

Playing politics: A scoping review of African civic game initiatives for engagement and policy participation

Oscar Michael Esio and Faith Benson Ibingha

Abstract

African democracies struggle with civic disengagement, institutional distrust, and rising disinformation; meanwhile, the continent's growing games industry has become an unexpected source of civic intervention. This paper presents a scoping review of six African-developed civic game initiatives launched between 2019 and 2026 as tools for governance education, democratic participation, and policy engagement. Drawing on practitioner interviews with studio founders and developers, internal ecosystem reports, and secondary sources, including press releases, academic publications, and industry documentation, this review maps a field that has received little scholarly attention to date. The analysis applies the UN 5Ps categorization and the Play-to-Impact Framework (Esio, 2026). Developed by Africacomicaide and first presented publicly at the Games and SDG Summit at the United Nations Office at Nairobi (April 2026), this framework sets out four layers- design, distribution, measurement, and partnership- that civic games need to get right for their impact to last. The review finds that African studios and their partners are producing culturally grounded interactive experiences that tackle governance literacy, counter-disinformation, economic citizenship, and climate justice. It identifies four structural barriers: a funding gap, a data gap, policy under-engagement, and design misalignment. The paper closes with recommendations for studios, funders, policymakers, and researchers. Appendix A presents the Play-to-Impact Framework in full.

Keywords: African civic game, politics, policy, participation, engagement

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1. Introduction

Democratic institutions across Africa are facing pressure from multiple directions at once: declining youth participation, rising disinformation, and diminishing trust in government (National Endowment for Democracy, 2024). Traditional civic education has not kept pace with the young, digitally connected population. However, that same population consists of enthusiastic gamers. Africa is the world's fastest-growing gaming market, growing at 12.4% annually, worth around US\$1.8 billion, with roughly 349 million active gamers, 87% of whom are on mobile (Carry1st and Newzoo, 2025). Together, these have sparked a growing movement: the intentional use of African-developed games as platforms for civic education, governance literacy, and democratic participation. As Oscar Michael Esio, founder of Africacomcade, puts it, a game is fundamentally a communication medium, and digital games are just one specific expression of this category of purposeful play (Esio, 2026). Beyond entertainment, games work simultaneously as interactive storytelling media, learning tools, and habit-forming instruments that shape how people think and behave. In April 2026, Nairobi hosted the Games and SDG Summit at the United Nations Office at Nairobi, the only UN headquarters in the Global South, bringing together more than 150 senior leaders from the games industry, the United Nations, technology, and philanthropy. The Play-to-Impact Framework, developed by Africacomcade's Oscar Michael Esio and publicly presented at this summit, is the primary analytic lens for this paper (Esio, 2026; Games for Change, 2026). This paper presents a scoping review of six African civic game initiatives developed or launched between 2019 and 2026, guided by a single central question: which African-developed civic game initiatives have been deployed in the civic technology space during this period, and how do they engage citizens with governance, policy, and the SDGs?

2. Conceptual Framework

2.1 Games: Definition and Philosophical Grounding

A game is any fun problem-solving activity done with a playful attitude (Esio, 2026). This broad framing covers digital and video games, board games, card games, live-action simulations, and gamified challenges. It also resonates with African philosophical traditions that locate human development and civic formation within communal, participatory processes. The ubuntu philosophy, expressed in the Nguni axiom 'umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu' (a person is a person through other persons), treats personhood as something achieved through collective participation rather than as a fixed individual trait (Mbiti, 1990; Wiredu, 1996; Ramose, 2002). Applied to civic game design, this tradition suggests that games built around collective problem-solving and shared civic experience are drawing on deeply rooted African ways of participatory learning. The game jam model, where communities come together to build games, puts this ubuntu-informed approach into practice directly: knowledge gets created communally, and the act of building together is itself a form of civic participation. Esio (2026) argues that games work in four registers at once: as interactive storytelling media, giving players narrative agency in civic worlds; as learning and discovery tools, making abstract governance processes feel experiential; as social platforms, bringing people together around shared challenges; and as habit-forming instruments, building the repeated behaviours that add up to active citizenship. These registers rest on documented psychological mechanisms: social confidence and cooperative skills, the dopamine hit from completing in-game tasks, sharper critical thinking through cognitive engagement, and the state of full immersion psychologists call flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Together, these help explain why games can reach citizens on issues other media struggle to land.

