

IfEDI AFRICA

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT & INNOVATION EXCELLENCE AWARDS 2026

AWARDS HANDBOOK

Categories, eligibility, nomination requirements, judging and governance

Recognising Excellence. Celebrating Impact. Advancing Africa.

Presented at ACOEDI 2026 | 26-29 October 2026 | Emperors Palace Convention Centre, Johannesburg, South Africa

1. Purpose of the Excellence Awards

The IfEDI Africa Economic Development & Innovation Excellence Awards recognise outstanding professional, institutional and collaborative contributions to economic development and innovation in Africa. They are designed to make excellent practice visible, encourage evidence-based implementation, promote ethical leadership and create credible reference points for practitioners and institutions seeking to improve development outcomes.

The awards are aligned with IfEDI Africa's commitment to professional excellence, evidence-based practice, ethical leadership, innovation and impactful economic development. They are presented annually at ACOEDI as part of the broader professional and knowledge ecosystem surrounding economic development and innovation.

AWARDS ARCHITECTURE

Certification recognises demonstrated professional competence. Continuing professional development helps keep that competence current. Professional standards define expectations for good practice. The Excellence Awards recognise exceptional application and impact. ACOEDI provides the annual continental platform at which learning and excellence are shared and recognised.

2. Separation from ACOEDI paper and innovation awards

IfEDI Africa Excellence Awards	ACOEDI Paper / Innovation Competition Awards
Recognise people, institutions, partnerships and sustained practice.	Recognise a paper, conference presentation, research submission, pitch or innovation entered into an ACOEDI competition.
Assessment is based on demonstrated track record, evidence and impact.	Assessment is based principally on the submitted or presented conference entry and relevant competition criteria.
A nominee does not need to be an ACOEDI paper presenter.	Entry is linked to the applicable ACOEDI submission/presentation process.

IfEDI Africa Excellence Awards	ACOEDI Paper / Innovation Competition Awards
Conferred by IfEDI Africa and presented at ACOEDI.	Conferred within the ACOEDI conference competition structure.

No nominee may rely on the quality of a single ACOEDI paper, presentation or innovation entry as the primary basis for an Excellence Award. Such work may be supporting evidence only where it demonstrates a broader record of impact.

3. Geographic scope, assessment period and general eligibility

- The awards are African in scope. Individuals should be African-based or demonstrate substantial professional impact in Africa; institutions and partnerships should demonstrate substantial activity and impact within Africa.
- For the 2026 competitive awards, the primary assessment period is 1 September 2023 to 31 August 2026. Earlier achievements may be referenced where necessary to demonstrate continuity, sustainability, institutionalisation, progression or longer-term impact.
- Competitive nominations may be submitted by a credible third-party nominator or by self-nomination, except where a category states otherwise.
- A nominee may be entered in more than one category only where each nomination demonstrates a genuinely distinct basis for recognition. The Secretariat may reassign or consolidate nominations where categories materially overlap.
- ACOEDI conference registration, attendance, paper submission or innovation entry is not part of the adjudication criteria for the Excellence Awards.
- The adjudication panel may request clarification, independent verification, additional evidence or an interview at any stage.
- Incomplete, misleading or materially unsubstantiated nominations may be excluded.

3.1 Awards independence, declaration and recusal safeguards

Nomination, judging and award outcomes are independent of IfEDI Africa membership, professional certification, sponsorship, commercial relationships, ACOEDI registration or conference participation. Service on an IfEDI Africa board, council, committee or other governance structure, or an institutional relationship with IfEDI Africa, does not automatically disqualify a nominee. The integrity safeguard is full declaration, transparent management of conflicts and mandatory recusal.

