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Conceptualizing Values-Based Monitoring and Evaluation of Climate Smart Agriculture Programmes in Kenya

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ABSTRACT

Climate-Smart Agriculture (CSA) has emerged as a central policy and programming response to the intertwined challenges of climate change, food insecurity, environmental degradation, and rural poverty. While significant investments have been made in CSA programs, questions persist regarding how success is defined, measured, and valued, particularly in relation to equity, ethics, inclusion, sustainability, and local priorities. Conventional monitoring and evaluation (M&E) approaches applied to CSA programs tend to emphasize technical performance, outputs, and biophysical outcomes, often marginalizing the social values, power relations, and lived experiences of smallholder farmers and vulnerable communities. This conceptual paper advances a Values-Based Monitoring and Evaluation (VBME) approach as a more ethically grounded, context-responsive, and transformative framework for assessing CSA programs in Kenya. Drawing on contemporary VBME scholarship, climate change evaluation literature, and Kenya's agricultural and institutional context, the paper conceptualizes Values-Based Monitoring and Evaluation of CSA programs and critically examines its principles, practices, and processes. Through a structured critique focused on relevance, utility, and application, the paper identifies key conceptual, theoretical, contextual, and methodological gaps in existing VBME and CSA monitoring and evaluation literature. The paper concludes with actionable recommendations for strengthening the design and implementation of VBME frameworks that better reflect Kenya's socio-economic realities, climate vulnerabilities, and development aspirations.

Keywords: Values-Based Monitoring and Evaluation, Climate-Smart Agriculture, Kenya, Equity, Systems Thinking, Climate Change Evaluation.

INTRODUCTION

Climate-Smart Agriculture (CSA) refers to an integrated approach to agricultural development that seeks to sustainably increase productivity, enhance resilience and adaptation to climate change, and, where possible, reduce or remove greenhouse gas emissions (FAO, 2019; Lipper et al., 2014). CSA projects operationalize this approach through interventions such as climate-resilient crop varieties, conservation agriculture, agroforestry, efficient water management, climate information

services, and inclusive value chain development. In Kenya, CSA projects are implemented across diverse agro-ecological zones and are embedded within national policy frameworks including the Kenya Climate-Smart Agriculture Strategy (2017–2026), the National Climate Change Action Plan, and the Agricultural Sector Transformation and Growth Strategy.

CSA projects in Kenya are inherently complex, operating at the intersection of biophysical systems, socio-economic dynamics, institutional arrangements, and cultural practices. They target multiple, sometimes competing objectives: improving yields and incomes for smallholder farmers, enhancing resilience to climate shocks such as droughts and floods, promoting environmental sustainability, and advancing social inclusion. This complexity presents significant challenges for monitoring and evaluation, particularly when traditional results-based M&E frameworks prioritize easily measurable outputs over deeper social, ethical, and distributive outcomes.

Values-Based Monitoring and Evaluation (VBME) is an M&E approach that explicitly integrates ethical principles, stakeholder values, and normative considerations into the design, implementation, analysis, and use of monitoring and evaluation systems (Averill, 2021; Odhiambo-Abuya, 2025). Unlike conventional M&E approaches that emphasize technical efficiency, effectiveness, and accountability primarily to donors, VBME recognizes that evaluation is inherently value-laden and that judgments about success, merit, and impact are shaped by underlying beliefs about what matters, for whom, and why. VBME moves beyond the assessment of measurable outputs and outcomes to examine whether programs align with and promote values such as equity, social justice, participation, transparency, sustainability, and human dignity (Odhiambo-Abuya, 2025). It incorporates both quantitative and qualitative methods, privileging stakeholder voices and contextual knowledge while maintaining methodological rigor. In doing so, VBME positions monitoring and evaluation as a moral and political practice, not merely a technical exercise.

VBME is structured around three interrelated dimensions: principles, practices, and processes. VBME principles provide the normative foundation guiding evaluation work and commonly include stakeholder participation, equity and social justice, transparency and accountability, holistic and systems thinking, evidence-based decision-making, purpose-driven orientation, and

adaptability with continuous learning (Odhiambo-Abuya, 2025). VBME practices translate these principles into actionable activities, including the development of values-based M&E plans, values-based theories of change, formulation of values-driven evaluation questions, creation of values-sensitive indicators, ethical and participatory data collection, values-informed data analysis, and principled utilization of evaluation findings (Odhiambo-Abuya, 2025). VBME processes refer to the sequential and iterative steps through which values are embedded across the M&E lifecycle. These include values-based stakeholder analysis, establishment of values-based baselines, development of VBME frameworks and criteria, ongoing monitoring, reflective learning, and adaptive management (Odhiambo-Abuya, 2025). Together, these dimensions enable a comprehensive approach to evaluating complex development interventions such as CSA programs.