2.2 Serious Games and Civic Learning

The serious game, designed for purposes beyond entertainment, has a long scholarly lineage (Abt, 1970; Zyda, 2005). Within the civic domain, researchers have examined games' capacity to simulate political systems, foster empathy across social divides, and support reflective engagement with governance challenges (Kahne, Middaugh, and Evans, 2009; Bogost, 2007). Bogost's idea that games can make arguments through their rules and systems of play is especially relevant here: a game that forces budget decisions under scarcity says more about governance trade-offs than a pamphlet ever could. Hassan (2017) goes further, arguing that governments and civic institutions should actively deploy games, and proposes a gamification framework for civic engagement platforms that moves beyond superficial reward mechanics toward genuinely systemic civic design. Fisher (2020) conducted a foundational peer-reviewed study of civic games in African democratic contexts, examining Haki2 in Kenya and Your Excellency in Nigeria. Her central finding, that civic games need to be understood through both their in-game content and the social process of making them, is foundational to this review too. This paper falls within the broader body of African civic technology research (Khene, Sieborger, and Thinyane, 2024; Karuri-Sebina & Mutua, 2023) and examines games as a distinct category of civic intervention.

2.3 Civic Games and Adjacent Categories: Conceptual Distinctions

Throughout this paper, civic game refers to a serious game whose primary or significant secondary purpose concerns civic education, governance literacy, democratic participation, economic citizenship, cultural identity, or policy advocacy (Section 3.2, criterion b). It is a subset of the broader category of serious games, games designed for purposes beyond entertainment (Abt, 1970; Michael & Chen, 2005); a serious game about health literacy or agricultural extension, for example, is not a civic game in this sense, even though it shares the same logic. Civic games are also different from gamified civic platforms, which fuse game elements, points, badges, and leaderboards onto an underlying non-game civic activity (Deterding et al., 2011): a budget-tracking website that hands out badges for completed feedback forms is gamified, but it isn't itself a game in the sense this review's first screening stage requires (Section 3.1). Educational games, another neighbouring category, share civic games' instructional intent but are aimed at formal curricular outcomes; the two overlap a lot where civic education is itself a school subject, as with Mama Atingi Shop. Game jams sit in a different spot again: a jam isn't itself a game but a time-bounded, collaborative process for making games, and this review treats it both as a production method, for GameUp Africa Jam for Democracy and the Mzansi Climate Justice Game Jam, and, following Section 5.4, as a civic practice in its own right. Civic participation, in this paper, follows Ekman and Amnå's (2012) typology, which separates manifest political participation, formal political behaviour like voting and party membership, plus protest and other extra-parliamentary action, from more latent forms: civic engagement (organised but non-political activity around collective problems) and social involvement (interest and attention short of any organised activity). The six cases here sit almost entirely in the latent category: they are trying to build civic knowledge, shift attitudes, and cultivate what Esio (2026) calls active citizenship, rather than mobilise acts such as voting or protest. That fits with the finding in Section 5.1 that none of the cases directly target electoral participation. This affects how these games are evaluated: a civic game that builds knowledge or shifts attitudes has done something real, even if it cannot be shown to have changed voting behaviour or policy outcomes. The Measurement Layer (Section 5.2) should be read with that in mind.

2.4 Theoretical Anchors for Civic Game Design

Three bodies of theory place the cases reviewed here within established scholarship. The first is civic engagement theory, particularly Ekman and Amnå's (2012) distinction between manifest and latent participation introduced in Section 2.3. This gives the Play-to-Impact Framework a vocabulary it does not otherwise have for naming what kind of civic outcome a game is actually aiming for, and for telling apart initiatives that build latent civic dispositions, which is most of what is reviewed here, from those that might mobilise manifest political action directly, none of which appear in this review. The second anchor is participatory democracy theory, associated with Pateman (1970) and Arnstein (1969), and it adds a dimension the framework does not currently spell out. Pateman (1970) distinguishes partial participation, in which multiple parties influence a decision, but one party still holds the final say, from full participation, in which decision-making power is genuinely shared. Arnstein's (1969) ladder breaks this down further into eight rungs, running from manipulation up to citizen control. The ubuntu-informed game jam model from Section 2.1, revisited in Section 5.4, where communities help create the civic artefact itself, gets close to the ladder's higher rungs of partnership and shared authorship. By contrast, a studio designing a game that communicates governance content to players, however well, without players having any say over its content or rules, sits closer to the lower rungs of informing or consultation, however engaging the result might be. The third anchor is gamification theory: Deterding et al.'s (2011) definition of gamification as the use of game design elements in non-game contexts, and Hamari, Koivisto, and Sarsa's (2014) later finding that gamification's effects are heavily dependent on context and design. Each case reviewed here uses recognisable game design elements, simulation, narrative choice, scoring, competition, and time pressure, inside a complete game rather than bolting these onto an existing civic process, which is why all six sit on the games side of the gamification/serious-games line drawn in Section 2.3 rather than the gamified-platform side.