- Every nominator and nominee must disclose any material governance, employment, advisory, financial, sponsorship, partnership, professional or institutional relationship that could reasonably be perceived as relevant to the awards process.
- Every judge, Awards Council member and Secretariat official must sign a confidentiality and conflict-of-interest declaration before participating in the awards cycle and must update it if circumstances change.
- A person with a material personal, professional, financial, governance or institutional conflict must recuse themselves from screening, scoring, verification, moderation and deliberation on the affected nomination.
- Each eligible nomination must receive at least two independent scores from non-conflicted adjudicators before shortlisting.
- Where a nominee has a material connection to IfEDI Africa governance or awards administration, processing, verification and adjudication of that nomination must be assigned to non-conflicted personnel and adjudicators.

- The Awards Secretariat must maintain a conflict-of-interest and recusal register for the awards cycle, recording declarations, recusals and replacement allocations.
- Sponsorship, partnership, membership, certification, conference participation or other commercial relationships may not be considered as positive or negative factors in judging.

3.2 Awards Council

For each awards cycle, IfEDI Africa will constitute an Awards Council as the governance and integrity oversight body for the Excellence Awards. The Awards Council oversees the integrity of the process, confirms adjudicator appointments, reviews conflict-of-interest arrangements, supports due diligence for the Distinguished Contribution Special Honour and addresses process-level governance matters. It does not replace the adjudication panel, alter properly recorded scores or select competitive-category winners outside the published assessment process.

Awards Council members are subject to the same declaration, confidentiality and mandatory recusal requirements as adjudicators. Where a matter concerns a person or institution connected to an Awards Council member, that member must withdraw from all consideration of that matter.

4. Award categories and category-specific criteria

1. Economic Development Professional of the Year

The flagship individual award for a practitioner whose leadership, professional practice and results demonstrate exceptional contribution to economic development and innovation.

Eligible nominees: Economic development professionals, LED practitioners, investment and enterprise development specialists, policy and programme leaders, development consultants and comparable practitioners.

Category-specific 40%: Professional leadership and judgement (10%); scope and depth of economic-development results (15%); contribution to professional practice and capability building (10%); influence and replication beyond the nominee's immediate role (5%).

2. Young Economic Development Professional of the Year

Recognises exceptional early-career professional achievement, leadership and measurable development impact.

Eligible nominees: Individuals aged 35 or younger on 20 September 2026 who are active in economic development or innovation practice.

Category-specific 40%: Early-career achievement relative to opportunity (10%); initiative and leadership (10%); quality of measurable outcomes (10%); future professional contribution and sector influence (10%).

3. CEDEL Ethical Leadership Award

Recognises leadership distinguished by integrity, accountability, ethical judgement, public value and professional conduct in difficult or consequential economic-development settings.

Eligible nominees: Senior or emerging leaders in public, private, academic, development and civil-society institutions.

Category-specific 40%: Demonstrated ethical judgement (15%); governance and accountability leadership (10%); institutional culture and integrity systems (10%); public trust and professional example (5%).

4. Economic Development & Innovation Institution of the Year

The apex institutional award for an organisation demonstrating strong institutional capability, measurable development impact and consistent excellence.

Eligible nominees: Public entities, development organisations, economic-development institutions, DFIs, chambers, NGOs/NPOs, private-sector organisations and comparable institutions.

Category-specific 40%: Institutional strategy and execution (10%); breadth and depth of outcomes (15%); organisational capability and learning (10%); system-level influence (5%).

5. Municipal Economic Development Excellence Award

Recognises a municipality or metropolitan government that has moved beyond planning to credible implementation and demonstrable local economic outcomes.

Eligible nominees: Local, district and metropolitan municipalities and formally constituted municipal economic-development units.

Category-specific 40%: Implementation discipline and institutional capability (10%); local economic outcomes (15%); business/community coordination (10%); integration with spatial and municipal systems (5%).

6. Economic Development Agency Excellence Award

Recognises a development, investment or economic-growth agency demonstrating exceptional implementation, enterprise support, investment mobilisation or economic transformation outcomes.

Eligible nominees: Provincial/local development agencies, investment promotion agencies and comparable economic-development agencies.

Category-specific 40%: Investment/enterprise development outcomes (15%); implementation effectiveness (10%); market and stakeholder mobilisation (10%); additionality and system impact (5%).