Values-Based Monitoring and Evaluation of Climate-Smart Agriculture projects in Kenya can be defined as a context-sensitive M&E approach that systematically integrates the ethical values, priorities, and lived experiences of diverse stakeholders-particularly smallholder farmers, women, youth, and marginalized groups-into the assessment of CSA interventions. This approach evaluates not only whether CSA projects achieve productivity, resilience, and mitigation objectives, but also whether they do so in ways that are equitable, inclusive, culturally appropriate, environmentally sustainable, and socially just. In the Kenyan context, VBME of CSA projects requires sensitivity to historical land inequalities, gendered access to resources, power asymmetries between donors and communities, and differential climate vulnerabilities across regions. It emphasizes downward accountability, learning-oriented evaluation, and adaptive management, ensuring that CSA programs contribute meaningfully to both climate resilience and human well-being.

PRINCIPLES OF VALUES-BASED MONITORING AND EVALUATION WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF CLIMATE-SMART AGRICULTURE PROJECTS IN KENYA.

The principles of Values-Based Monitoring and Evaluation (VBME) provide the normative and ethical foundation upon which monitoring and evaluation systems are designed, implemented, and utilized (Averill, 2021; Odhiambo-Abuya, 2025). In the context of Climate-Smart Agriculture (CSA) projects in Kenya, these principles are particularly salient given the complexity of climate risks, socio-economic inequalities, ecological fragility, and institutional pluralism that characterize

the agricultural sector. However, while VBME principles are conceptually compelling, their relevance, utility, and practical application within CSA programs in Kenya remain uneven and under-theorized. This section critically examines the core principles of VBME as applied to CSA projects in Kenya, focusing on their conceptual relevance, practical utility, and real-world application. The critique also identifies key conceptual, theoretical, contextual, and methodological gaps in the existing VBME and CSA evaluation literature.

Stakeholder Participation

Stakeholder participation is widely recognized as a cornerstone of both CSA programming and VBME (FAO, 2019; Odhiambo-Abuya, 2025). CSA projects in Kenya target smallholder farmers operating within diverse agro-ecological and socio-cultural contexts, making stakeholder engagement essential for ensuring relevance and legitimacy. Participatory approaches align with Kenya's devolution framework and community-driven development ethos, particularly in counties that are highly vulnerable to climate shocks such as Turkana, Garissa, Kitui, and parts of Western Kenya. From a VBME perspective, stakeholder participation is relevant because values are socially constructed and context-specific. Without meaningful engagement of farmers, pastoralists, women, youth, and local institutions, evaluations risk privileging donor-defined success criteria over locally meaningful outcomes (Mertens, 2023; Chilisa, Major, & Khudu-Petersen, 2017).

Despite its conceptual relevance, the utility of stakeholder participation within CSA evaluations in Kenya is often constrained by instrumentalism. Participation is frequently reduced to data extraction-such as focus group discussions or beneficiary surveys-rather than genuine co-production of evaluation questions, indicators, and judgments (Cooke & Kothari, 2001; Guijt, 2014). This limits VBME's potential to surface competing values, power relations, and trade-offs inherent in CSA interventions. Furthermore, participatory processes require time, resources, and facilitation skills that are often undervalued in donor-driven CSA projects operating under tight timelines and log-frame-driven accountability systems (Eyben, 2015). As a result, participation becomes symbolic rather than transformative, undermining the utility of VBME in influencing program adaptation and learning.

In practice, stakeholder participation in CSA M&E in Kenya is uneven and often excludes the most marginalized actors, including women farmers, landless laborers, and pastoralist communities. Power asymmetries between implementing agencies, local elites, and beneficiaries shape whose values are prioritized and whose voices are heard (Cornwall, 2008; Chambers, 2017). VBME literature insufficiently theorizes how participatory principles can be operationalized within politically charged and resource-constrained CSA environments, representing a key conceptual and methodological gap.