Taken together, these three literatures explain the Play-to-Impact Framework's main contribution, which is organisational rather than explanatory. On its own, it does not predict when a civic game will actually shift civic knowledge, attitudes, or behaviour, and it does not specify how much a game's production process gives to the communities it is meant to serve, which is where participatory democracy theory comes in. What the framework offers is a practitioner-usable taxonomy that lines up with these established literatures without simply restating them. On that basis, this paper uses the framework as an emerging conceptual model for organising practice, in keeping with its origins as practitioner theory still under development as a body of scholarship.

2.5 The Play-to-Impact Framework

This framework diagnoses four structural failures in the current African civic games ecosystem: a Funding Gap (impact games depend entirely on grants with no sustainable models); a Data Gap (no standardised measurement framework for games-driven SDG outcomes exists); Policy Issues (most governments and NGOs do not treat games as a legitimate development tool); and Alignment Issues (many studios pursue social impact as a funding narrative rather than a design discipline). In response, the four-layer model prescribes Design (fun-first games with embedded revenue models); Distribution (mobile-first, offline-capable, community-anchored reach); Measurement (tracking in-game activity to real-world change); and Partnership (structures outlasting the grant cycle). Table A1 in Appendix A presents the model in full. Set against the theoretical anchors introduced in Section 2.4, the framework's four-layer model turns into design-stage prescriptions, things that civic engagement and gamification research usually only measure after the fact, as outcomes. Section 5 applies the framework's four layers to assess the six cases,

including where they fall short of its prescriptions, in keeping with its status as an emerging model that's open to revision rather than a settled theory.

3. Methodology

This paper adopts a scoping review design following Arksey and O'Malley (2005) and refined by Levac, Colquhoun, and O'Brien (2010). The scoping review is appropriate because the field is nascent and heterogeneous, the evidence base is mixed, and the aim is to map terrain and identify gaps rather than synthesise outcomes from comparable studies. The primary research question is: What African-developed civic game initiatives have been deployed as civic technology interventions between 2019 and 2026, and how do they align with the Play-to-Impact Framework's four-layer model? Case identification followed a dual strategy. The primary track drew on the authors' direct access to the African civic games ecosystem through Africacomcade's network, including structured conversations and informal interviews with founders and developers. The secondary track employed targeted Google Scholar searches using Boolean strings and keywords, as well as press releases from commissioning organisations.

3.1 Search Strategy and Screening

The search strategy yielded an initial pool of over 300 games, game-based projects, and game-adjacent civic-creative initiatives created by African studios, developers, or collectives during the review period. This pool was narrowed down to the six cases presented in Section 4 through a sequential screening process, summarised in Figure 1. The first screening stage removed candidates that did not meet the definition of a serious game (Abt, 1970), or that were not themselves games or game-based interventions at all. Given that Africa's games market is overwhelmingly entertainment-first (Carry1st and Newzoo, 2025), this stage accounted for the substantial majority of the initial pool. The second stage removed serious games whose primary or significant secondary purpose did not concern civic education, governance literacy, democratic participation, economic citizenship, cultural identity, or policy advocacy. This excluded serious games addressing other domains, such as health, agriculture, or general literacy, that lacked a civic or governance dimension. The third and final stage removed candidates whose leadership, funding, or production was close enough to Africacomcade that keeping them in would have risked the review's positionality. Three candidates were excluded at this stage (Table 2). Because the search was an iterative, practitioner-led process across multiple databases, repositories, and ecosystem contacts rather than a single database export, the running totals at each screening stage were not tracked precisely enough to report as numbers. The screening process is therefore described narratively rather than as a numerical PRISMA-style diagram with stage counts. The initial pool size ($n = 332$) and final inclusion count ($n = 6$) are solid, however, and Figure 1 lays out the screening stages in sequence.

