governance of AI in development contexts, or whether they simply receive tools designed and governed elsewhere. This is a sovereignty question.

Shift Four: From Resilient Programmes to Resilient Systems

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed a fundamental fragility in most African evidence systems: they were built for stability, not disruption. When field data collection became impossible, evidence systems collapsed. Resilient evidence ecosystems require redundancy, multiple data channels that can substitute for each other under stress. It also requires adaptability, the capacity to rapidly reconfigure in response to new decision-making requirements; and distributed capacity, meaning analytical capability at multiple levels of government, not concentrated in central institutions that become single points of failure.

Shift Five: From Continental Aspiration to Continental Architecture

We must move from continental aspirations to continental institutional architecture that makes those aspirations operational. A continental evidence architecture means: harmonised data standards across member states; shared innovation infrastructure that allows institutions to collaborate on cross-border evidence challenges without a new project for each collaboration; and a continental platform for evidence brokerage, connecting knowledge producers with decision-makers at scale, with African ownership, African data governance, and African sustainability. None of this is technically impossible. All of it requires political decision. And all of it will generate returns that dwarf the investment required.

SECTION V: THE COMPACT & CLOSING

None of this is achieved without a compact, which means mutual obligations, accepted by all parties, with accountability built in.

To governments: allocate domestic budget to evidence infrastructure as a statutory commitment. Mandate institutionalisation reviews for major programmes. Establish AI and data governance frameworks that ensure African data sovereignty. And invest in distributed analytical capacity so that evidence-informed decision-making is possible at district level, not only in capitals.

To the research community: Always design for scale from the beginning. Produce findings in the formats that reach decision-makers and communities.

To international development partners: finance African-owned research agendas. Publish everything, including what did not work. And accept that the measure of your success is whether African evidence ecosystems are stronger and more African-owned because of your engagement than they were before it.

I want to close where I began, in a field.

The farmer I described at the opening of this address is still there. She is making decisions about what to plant, when to harvest, where to sell. She will make those decisions with or without us. The question is what quality of evidence she will have when she makes them. Whether the road to her market has been maintained because someone in government made a decision based on rural infrastructure evidence, or whether it has deteriorated because the evidence never reached the desk where the decision was made.

That farmer is the test. She is the test.

> ***"Africa does not need better evidence about its potential. Africa needs evidence ecosystems that are African-owned, institutionally sustained, technologically enabled, and politically backed ecosystems that turn knowledge into action before the season is lost."***

When you return to your ministries, your research institutions, your communities carry one question: What is the one structural decision I can make, champion, or refuse to obstruct, that brings us closer to an Africa where evidence reaches the decisions that shape lives, before it is too late to matter?

Not the easiest decision. The structural one.

Africa's transformation will be achieved in a thousand decisions, made in a thousand offices and village councils across this continent, by people among whom are people who left rooms like this one and decided that the season was right for planting.

Be those people.

Thank you.