Equity and Social Justice

Equity and social justice are central to both climate adaptation and values-based evaluation. Climate change impacts in Kenya are unevenly distributed, disproportionately affecting women, youth, pastoralists, and resource-poor smallholder farmers (IPCC, 2022; Kristjanson et al., 2017). CSA projects that fail to address structural inequalities risk reinforcing existing vulnerabilities rather than enhancing resilience. VBME's explicit commitment to equity (Odhiambo-Abuya, 2025), is therefore highly relevant in assessing whether CSA interventions contribute to fair access to resources, technologies, information, and decision-making processes (Mertens, 2023; Buckton et al., 2025).

In theory, VBME provides evaluators with an ethical lens to interrogate distributional outcomes and power relations (Odhiambo-Abuya, 2025), within CSA programs. However, in practice, equity is often treated as a cross-cutting theme rather than a core evaluative criterion. CSA evaluations frequently report disaggregated data by gender or region without interrogating deeper issues of land tenure, labor burdens, or intra-household decision-making (Doss et al., 2018). This limits the utility of equity-oriented VBME, as surface-level indicators fail to capture structural injustices embedded in Kenya's agrarian political economy. VBME literature lacks robust methodological guidance on translating equity principles into measurable, context-specific indicators for CSA programs.

Applying equity and social justice principles within CSA M&E faces resistance from technocratic evaluation cultures that prioritize neutrality and objectivity (Picciotto, 2020). Explicitly normative evaluation approaches may be perceived as politically sensitive, particularly when findings

challenge government policies or donor priorities. This tension highlights a theoretical gap in VBME regarding how evaluators navigate normative commitments within politically constrained environments.

Transparency and Accountability

Transparency and accountability are fundamental principles for evaluating public and donor-funded CSA initiatives in Kenya, where large-scale investments are made through climate finance mechanisms and development partners (Kusek & Rist, 2004; Ospina et al., 2021). VBME extends accountability beyond upward reporting to donors to include downward accountability to communities and beneficiaries (Odhiambo-Abuya, 2025).

VBME enhances the utility of M&E by promoting transparent decision-making, ethical data use, and inclusive dissemination of findings (Odhiambo-Abuya, 2025). In CSA projects, transparent sharing of evaluation results can strengthen trust, facilitate learning, and enable communities to hold implementing agencies accountable (Guijt & Taylor, 2019). However, transparency is often selectively applied. Evaluation reports are commonly written in technical language, shared late, or not disseminated at all to local stakeholders. This undermines the practical utility of VBME as a tool for empowerment and learning.

Institutional incentives within CSA programs often favor compliance-oriented accountability over learning-oriented transparency (Eyben et al., 2015). VBME literature insufficiently addresses how organizational cultures, donor requirements, and political considerations constrain transparency in practice, revealing a contextual and institutional research gap.

Holistic and Systems Thinking

CSA interventions operate within complex socio-ecological systems where agricultural practices interact with climate dynamics, markets, governance structures, and cultural norms (Hummelbrunner, 2011; Gates, 2016). VBME's emphasis on holistic and systems thinking (Odhiambo-Abuya, 2025) is therefore highly relevant for capturing unintended outcomes, feedback loops, and trade-offs.

Systems-oriented VBME allows evaluators to move beyond linear cause-effect models toward understanding CSA as an adaptive process. This is particularly useful in Kenya's heterogeneous agricultural systems, where identical interventions may yield divergent outcomes across regions. However, the utility of systems thinking is limited by methodological complexity and capacity constraints. Many CSA evaluations lack the time, data, and analytical skills required to operationalize systems approaches meaningfully.

In practice, CSA M&E frameworks in Kenya remain dominated by linear log-frame models that struggle to accommodate complexity and emergence (Rogers, 2008). VBME literature provides limited operational guidance on integrating systems thinking into routine CSA evaluations, representing a methodological gap.

Evidence-Based Decision-Making

Evidence-based decision-making is critical for ensuring CSA investments deliver climate resilience and livelihood benefits (FAO, 2019). VBME reframes evidence not as value-neutral data, but as information interpreted through ethical and contextual lenses. VBME enhances the utility of evidence by linking data to stakeholder values and decision-making needs (Odhiambo-Abuya, 2025). In CSA programs, this supports adaptive management and context-specific learning. However, donor-driven evidence hierarchies often privilege quantitative indicators over qualitative insights, limiting the influence of values-based evidence on strategic decisions (Sanderson, 2003; Picciotto, 2020). The coexistence of positivist evaluation traditions and normative VBME approaches creates epistemological tensions. VBME literature has yet to fully reconcile these tensions, indicating a theoretical research gap.