Initial pool identified through dual-track search and ecosystem mapping (n = 332)
Stage 1 - Excluded: not a serious game, or not itself a game or game-based intervention
Stage 2 - Excluded: no civic education, governance, democratic participation, or policy dimension
Stage 3 - Excluded: not publicly released or independently documented, or the primary deliverable is a non-games transmedia output
Stage 4 - Excluded: Africacomicaide-affiliated, creating a conflict-of-interest risk to positionality (n = 3; see Table 2)
Cases included in this review (n = 6; see Section 4 and Table 1)

Figure 1: Screening Process Applied to the Initial Pool of African Civic Game Initiatives

3.2 Case Selection Criteria

Cases were included where: (a) the initiative was led primarily by an African studio or organisation from 2019; (b) its primary or significant secondary purpose concerns civic education, governance literacy, democratic participation, economic citizenship, cultural identity, or policy advocacy; (c) it targets African players or communities; and (d) sufficient independent documentation exists from at least two sources. Six cases met all the inclusion criteria after the full screening process described in Section 3.1. The review does not claim to provide exhaustive coverage of African civic game activity and acknowledges that many smaller initiatives exist across the continent.

3.3 Data Sources and Their Limitations

The evidence base for the six included cases draws on five categories of source, summarised in Table 3 together with their respective strengths and limitations.

Table 3: Data Sources Used in This Review and Their Limitations

Source Type	Examples Used in This Review	Strengths	Limitations
Press releases and official announcements	Capitec Bank (2019). African Union (2022); Maliyo Games (2024)	Timely; authoritative on launch dates, partners, and design rationale	Promotional framing; rarely report outcomes beyond reach
Industry and trade press	Games Industry Africa; Digital Times Africa; Ventureburn; The East African	Developer quotes; award recognition; ecosystem context	Variable editorial rigour; uneven coverage across cases
Institutional and project sources	Jiwe Studios (2023); slaveryforcedmigration.org (2023); climatejusticejam.net (2025); GameUp Africa (2025)	First-party detail on design intent, funding, and partnerships	Self-reported; impact framing not independently audited
Practitioner interviews	Structured and informal conversations with founders and developers at Maliyo Games, Usiku Games/PAGG, and Sea Monster Entertainment	Unpublished context, design rationale, and candid assessment	Single-informant accounts; recall bias; informants have a stake in positive framing
Peer-reviewed academic sources	Fisher (2020); Khene, Sieborger, and Thinyane (2024); Karuri-Sebina and Mutua (2023)	Independent scholarly grounding and methodological rigour	Limited in number; few address games specifically rather than civic technology generally.

Across all five source types, the quantitative claims reported in Section 4, including survey results, could not be independently checked beyond their source. The two-source minimum in inclusion criterion (d) helps, but does not entirely remove this limitation, so figures should be read as practitioner-reported rather than independently audited.

3.4 Positionality and Reflexivity

Both authors are affiliated with Africacomicaide, and One author (Esio) developed the Play-to-Impact Framework applied throughout this review. This dual position cuts both ways. On one hand, it gives the authors access to practitioners, unpublished documentation, and contextual knowledge that an outside researcher would not have. On the other hand, it creates the risk of confirmation bias: the framework used to assess the field was developed by one of the researchers doing the assessing, and several of the cases assessed were identified through that same researcher's professional network. A few measures help with this, though none of them remove the risk entirely. First, the Stage 4 screening (Section 3.1) dropped Africacomicaide-affiliated candidates from the review outright rather than keeping them in with a disclosure, including Active Citizens, which otherwise met every inclusion criterion. Second, Section 5.2 uses the four-layer model to show where the six included cases fall short of its prescriptions, particularly regarding sustainability and measurement, rather than relying solely on the framework to confirm what is working. Third, factual claims about each case are checked against at least two independent sources, per inclusion criterion (d). No external grant funds the paper itself. A related but separate risk is about which cases were visible in the first place, rather than how findings were interpreted. Five of the six included cases involve organisations with which the authors already had a working relationship through Africacomicaide's network. It is entirely possible that civic game initiatives outside these networks, without comparable public documentation, do not show up in this mapping exercise. That is a limitation of the review, flagged here.