7. University & Knowledge Institution Economic Development Leadership Award

Recognises a university, research institution or knowledge organisation that converts research, skills, innovation and engagement into demonstrable economic-development value.

Eligible nominees: Universities, research institutes, policy centres and knowledge institutions.

Category-specific 40%: Translation of knowledge into practice (15%); economic/community engagement outcomes (10%); skills and capability contribution (10%); knowledge-system partnerships (5%).

8. Enterprise & Innovation Ecosystem Excellence Award

Recognises an institution strengthening the environment in which entrepreneurs, enterprises and innovators can start, survive, scale, commercialise and compete.

Eligible nominees: Innovation hubs, incubators, accelerators, entrepreneurship-support organisations, technology-transfer entities, industry platforms and comparable ecosystem institutions.

Category-specific 40%: Enterprise/innovator outcomes (15%); ecosystem connectivity and partnerships (10%); commercialisation/market access contribution (10%); replicability of the support model (5%).

9. Economic Development Partnership of the Year

Recognises a cross-institutional partnership delivering measurable outcomes that would have been difficult for any partner to achieve alone.

Eligible nominees: Partnerships involving two or more independent organisations, including public-private, university-industry, government-community, regional or cross-border partnerships.

Category-specific 40%: Complementarity of partner roles (10%); collective outcomes and additionality (15%); partnership governance and accountability (10%); transferability of the partnership model (5%).

10. Evidence-to-Policy & Practice Impact Award

Recognises demonstrable translation of evidence, research or knowledge into policy, institutional decisions, programmes or economic-development practice. It rewards influence and application rather than the quality of a single paper.

Eligible nominees: Individuals, research teams, universities, public bodies, policy organisations and knowledge institutions.

Category-specific 40%: Evidence uptake and documented influence (15%); implementation or decision consequences (10%); quality of knowledge translation (10%); reach beyond a single publication/output (5%).

11. Economic Development Enablers & Catalysts Excellence Award

Recognises exceptional use of an enabling system, asset, instrument or capability as a deliberate instrument of economic development. The award focuses on what the enabler unlocked economically, rather than rewarding the sector, infrastructure asset or technology in isolation.

Eligible nominees: Institutions and partnerships that can demonstrate a clear and credible link between an enabling system or instrument and measurable economic-development outcomes in Africa.

Category-specific 40%: Economic-development additionality created through the enabler (15%); deliberate linkage between the enabler and an economic-development strategy or opportunity (10%); measurable productive, market, investment, enterprise, employment or place-based outcomes (10%); replication and wider system value (5%).

How the Enablers & Catalysts pathway works

Core principle: the judges assess the use of the enabler for economic development, not technical performance or scale alone. A large energy, water, transport, digital or other project does not qualify merely because it exists; the nomination must show how it unlocked productive activity, investment, enterprise development, productivity, employment, market access, inclusion or transformation of a place or economic system.

Productive infrastructure: Energy for Economic Development; Water for Economic Development; Transport & Mobility for Economic Development; Digital Infrastructure for Economic Development.

Economic instruments: Finance for Economic Development; Procurement for Economic Development; Trade & Market Access for Economic Development.

Knowledge and capability: Skills for Economic Development; Universities & Knowledge for Economic Development; Data & Intelligence for Economic Development; Technology & AI for Economic Development.

Place and productive assets: Land & Spatial Development for Economic Development; Natural Resources for Economic Development; Human Settlements for Economic Development; Food Systems for Economic Development.

Place-based and societal catalysts: Tourism for Economic Development; Culture & Creative Industries for Economic Development; Sport for Economic Development; Human Mobility & Diaspora for Economic Development.

Transition and resilience: Climate, Green & Circular Transition for Economic Development; Health Systems for Economic Development where the nomination demonstrates wider productive and economic value.

The list is illustrative rather than exhaustive. The Secretariat may accept another enabling system or capability where the nomination clearly demonstrates its economic-development purpose and outcomes. Application areas do not constitute separate awards and do not guarantee a category winner.