Adaptability and Continuous Improvement

Climate change introduces uncertainty and non-linearity, making adaptability essential for CSA programs. VBME's learning-oriented principle (Odhiambo-Abuya, 2025) aligns strongly with adaptive management approaches promoted in climate resilience programming (IPCC, 2022). In principle, VBME enables real-time learning and course correction. In practice, rigid project designs, short funding cycles, and risk-averse donor cultures constrain adaptability in Kenyan CSA projects (Guijt, 2014). VBME literature insufficiently addresses how institutional constraints

shape the feasibility of adaptive, values-driven evaluation in climate programming, pointing to a critical contextual and methodological gap.

PRINCIPLES OF VBME IN CSA RESEARCH GAPS

This critique reveals several cross-cutting research gaps:

- Conceptual gaps in operationalizing values such as equity and participation within CSA evaluation frameworks.
- Theoretical gaps in reconciling normative VBME with positivist evaluation traditions.
- Contextual gaps in adapting VBME principles to Kenya's political economy, institutional capacity, and climate vulnerability.
- Methodological gaps in translating systems thinking and values into measurable and actionable evaluation designs.

PRACTICES OF VALUES-BASED MONITORING AND EVALUATION WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF CLIMATE-SMART AGRICULTURE PROJECTS IN KENYA

While the principles of Values-Based Monitoring and Evaluation (VBME) articulate the ethical and normative aspirations of evaluation, it is through evaluation practices that these principles are operationalized. Practices refer to the concrete activities, tools, and methodological choices employed throughout the monitoring and evaluation lifecycle, including planning, indicator development, data collection, analysis, interpretation, reporting, and use of findings (Odhiambo-Abuya, 2025).

In the context of Climate-Smart Agriculture (CSA) projects in Kenya, VBME practices are expected to translate abstract values such as equity, participation, transparency, and sustainability into tangible evaluative actions. However, a critical examination of CSA evaluations in Kenya reveals persistent misalignments between values-based intentions and actual M&E practices. This section critiques key VBME practices as applied to CSA programs, focusing on their relevance, utility, and application, while identifying conceptual, theoretical, contextual, and methodological gaps in the extant literature.

Values-Based Evaluation Planning and Design

Values-based evaluation planning involves the deliberate identification and articulation of stakeholder values during the design of M&E frameworks, including the formulation of evaluation purposes, questions, criteria, and success definitions (Odhiambo-Abuya, 2025; Averill, 2021). For CSA projects in Kenya, such planning is highly relevant due to the diversity of stakeholder priorities across agro-ecological zones, livelihood systems, and social groups. CSA programs often pursue multiple objectives—productivity, resilience, mitigation, and inclusion—each reflecting different value positions. Values-based planning offers a mechanism for negotiating these priorities transparently and ethically.

In practice, the utility of values-based M&E planning in Kenyan CSA projects is limited by the dominance of pre-defined donor logframes and results frameworks. Evaluation designs are frequently finalized at proposal stage, leaving little room for meaningful stakeholder input once implementation begins (Kusek & Rist, 2004; Eyben, 2015). Consequently, values articulation becomes an ex-post justification exercise rather than a foundational design practice. VBME literature tends to assume evaluators have sufficient autonomy to shape evaluation designs, underestimating structural constraints imposed by funding agreements. This represents a contextual and institutional gap in VBME scholarship. Applying values-based evaluation planning requires facilitation skills, time, and institutional buy-in that are often absent in CSA projects implemented through competitive grants. As a result, evaluation plans tend to prioritize compliance over learning, limiting the transformative potential of VBME.

Development of Values-Sensitive Theories of Change

The Theory of Change (ToC) is a central evaluative practice in CSA programming. A values-sensitive ToC explicitly incorporates assumptions about equity, power relations, and social change pathways, making it a critical tool for VBME (Odhiambo-Abuya, 2025; Stein & Valters, 2012). In Kenya, where CSA interventions interact with entrenched social norms, land tenure systems, and gendered labor relations, values-sensitive ToCs are highly relevant for understanding how and for whom change occurs.