4. Case Studies

The six cases are presented chronologically. Table 1 provides a cross-case overview mapped to the Play-to-Impact Framework.

Table 1: African Civic Game Initiatives Reviewed (2019-2026), Mapped to the Play-to-Impact Framework

Game / Initiative	Lead Organisation (s)	Country	5 P's Category	Mechanism and Commissioning Partner(s)
Livin' It Up	Sea Monster Ent. (ZA)	South Africa	Prosperity (SDGs 8, 10)	3D mobile simulation; commissioned by Capitec Bank
Mama Atingi Shop	Maliyo, Leti Arts, Usiku, Kayfo	Pan-African	People (SDGs 4, 8)	Mobile simulation; GIZ/BMZ via Atingi platform
Mission 55: Conflict in Anaka	Usiku Games / PAGG (KE)	Pan-African	Peace (SDG 16)	Mobile serious game; commissioned by AU, GIZ, UNOAU
Usawa: Equality	Jiwe Studios (KE) + SOAS, Donkosira, V4T	Kenya / Mali	Peace (SDG 16) / People (SDG 10)	Afro-futuristic mobile game; funded by UKRI/AHRC
GameUp Africa Jam for Democracy	Maliyo Games (NG)	NG, GH, KE	Peace (SDG 16)	Game jam; partnered with the US Consulate General Lagos and Global Game Jam
Mzansi Climate Justice Game Jam	Internet Teapot / SA and NL collectives	South Africa	Planet (SDGs 13, 15)	Hybrid collaborative jam; funded by Creative Industries Fund NL

4.1 Livin' It Up (South Africa, 2019): Prosperity

Livin' It Up is a 3D simulation and strategy mobile game developed by Sea Monster Entertainment for Capitec Bank, launched in September 2019 (Capitec Bank, 2019). It is aimed at building financial capability among South African players and maps to Prosperity: SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities). One stated design goal was to push back against the idea that saving is only for high-income earners (Gillis, cited in Games Industry Africa, 2022). Players navigate careers, household budgets, unexpected life events, including load-shedding, and long-term savings goals through consequence-driven simulation. The game is free to download, mobile-first, and has racked up over 100,000 installs. It won the International Content Marketing Award (Data and Insight category) in the United Kingdom in 2020 (Ventureburn, 2020). The civic and commercial motivations here are not fully separable: Capitec has a social-licence interest in improving financial literacy among its customers, and the game was built as a multi-year platform tied to consumer insight. This paper treats it as a civic game because financial capability is a prerequisite for economic citizenship, while acknowledging the commercial framing.

4.2 Mama Atingi Shop (Pan-African, 2021): People

Mama Atingi Shop launched in December 2021 as a co-production between four studios from four countries: Maliyo Games (Nigeria), Leti Arts (Ghana), Usiku Games (Kenya), and Kayfo Game Studio (Senegal), funded by GIZ on behalf of BMZ as a serious game component of the Atingi

digital learning platform (Digital Times Africa, 2022). On the 5 P's, it maps to People: SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth). The game is a business simulation that teaches entrepreneurship principles through active play, with culturally specific characters, settings, and soundtracks created entirely by African artists. Its multilingual reach across Francophone and Anglophone Africa demonstrates that the Distribution Layer is working well. At the same time, the four-studio co-production spanning two linguistic traditions, funded through bilateral development, is close to a best-case example of the Partnership Layer. The partner studios described their shared ambition as building a portfolio of fun-first social-impact games featuring African heroes set against various backdrops of African culture (Maliyo Games et al., cited in Digital Times Africa, 2022).

4.3 Mission 55: Conflict in Anaka (Pan-African, 2022): Peace

Mission 55 was developed by Usiku Games and PAGG, commissioned by the African Union's Youth for Peace Africa Programme, GIZ, and the United Nations Office to the African Union (UNOAU), and launched on the International Day of Peace, 21 September 2022, at AU headquarters in Addis Ababa (African Union, 2022). It maps to Peace: SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions). Set in the fictional country of Anaka, players resolve conflicts using tools that mirror the real African Governance Architecture and African Peace and Security Architecture. The game has passed 10,000 downloads on Google Play. Measured against the Measurement Layer, Alice Muini of Usiku Games calls it among their most impactful projects, yet the only quantitative metric available is the download count (The East African, 2023), which fits the Data Gap diagnosis. Against the Partnership Layer, the AU-GIZ-UNOAU trilateral commission is a strong, replicable institutional model.