ENABLERS & CATALYSTS ADJUDICATION SAFEGUARD

Where specialist technical knowledge is required, an Enablers & Catalysts nomination should be reviewed by at least one relevant domain assessor together with economic-development adjudicators. Technical expertise informs verification, but the award is determined against the same published economic-development assessment framework and category criteria.

Special Honour: Distinguished Contribution to African Economic Development & Innovation

This honour recognises sustained, exceptional contribution over an extended period and is not treated as a standard competitive award. The Awards Council may identify candidates directly, may consider credible external nominations, and must complete appropriate due diligence before conferral. Self-nomination is not accepted for this honour. Any Awards Council member with a material relationship to a candidate must declare the relationship and recuse themselves from consideration of that candidate.

IMPORTANT

The CEDEL Ethical Leadership Award is recognition of excellence. It does not itself confer IfEDI professional certification or the CrCEDEL professional designation.

5. Assessment framework

Every competitive nomination is assessed out of 100. The common core establishes a consistent IfEDI standard across all awards; the category-specific component tests the distinctive form of excellence relevant to the category.

Common core criterion	Weight	What judges should test
Demonstrated impact	20%	What changed because of the nominee? Are outcomes material, attributable and relevant to economic development or innovation?
Quality and credibility of evidence	10%	Are claims supported by credible quantitative and/or qualitative evidence, with clear sources and reasonable attribution?
Sustainability and institutionalisation	10%	Are outcomes likely to continue? Have systems, budgets, capability or institutional arrangements been established?
Ethics, governance and professional standards	10%	Does the work demonstrate integrity, accountability, sound governance and professional conduct?
Inclusion, collaboration and public value	10%	Does the work create wider value, engage relevant stakeholders and avoid narrow or extractive outcomes?
Category-specific excellence	40%	Assessed against the specific criteria published for the selected category.

5.1 Overall scoring guide

Score band	Interpretation
90-100	Exceptional / continental benchmark: independently credible evidence of extraordinary results and leadership.
80-89	Outstanding: strong evidence, clear additionality and performance substantially above normal expectations.
70-79	Excellent: credible evidence of significant results and good practice with only limited gaps.
60-69	Commendable: positive performance, but evidence, scale, originality or sustainability is not yet award-leading.
Below 60	Does not meet the Excellence Award threshold for the year.

A category winner should normally score at least 70/100. The panel retains the right to set a higher effective benchmark, to identify finalists without selecting a winner, or to withhold an award.

5.2 Criterion-level scoring anchors

Judges should apply the following anchors proportionately to each criterion. For criteria weighted above 10 points, the same performance standard is scaled to the available points.

Performance level	Guide for a 10-point criterion
Insufficient / unsubstantiated	0-2: little relevant evidence, major credibility gaps or no demonstrated result.
Limited	3-4: some relevant activity or evidence, but weak additionality, outcome clarity or verification.
Credible / competent	5-6: sound performance and supportable evidence, broadly consistent with expected good practice.
Strong / excellent	7-8: clear, well-supported results and practice materially above normal expectations.
Exceptional / benchmark	9-10: compelling, independently credible evidence of exceptional results, leadership and wider value.

6. Evidence standard

The awards prioritise demonstrated outcomes over promotional descriptions. A strong nomination should show a clear chain from challenge or opportunity to intervention, evidence and impact:

EVIDENCE NARRATIVE

Challenge -> Intervention -> Leadership / Innovation -> Evidence -> Impact -> Sustainability -> Replication or wider system value

Examples of evidence may include annual reports, audited or management information, monitoring and evaluation reports, impact assessments, policy documents, project reports, investment confirmations, beneficiary records, research uptake evidence, independent evaluations, media coverage, testimonials, letters of support and relevant photographs. Judges may discount evidence that is purely promotional, unverifiable or disconnected from the outcomes claimed.

7. Nomination process

Stage 1 - Initial nomination

- Completed official Nomination Form.
- Impact narrative within the stated word limits and directly addressing the published category-specific criteria.
- A concise list of 3-5 strongest pieces of supporting evidence.
- One independent referee endorsement.
- Signed declaration confirming accuracy and disclosure of relevant relationships or potential conflicts.
- For third-party nominations, nominee consent is not required at initial submission but must be obtained before finalist confirmation, verification and public announcement.