Despite their relevance, most CSA ToCs in Kenya remain technocratic and linear, emphasizing adoption of technologies and yield increases while marginalizing social transformation pathways

(Douthwaite et al., 2017). Values such as empowerment, dignity, and agency are often implicit rather than explicit, reducing their evaluative utility. VBME literature provides limited practical guidance on how to systematically embed values into ToC development beyond high-level recommendations, highlighting a methodological gap. Values-sensitive ToCs require participatory development and iterative revision, both of which are constrained by rigid project timelines and donor reporting cycles. As a result, ToCs often fail to function as living learning tools in CSA evaluations.

Formulation of Values-Driven Evaluation Questions

Values-driven evaluation questions explicitly interrogate ethical dimensions of CSA interventions, such as who benefits, who bears costs, and whose priorities are reflected in program design (Mertens, 2023; Odhiambo-Abuya, 2025). In Kenya's climate-vulnerable agricultural systems, such questions are essential for assessing justice and sustainability. In practice, evaluation questions in CSA projects tend to focus on effectiveness and efficiency, with limited attention to values-based criteria such as fairness, inclusivity, and legitimacy (Picciotto, 2020). This narrows the evaluative lens and reduces the utility of M&E for addressing structural challenges. VBME scholarship has not sufficiently influenced mainstream evaluation commissioning practices, indicating a conceptual and dissemination gap between theory and practice. Evaluators may face resistance when proposing values-driven questions perceived as politically sensitive or beyond project mandates. This constrains the application of VBME in CSA contexts characterized by power asymmetries and donor dominance.

Development of Values-Sensitive Indicators

Indicators operationalize values by translating abstract concepts such as equity and participation into measurable signals of change. For CSA projects in Kenya, values-sensitive indicators are relevant for tracking social outcomes alongside biophysical and economic metrics (Kristjanson et al., 2017). While gender-disaggregated indicators are increasingly common, deeper values such as empowerment, voice, and social cohesion remain poorly captured. Proxy indicators are often used without sufficient contextual validation, undermining their interpretive value (Doss et al., 2018). VBME literature lacks robust indicator frameworks tailored to CSA contexts, representing a methodological research gap. Operationalizing values-sensitive indicators requires mixed-

methods approaches and longitudinal data, which are often resource-intensive. Capacity constraints within implementing agencies further limit indicator innovation.

Ethical and Participatory Data Collection

Ethical and participatory data collection is central to VBME (Odhiambo-Abuya, 2025), particularly in CSA projects involving vulnerable populations affected by climate stress. Respect for dignity, informed consent, and cultural norms is essential (Chilisa et al., 2017). In practice, participatory data collection is frequently constrained by standardized tools and short fieldwork timelines. Data collectors may prioritize efficiency over depth, limiting opportunities for meaningful engagement and reflection. VBME literature emphasizes ethics but offers limited operational guidance for balancing ethical rigor with logistical constraints in large-scale CSA evaluations. Power dynamics between enumerators and respondents, language barriers, and low literacy levels pose challenges to ethical practice. These issues are insufficiently addressed in existing VBME methodological frameworks.

Values-Informed Data Analysis and Interpretation

Values-informed analysis involves interpreting data through ethical and contextual lenses, acknowledging subjectivity and multiple perspectives (Odhiambo-Abuya, 2025). In CSA evaluations, this is critical for understanding differential impacts across social groups. Despite its importance, data analysis in CSA evaluations often privileges quantitative aggregation, marginalizing qualitative insights and community narratives (Sanderson, 2003). This limits the ability of VBME to surface lived experiences and unintended outcomes. Institutional incentives favor standardized reporting formats, discouraging nuanced values-based interpretation. VBME literature has yet to offer scalable analytical models suitable for donor-funded CSA programs.

Reporting and Utilization of Evaluation Findings

Values-based reporting emphasizes accessibility, inclusivity, and ethical use of findings (Odhiambo-Abuya, 2025). For CSA projects in Kenya, reporting is relevant not only for accountability but also for learning and empowerment. In practice, evaluation reports are often technical and upward-facing, limiting their usefulness to local stakeholders. Feedback loops to communities are weak, undermining VBME's transformative intent (Guijt & Taylor, 2019). Time

and budget constraints, coupled with donor reporting requirements, limit innovation in values-based dissemination approaches. This reflects a persistent practice-to-use gap in VBME.