4.4 Usawa: Equality (Kenya and Mali, 2023): Peace

Usawa, meaning equality in Swahili, was developed by Jiwe Studios (Kenya) with SOAS University of London, the Malian NGOs Donkosira and V4T, and the creative studios Kasart Media and Kerdoff Productions, and was funded by UKRI through the AHRC and launched in Nairobi on 30 September 2023 (Jiwe Studios, 2023). It maps primarily to Peace: SDG 16, specifically the eradication of modern slavery and forced labour (target 16.2), while also touching on SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities). Set on the fictional planet Horon, the Afro-futuristic setting gives players the cognitive and emotional distance they need to engage with descent-based slavery in Mali and West Africa without becoming defensive. The game's narrative draws directly on research and firsthand testimonies gathered from young Malian villagers through the Djonya Kele Ja Toulon project (Slaveryforcedmigration.org, 2023). The co-production model here- academic research (SOAS), community testimony (Malian NGOs), creative technology (Jiwe Studios), and international research funding (UKRI)- pushes the Partnership Layer beyond a simple funder-studio relationship to include communities as genuine co-authors.

4.5 GameUp Africa Jam for Democracy (Nigeria, Ghana, and Kenya, 2024): Peace

The GameUp Africa Jam for Democracy was hosted by Maliyo Games, in partnership with the US Consulate General Lagos and Global Game Jam, and ran 9-20 December 2024. It challenged young creators aged 18-35 across three countries to design and prototype games that counter disinformation and reinforce democratic values (Maliyo Games, 2024), mapping to Peace: the information-integrity side of SDG 16. The jam ran as a training week followed by a development sprint, producing 30 game prototypes from 23 teams. Post-event surveys recorded a 70% jump in participants' understanding of malign influence, making this One of only two cases in this review with before-and-after outcome data (GameUp Africa, 2025). Winning teams got three months of

mentorship and publishing support. The jam format positions participants as citizen-game-makers as well as players, thereby making the design of civic games itself a form of civic engagement.

4.6 Mzansi Climate Justice Game Jam (South Africa, 2025): Planet

The Mzansi Climate Justice Game Jam was organised by Internet Teapot (Adriaan Odendaal and Karla Zavala Barreda) with South African coordinator Mxolisi Xaba, funded by the Creative Industries Fund NL, and ran as a month-long hybrid programme between Johannesburg and Utrecht in June 2025 (climatejusticejam.net, 2025). It maps to Planet: SDG 13 (Climate Action) and SDG 15 (Life on Land). Expert sessions put indigenous African knowledge systems front and centre, with Dr Mmatshilo Motsei on indigenous Creation stories and Professor Dick Ng'ambi on decolonising Education through indigenous games. Seven games emerged from it, including Biome Evolver, a collaborative strategy game that manages South African biomes using Ubuntu principles and an explicit equity-ecology-economy trilemma. This case stands apart for its decolonial design approach and its openness to both analogue and digital formats.

5. Cross-Cutting Analysis

5.1 The 5 P's Distribution: What the Map Reveals

Mapping the six cases onto the 5 Ps reveals an uneven yet telling distribution. The biggest gap is the Planet cluster. Given how urgent climate change, biodiversity loss, and water insecurity are for African communities, it is striking that only One of the reviewed initiatives directly targets these SDGs. That absence is as telling as the presence of cases elsewhere: it suggests either that the civic games field has not yet aligned with environmental advocacy, or that such games are not well documented. This is where the Play-to-Impact Framework earns its keep as a diagnostic tool: mapping known cases immediately shows where investment and commissioning are most needed. None of the cases in this review directly target electoral participation, participatory policymaking, or the aspects of SDG 16 related to accountable institutions at the local government level. That gap may reflect political sensitivities around electoral simulations in fragile democratic contexts, or simply the resource constraints of commissioning such games outside the mandates of bilateral development agencies.