Eligibility screening and first-round assessment

- The Secretariat confirms completeness, eligibility, category fit and declarations. Eligibility screening does not determine merit.
- Every eligible nomination must receive at least two independent scores from non-conflicted adjudicators before shortlisting.
- Material scoring differences should be moderated and documented before the shortlist is confirmed.

Stage 2 - Finalist verification

- Additional supporting documents requested by the Secretariat or panel.
- Second independent referee endorsement where required.
- Verification of key quantitative or qualitative claims.
- Interview or clarification session where required.
- Final conflict-of-interest, eligibility and nominee-consent checks before adjudication.

8. Judging governance and integrity

- The judging panel will comprise independent senior academics, economic development professionals, industry experts, innovation specialists, public-sector leaders and other suitably qualified experts.
- Each judge must sign confidentiality and conflict-of-interest declarations before receiving nominations and update the declaration if circumstances change.
- A judge with a material personal, professional, financial, governance or institutional conflict must recuse themselves from the affected nomination.
- At least two independent scores must be recorded for every eligible nomination before shortlisting. Finalist verification and final adjudication must also be conducted by non-conflicted adjudicators.
- Material scoring differences must be discussed and documented through moderation.
- The panel may seek external technical verification where a claim is specialised or material to the result.
- The Awards Secretariat administers the process and may not override adjudication scores or select competitive-category winners.
- The panel may withhold an award where the standard has not been met, regardless of the number of nominations received.
- If material misrepresentation is discovered after announcement, IfEDI Africa may withdraw recognition following due process.

9. Confidentiality, data and evidence handling

Nomination information and evidence will be used for eligibility screening, adjudication, verification and awards administration. Access must be limited to authorised Secretariat personnel, Awards Council members, adjudicators and technical verifiers who have a legitimate role in the process and who are subject to confidentiality obligations. Confidential or commercially sensitive information should not be published without appropriate permission. Public case studies, citations or detailed impact narratives should use information approved for communication by the nominee or nominating institution.

10. What makes a strong nomination?

- Lead with the development result, not organisational history.
- Use numbers where they are meaningful, but explain what they prove.
- Distinguish outputs (activities delivered) from outcomes (what changed).
- Explain the nominee's contribution rather than claiming every result in the surrounding economy.
- Show why the work is exceptional relative to the nominee's mandate, resources and context.
- Address the published category-specific criteria directly.
- Provide evidence of sustainability, institutionalisation or replication.
- Be candid about context and evidence limitations; exaggerated claims weaken credibility.

11. Important dates

Activity	Date
Call for nominations opens	1 September 2026
Nominations close	20 September 2026, 23:59 SAST
Eligibility screening	21-23 September 2026
Independent first-round assessment	24-30 September 2026
Shortlisting and moderation	1-3 October 2026
Finalist notification	4-5 October 2026
Finalist evidence verification	5-14 October 2026
Final adjudication	15-18 October 2026
Outcome communication	19-21 October 2026
Awards ceremony at ACOEDI 2026	29 October 2026

12. Recognition of recipients

- Official IfEDI Africa Excellence Award certificate.
- Trophy or plaque.
- Recognition during ACOEDI 2026.
- Visibility through IfEDI Africa communication platforms.
- Potential inclusion in IfEDI excellence and knowledge publications.
- Recognition within Africa's economic development and innovation professional community.

ACOEDI registration or attendance is not an adjudication requirement for the Excellence Awards. Finalists are encouraged to attend where practical, but conference participation may not influence judging or award outcomes.

13. Submission and enquiries

IfEDI AFRICA AWARDS SECRETARIAT

Submit to: awards@ifedi.org | info@ifedi.org

Website: www.ifedi.org

Telephone: +27 (0) 87 551 0639

Closing date: 20 September 2026, 23:59 SAST