

**AFRICA
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From Principles to Practice: The AEN Manifesto Innovation Challenge

Recognising Innovative and Efficient Applications of the AEN
Manifesto on Capacity Development for EIDM in Africa



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Background

The Africa Evidence Network (AEN) launched its Manifesto on Capacity Development for Evidence-Informed Decision-Making (EIDM) in Africa in 2020 to reframe how capacity is understood, practised, and valued across Africa's evidence ecosystems. Grounded in principles of African leadership, equity, contextual relevance, collaboration, and decoloniality, the Manifesto challenges extractive, externally driven, and technocratic approaches to capacity development.

Through initiatives such as the #LivingTheManifesto Storytelling Challenge, the AEN has demonstrated that the Manifesto resonates strongly with practitioners, institutions, and communities across the continent. Members are not only engaging with the Manifesto conceptually but are actively adapting and applying it in their everyday work, often in innovative, low-cost, and contextually grounded ways.

The Manifesto Innovation Challenge builds on this momentum. It seeks to move beyond documentation and reflection toward recognition and learning by identifying and rewarding ten (10) of the most efficient and innovative uses of the Manifesto within a given year. In doing so, the challenge positions innovation not as novelty or scale, but as principled practice under real-world constraints.

Purpose and Objectives

Purpose

To recognise, reward, and learn from innovative and efficient applications of the AEN Manifesto on Capacity Development for EIDM in Africa, while reinforcing African-led, decolonial approaches to evidence use.

Specific Objectives

The challenge aims to accomplish the following specific objectives:

- To identify ten (10) innovative practices that meaningfully apply the Manifesto's principles in diverse African contexts;
- To celebrate efficiency, creativity, and contextual intelligence in capacity development for EIDM;
- To generate practical learning for the AEN community on how the Manifesto can be operationalised;
- To strengthen a culture of values-based innovation within Africa's evidence ecosystems; and
- To culminate in shared reflection and recognition during Africa Evidence Week 2026 (AFEW 2026).

What the Challenge Is (and Is Not)

What the Challenge Is

The Challenge is intentionally framed to reflect the AEN's philosophy that capacity development is not a product to be delivered, but a practice to be nurtured. In a landscape where innovation is often equated with scale, technology, or funding size, this challenge reorients attention toward values, process, and context. It invites participants to engage not with a narrow definition of success, but with a principled question: what does it look like to live the Manifesto under real-world conditions? By clarifying what the challenge seeks to encourage, and what it deliberately resists, the AEN affirms its commitment to decolonial, African-led approaches that prioritise learning, relationships, and meaningful change over performative compliance. The following are specific notions of what this challenge is:

- A values-led recognition initiative, not a funding competition;
- A platform for African (or Africa-based or Africa-focused) EIDM practitioners to define innovation on their own terms;
- A learning mechanism that surfaces practical adaptations of the Manifesto; and
- A way of rewarding efficiency, relational work, and principled experimentation.

What the Challenge Is Not

Equally important is clarity about what the Manifesto Innovation Challenge does not seek to promote. In setting these boundaries, the AEN intentionally resists dominant logics that often shape competitive initiatives in the evidence and development space: logics that privilege scale over substance, novelty over relevance, and external validation over local meaning. By articulating what the challenge is not, the AEN protects the integrity of the Manifesto and signals that recognition will not be driven by visibility, resources, or performative innovation, but by grounded practice, ethical intent, and alignment with African realities. This distinction ensures that the challenge remains a space for authentic learning and principled experimentation, rather than replication of extractive or exclusionary models. Specific notions of these are presented below:

- Not a competition for the biggest project or budget;
- Not limited to formal programmes or institutions;
- Not technology-centric by default; and
- Not extractive or externally judged using imported metrics.

Defining Innovation and Efficiency

Innovation

Within the Challenge, innovation is understood as a contextual and values-driven practice, rather than novelty, scale, or technological advancement. It is recognised where actors creatively interpret and apply the AEN Manifesto in ways that respond meaningfully to their social, institutional, and cultural realities. This framing deliberately departs from dominant models that equate innovation with visibility or disruption, emphasising relevance, ethical intent, and alignment with African-led approaches to capacity development instead.

Innovation may be expressed through practices that prioritise capacity sharing over capacity building, integrate indigenous knowledge and lived experience, or reconfigure power relations within evidence systems. It often emerges in quiet, adaptive ways, embedded in everyday work rather than formal programmes or high-cost interventions. Under this challenge, innovation is recognised where practice demonstrates clear alignment with the Manifesto's principles, contributes to learning or change, and offers insights that others across Africa's evidence ecosystem can adapt to their own contexts.

Efficiency

Efficiency is understood in this Challenge not as cost-cutting or speed, but as an intentional, resource-conscious practice. It refers to how actors achieve meaningful learning, change, or influence using available resources—financial, relational, and institutional—without reproducing extractive or unsustainable approaches. This framing recognises that many African practitioners operate under significant constraints, and that efficiency often lies in working creatively within those realities rather than overcoming them through scale or external inputs.

This may be demonstrated through the strategic use of existing relationships, knowledge, and structures (including co-creation mechanisms); by embedding evidence use and learning into everyday processes; or by reducing duplication and administrative burden. Practices that prioritise trust, continuity, and local ownership often prove more efficient over time than short-term, resource-intensive interventions. Under this challenge, efficiency is recognised where initiatives show thoughtful stewardship of resources, alignment with the Manifesto's values, and the ability to generate lasting learning or impact without disproportionate investment.

Eligibility

The challenge will be open to the following categories of applicants:

- AEN members and partner organisations.
- Individual practitioners, collectives, networks, or institutions.
- Initiatives started within the preceding 12–18 months, but are still active for at least 6 months this year.

Submissions may relate to any sector (health, education, climate, governance, etc.) and may be formal or informal in nature.

Selection Criteria

Submissions will be assessed using a Manifesto-aligned rubric, focusing on the following principles:

- **Manifesto Alignment:** Demonstrated application of the Manifesto’s principles in practice.
- **Innovative Practice:** Creativity, contextual adaptation, and non-traditional approaches.
- **Efficiency and Resourcefulness:** Evidence of impact or learning achieved with modest inputs.
- **African Leadership and Decolonial Orientation:** Local ownership, agency, and epistemic justice.
- **Learning and Transferability:** Clarity of insights that others can learn from.

Ten (10) initiatives will be selected as Manifesto Innovation Awardees.

Recognition and Rewards

By participating in this Challenge, Awardees will receive:

- Recognition as AEN Manifesto Innovation Awardees (2026).
- Visibility across AEN platforms (website, newsletter, social media).
- Documentation of their innovation (short case profile or video).
- Featuring during Africa Evidence Week 2026.
- Modest financial or in-kind recognition (subject to resource availability).

Timeline of Activities

Specific dates of Activities

1. Call for Submissions – 6 March to 29 May
 - a. Public launch of the challenge – 6 March
 - b. Dissemination through the AEN’s comms platforms – 9 March
 - c. Information session – 1 April
 - d. Webinar – 29 April
2. Submission Period - 9 March to 29 May
3. Review and Selection – 1 June to 31 July
4. Documentation and Learning – 1 July to 31 August
5. Culmination at AFEW 2026 – TBD

Expected Outcomes

Below are some expected outcomes from the Manifesto Challenge:

- Increased uptake and practical use of the AEN Manifesto.
- Greater visibility for African-led innovation in capacity development.
- A growing repository of lived, contextualised Manifesto applications.
- Strengthened learning culture within the AEN and its community.
- Reinforcement of decolonial approaches to evidence and capacity.