5.2 Assessment Against the Four-Layer Model

Design Layer: The fun-first principle comes through most clearly in *Livin' It Up*, *Mama Atingi Shop*, and *Mission 55*, which deliver real entertainment value alongside civic purpose and have reached large audiences. *Usawa's* Afro-futuristic narrative is inventive and culturally specific, and the game jam outputs range from polished prototypes to early-stage concepts. On the sustainability side of the Design Layer, though, all six cases depend on external funding, and none has built a commercial revenue model that could survive without grants or corporate sponsorship. This is the most consistent structural finding throughout the review and the clearest confirmation of the Funding Gap diagnosis. It suggests the African civic games sector has not yet internalised the business-side thinking the Play-to-Impact Framework treats as foundational.

Distribution Layer: Five of the six cases are delivered on mobile, which backs up the mobile-first thinking the Distribution Layer calls for. Offline capability, though, a critical need given internet gaps across much of Africa, is handled inconsistently across the cases. Community anchoring, deliberately embedding games within specific civic institutions, schools, or community networks to keep engagement going, remains mostly aspirational. The *Usawa* co-research process, in which communities directly helped shape the game's narrative, is the clearest example of community anchoring. However, it occurs at the production stage rather than the distribution stage. The Mzansi jam's direct work with South African environmental communities demonstrates a different model of community anchoring built into the jam format.

Measurement Layer: The Data Gap shows up most consistently of all the structural issues. Only the GameUp Africa Jam for Democracy, which produced game prototypes rather than commercially released titles, reports before-and-after outcome data: a 70% increase in participants' understanding of malign influence. Livin' It Up can point to install figures over 100,000 and an industry award. The other four cases report only download counts or qualitative reception. None of them has longitudinal data on sustained behavioural change, civic participation outcomes, or SDG-aligned impact beyond the immediate engagement period. That does not make these initiatives less significant; it reflects the absence of shared evaluation infrastructure that Esio (2026) flags as the sector's most critical systemic gap. Partnership Layer: Three distinct funding models show up across the six cases. Bilateral agency funding for Mama Atingi Shop, Mission 55, and Usawa (GIZ/BMZ and UKRI, respectively) demonstrates how well these games' civic mandates align with official development priorities. Corporate sponsorship covers Livin' It Up, in which Capitec Bank funded Sea Monster Entertainment with a multi-year platform commitment and measurable consumer-insight goals. Diplomatic and cultural institution funding covers the GameUp Africa Jam for Democracy (US Consulate General Lagos) and the Mzansi Climate Justice Game Jam (Creative Industries Fund NL). Across all six cases, none has reached the kind of post-grant-cycle durability the Partnership Layer calls for: they all still depend on continued external support for ongoing development, distribution, and iteration. This dependency is arguably the African games sector's most fundamental sustainability challenge.

5.3 Cultural Specificity as Design Principle

A feature that comes up across all six cases is how deliberately the game worlds, characters, narratives, and mechanics are rooted in African social realities. This is not only an aesthetic choice. It reflects the shared understanding that civic learning sticks best when it grows out of communities' own knowledge systems rather than being imposed from outside. Mission 55's fictional Anaka mirrors real AU governance architecture without naming specific countries, allowing players to engage with institutional processes through scenarios that feel familiar yet distant. Usawa's Afro-futuristic planet Horon creates the cognitive and emotional distance that lets players engage with descent-based slavery without becoming defensive. Biome Evolver's South African biomes carry specific local ecological meaning that a generic climate game could not replicate. African artists created Mama Atingi Shop's characters, settings, and soundtrack from the four countries where the game was designed to be played. This consistent design ethic is what African civic game design is: a genuine engagement with the lived civic realities of African players.

5.4 The Game Jam as Civic Practice

Three of the six cases are game jams, or use participatory processes with the same civic intent: the GameUp Africa Jam for Democracy, the Mzansi Climate Justice Game Jam, and Usawa's community co-research model. The jam model is worth examining separately because it does something that individual commercial game releases cannot: it places participants in the roles of citizens, game-makers, and players, making the design of civic games itself a form of civic engagement. This meta-civic dimension, in which the process of building a game about governance is itself a governance intervention, aligns with Fisher's (2020) finding that civic game production processes are opportunities for direct civic engagement, participatory learning, and group mobilisation. It also speaks directly to Ubuntu's way of knowing. Knowledge about how to tackle shared civic problems communally, through collaboration, dialogue, and shared purpose.