The critique of VBME practices reveals:

- Conceptual gaps in translating values into operational M&E designs.
- Methodological gaps in indicator development, ToC integration, and data analysis.
- Contextual gaps in adapting practices to Kenya's institutional and political realities.
- Utilization gaps in ensuring values-based findings inform decision-making.

PROCESSES OF VALUES-BASED MONITORING AND EVALUATION WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF CLIMATE-SMART AGRICULTURE PROJECTS IN KENYA

Values-Based Monitoring and Evaluation (VBME) processes refer to the sequential, iterative, and relational steps through which values are embedded across the entire monitoring and evaluation lifecycle—from initial stakeholder engagement and baseline formulation to monitoring, reflection, learning, and adaptive decision-making (Averill, 2021; Odhiambo-Abuya, 2025). In Climate-Smart Agriculture (CSA) projects in Kenya, VBME processes are expected to enable ethical sense-making in contexts characterized by climatic uncertainty, socio-economic inequality, institutional complexity, and dynamic ecological systems. While VBME processes are conceptually well aligned with adaptive and systems-oriented climate programming, their practical implementation within Kenyan CSA projects remains limited and uneven. This section critiques the relevance, utility, and application of core VBME processes in CSA evaluations and identifies persistent gaps in existing literature and practice.

Values-Based Stakeholder Identification and Engagement Processes

Values-based stakeholder identification extends beyond mapping formal project actors to recognizing individuals and groups (Odhiambo-Abuya, 2025) affected by CSA interventions, including marginalized populations such as women farmers, pastoralists, youth, and informal agricultural workers. In Kenya, where climate impacts and agricultural livelihoods vary significantly across regions, such inclusive processes are highly relevant (Kristjanson et al., 2017; IPCC, 2022).

VBME emphasizes early and continuous engagement to surface diverse value systems, expectations, and priorities, thereby shaping evaluation design and interpretation (Odhiambo-Abuya, 2025). In practice, stakeholder engagement processes in CSA projects are often front-loaded during inception phases and diminish over time. Engagement tends to focus on administrative stakeholders—government officials, implementing partners, and donors—while community engagement remains consultative rather than deliberative (Cornwall, 2008). This limits the utility of VBME processes in fostering shared ownership of evaluation findings and adaptive learning. VBME literature insufficiently addresses how sustained engagement can be institutionalized within long-term CSA programming, revealing a process design gap. Power asymmetries, elite capture, and logistical constraints complicate stakeholder engagement in Kenya's rural contexts. VBME frameworks often under-theorize power dynamics, assuming good-faith participation without adequately addressing structural inequalities.

Values-Based Baseline Development

Baseline studies establish reference points against which change is assessed. In VBME, baselines are not merely statistical benchmarks but values-laden representations of social, economic, and ecological realities (Picciotto, 2020; Odhiambo-Abuya, 2025). For CSA projects in Kenya, values-based baselines are critical for capturing pre-intervention conditions related to vulnerability, adaptive capacity, and social relations. Despite their relevance, CSA baselines in Kenya frequently emphasize biophysical and economic indicators while neglecting social values such as trust, agency, and collective action (Doss et al., 2018). This constrains the ability of evaluations to assess transformative change. VBME literature offers limited methodological guidance on integrating qualitative, participatory, and narrative methods into baseline processes, highlighting a methodological gap. Time and budget constraints often lead to rapid baseline assessments, limiting depth and stakeholder involvement. This undermines the credibility and ethical grounding of baselines used in CSA evaluations.

Continuous Monitoring through a Values Lens

Continuous monitoring is essential for tracking progress, detecting unintended outcomes, and supporting adaptive management in climate-sensitive programs. VBME reframes monitoring as an ongoing ethical inquiry rather than a compliance exercise (Averill, 2021; Odhiambo-Abuya,

2025). In Kenya's CSA context, where climate variability introduces uncertainty, values-based monitoring is highly relevant for responsive decision-making. In practice, monitoring systems in CSA projects remain indicator-driven and reporting-oriented. Data is often collected to satisfy donor requirements rather than to inform local learning and adaptation (Guijt, 2014). This limits the utility of VBME processes in enabling timely course correction and ethical reflection. Existing VBME literature does not sufficiently engage with institutional incentives that shape monitoring practices. Capacity constraints, data quality issues, and limited digital infrastructure hinder continuous, values-oriented monitoring in many Kenyan counties. VBME frameworks often assume capacities that do not exist uniformly across implementation contexts.