5.5 Civic Games in Comparative Perspective

The six cases here sit within a much bigger landscape of civic technology in Africa, most visibly SMS-based polling platforms like U-Report, which UNICEF has run since 2011 to canvass youth opinion across multiple African countries, and crowdsourced reporting platforms like Ushahidi, built in Kenya in 2008 to map post-election violence and since adapted across the continent (Rotich, 2017). Nobody seems to have put this literature in conversation with civic games specifically before, but two points of comparison stand out. First, the Data Gap that Section 5.2 identifies as this review's most consistent finding is not unique to civic games. Peixoto and Sifry's (2017) evaluation of 23 ICT platforms for civic engagement across the Global South, including a field evaluation of U-Report in Uganda, found little evidence that these platforms actually translate citizen voice into government responsiveness, which the authors describe as uptake without institutional response. The civic games reviewed here show much the same pattern: strong reported reach, *Living It Up's* 100,000 installs, *Mission 55's* 10,000 downloads, without comparable evidence of any downstream civic effect. This supports the claim that the Data Gap may be a general feature of civic technology in under-resourced governance environments, rather than something specific to games or to the Play-to-Impact Framework's categories. Secondly, a tentative pattern emerges when the six cases are read alongside the institutional uptake literature. The cases with the clearest institutional commissioning routes, *Mission 55* (African Union, GIZ, UNOAU) and *Mama Atingi Shop* (GIZ/BMZ via the Atingi platform), are also the ones where the Partnership Layer (Section 5.2) is most fully realised, echoing Ushahidi's own path from a civil-society tool to use by formal crisis-response institutions (Rotich, 2017). The game jam-format cases, by contrast, *GameUp Africa Jam for Democracy* and the *Mzansi Climate Justice Game Jam*, deliver strong participatory and cultural outcomes (Sections 5.3 and 5.4) but do not have a defined institutional home for their outputs beyond the mentorship and publishing support given to winning teams. This points to institutional commissioning, rather than design quality, as possibly the strongest predictor of whether a civic game's reach becomes the kind of durable partnership the Partnership Layer calls for. Given how few cases there are and the lack of outcome data discussed in Section 3.4, this is offered as a hypothesis worth testing (Section 6), not as an established finding.

6. Recommendations

For studios and game developers: Build the Play-to-Impact Framework's Design Layer into production from day One, making fun-first games with revenue models built in rather than grant-funded showcases. Treat impact evaluation as a design requirement from the start, not an afterthought. The *GameUp Africa Jam's* before-and-after survey model offers a minimum viable evaluation approach that works at any budget. Co-design with target communities, as *Usawa* showed, should be standard practice for games dealing with sensitive civic themes. For funders and development partners: Move toward multi-year platform funding that lets studios develop, test, and iterate across multiple cycles, rather than one-off grants. Invest in a shared, standardised measurement framework for games-driven SDG outcomes, since its absence is the most critical systemic gap (Esio, 2026). For policymakers and government institutions: The Games and SDG Summit in Nairobi (April 2026) showed there is growing institutional appetite for games as development tools (Games for Change, 2026). African governments with mandates for voter education, civic literacy, and transparency should establish dedicated pathways for civic game commissions that small and medium studios can actually access. For researchers and academics: Fisher's (2020) study remains among the most substantive peer-reviewed empirical studies focused specifically on African civic games. Researchers should partner with practitioner organisations to

build Africa-specific evaluation frameworks, using the Play-to-Impact Framework as a practitioner-generated starting point. Longitudinal studies tracking knowledge retention, attitude change, and civic behaviour over six to twelve months are badly needed.

7. Conclusion

This scoping review has mapped an emerging and significant landscape: African-developed civic game initiatives used as platforms for governance, Education, democratic participation, and SDG-aligned civic action. Across six cases spanning 2019 to 2026, the review documents a diverse set of approaches united by a commitment to culturally grounded, experiential civic communication that together constitute what can be called a distinct and emerging practice of African civic game design. The Play-to-Impact Framework, developed by Oscar Michael Esio of Africacomcade and presented at the United Nations Office at Nairobi in April 2026, gives this analysis its organising logic. The 5 P's taxonomy maps the current position of civic game activity within the SDG landscape. The four-layer model diagnoses what is needed for impact to last. Together, they point to a field with real momentum and real gaps. The Games and SDG Summit in Nairobi marked a moment of global recognition for African civic game innovation. What is left is closing the four Broken Pieces: funding models that can last beyond grants, measurement systems that actually show impact, policy environments that commission games, and a generation of designers who build for change from day one of production.

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