Reflective Learning and Sense-Making Processes

Reflective learning is a core VBME process that enables stakeholders to interpret evidence collectively, surface values, and derive meaning from evaluation findings (Patton, 2011; Odhiambo-Abuya, 2025). In CSA projects, reflective learning is vital for understanding complex change processes and contextual variability. Although learning is frequently cited as an evaluation objective, structured reflection spaces are rare in CSA projects in Kenya. Learning is often individual rather than collective, and lessons are documented but not internalized or acted upon.

VBME literature tends to emphasize learning conceptually without sufficiently addressing how learning is institutionalized within organizations, indicating a theoretical and organizational gap. Hierarchical organizational cultures and performance-driven accountability systems discourage open reflection on failure and unintended outcomes. This undermines the transformative potential of VBME processes.

Adaptive Management and Decision-Making

Adaptive management is central to climate resilience programming. VBME aligns with adaptive management by linking values-based evidence to decision-making processes (IPCC, 2022). In Kenya's CSA programs, adaptive decision-making is particularly relevant given increasing climate uncertainty and socio-economic volatility. Despite its relevance, adaptive management remains constrained by rigid project designs, inflexible budgets, and donor reporting requirements (Eyben et al., 2015). Evaluation findings often arrive too late or lack decision-making authority.

VBME literature underestimates these structural constraints, highlighting a contextual and political economy gap. Decision-making authority in CSA projects is frequently centralized, limiting the influence of community-level values and evidence. This disconnect reduces the practical impact of VBME processes.

Ethical Closure, Feedback, and Accountability Loops

VBME emphasizes ethical closure—ensuring findings are shared responsibly, feedback is incorporated, and accountability loops are closed (Odhiambo-Abuya, 2025). In CSA projects, this is critical for sustaining trust and legitimacy. In practice, feedback to communities is inconsistent, and evaluation findings are often disseminated in inaccessible formats. This limits the ethical and practical utility of VBME. VBME literature provides limited operational guidance on closing feedback loops in large-scale development programs, representing a practice-to-ethics gap. Resource constraints and donor-centric reporting priorities limit investment in community feedback mechanisms. This undermines downward accountability in CSA evaluations.

The critique of VBME processes reveals:

- Conceptual gaps in theorizing power and ethics across the M&E lifecycle.
- Methodological gaps in baseline design, monitoring systems, and learning processes.
- Contextual gaps related to institutional capacity, political economy, and decentralization.
- Practical gaps in closing feedback and accountability loops.

SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This conceptual paper set out to critically examine the relevance, utility, and application of Values-Based Monitoring and Evaluation (VBME) within the context of Climate-Smart Agriculture (CSA) programs in Kenya. Through a structured critique of VBME principles, practices, and processes, the analysis reveals that while VBME offers a compelling ethical and conceptual alternative to conventional monitoring and evaluation approaches, its operationalization within Kenyan CSA programs remains limited, fragmented, and uneven.

Across all three analytical dimensions-principles, practices, and processes-the paper finds a persistent misalignment between normative aspirations and implementation realities. At the level

of principles, VBME strongly aligns with the ethical demands of CSA programming in Kenya, particularly in relation to participation, equity, transparency, systems thinking, and adaptability. However, these principles are often applied superficially or selectively, constrained by donor-driven accountability frameworks, technocratic evaluation cultures, and entrenched power asymmetries. Participation tends to be instrumental rather than transformative, equity is treated as a secondary consideration, and systems thinking is acknowledged rhetorically but rarely operationalized in evaluation designs.

The critique of VBME practices highlights significant methodological and institutional limitations. Values-based M&E planning, theories of change, indicator development, and data analysis practices are frequently overridden by pre-determined logframes and standardized reporting requirements. As a result, values such as empowerment, dignity, agency, and social justice remain under-measured or inadequately captured. Ethical and participatory data collection practices are constrained by time, capacity, and logistical pressures, while values-informed interpretation and utilization of findings are undermined by upward-facing reporting systems that marginalize local learning and decision-making.

At the level of processes, the analysis demonstrates that VBME's transformative potential is further weakened by fragmented stakeholder engagement, shallow baseline studies, compliance-oriented monitoring systems, weak reflective learning mechanisms, and limited adaptive decision-making authority. Feedback and accountability loops to communities are inconsistent, reducing trust and legitimacy. Collectively, these process-level constraints reveal that VBME in Kenyan CSA programs operates more as an aspirational framework than as an institutionalized evaluation practice.

Importantly, the paper identifies four interrelated research gaps that cut across principles, practices, and processes. First, there are conceptual gaps in translating abstract values into context-specific evaluation criteria for CSA programs. Second, theoretical gaps persist in reconciling normative, values-driven evaluation approaches with dominant positivist and results-based evaluation traditions. Third, contextual gaps emerge from insufficient engagement with Kenya's political economy, decentralization dynamics, institutional capacity constraints, and socio-cultural

diversity. Finally, methodological gaps are evident in the lack of practical tools and frameworks for operationalizing systems thinking, equity analysis, and values-based learning in large-scale CSA evaluations.

CONCLUSIONS

The analysis concludes that Values-Based Monitoring and Evaluation is both necessary and timely for Climate-Smart Agriculture programs in Kenya, given the ethical, social, and ecological complexities associated with climate change adaptation and agricultural transformation. Conventional M&E approaches, with their emphasis on technical efficiency and measurable outputs, are insufficient for capturing the multidimensional outcomes and normative trade-offs inherent in CSA interventions. VBME offers a more holistic, ethically grounded, and context-responsive framework capable of addressing these limitations.

However, the paper also concludes that VBME, as currently conceptualized and applied, remains under-institutionalized within CSA programming in Kenya. Its principles are widely endorsed but weakly embedded; its practices are constrained by donor architectures and capacity limitations; and its processes are disrupted by hierarchical decision-making and accountability systems. Without deliberate efforts to address these structural and institutional barriers, VBME risks being reduced to a rhetorical add-on rather than a transformative evaluation paradigm.

Ultimately, advancing VBME in CSA programs requires a shift from viewing evaluation as a neutral, technical exercise toward recognizing it as a normative, political, and ethical practice. Such a shift has implications not only for evaluators, but also for donors, implementing agencies, policymakers, and communities engaged in climate-resilient agricultural development.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the critique and conclusions, the paper proposes the following recommendations to strengthen the design, implementation, and use of Values-Based Monitoring and Evaluation in Climate-Smart Agriculture programs in Kenya:

First, CSA programs should institutionalize values articulation at the earliest stages of program

and M&E design. Donors and implementing agencies should require explicit identification and negotiation of stakeholder values, including equity, inclusion, sustainability, and dignity, and embed these values within theories of change, evaluation questions, and success criteria.

Second, evaluation commissioning frameworks should move beyond rigid logframes to allow greater flexibility for values-based and systems-oriented evaluation designs. This includes permitting adaptive indicators, mixed-methods approaches, and iterative learning processes that reflect the dynamic nature of climate change and agricultural systems.

Third, capacity strengthening for VBME should be prioritized at both national and county levels. Evaluators, government officials, and implementing partners require targeted training in values-based evaluation, systems thinking, participatory methods, and ethical sense-making to operationalize VBME effectively within CSA programs.

Fourth, CSA evaluations should strengthen equity-focused and power-sensitive methodologies. This includes deeper analysis of gender, land tenure, labor relations, and intra-household dynamics, moving beyond disaggregated data toward structural analysis of vulnerability and resilience.

Fifth, monitoring and evaluation systems should be reoriented toward learning and adaptive management rather than compliance. This requires creating safe institutional spaces for reflection, acknowledging failure, and using values-based evidence to inform real-time decision-making.
Sixth, downward accountability and ethical feedback mechanisms should be strengthened. Evaluation findings must be communicated in accessible formats and local languages, with structured opportunities for community validation, dialogue, and response, thereby closing accountability loops and reinforcing trust.

Finally, future research should focus on developing context-specific VBME frameworks for CSA programs in sub-Saharan Africa, with Kenya as a critical case. Empirical studies are needed to test and refine values-based indicators, participatory processes, and systems-oriented methodologies that can be scaled within donor-funded climate and agricultural programs.

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