



Consortium for Advanced Research Training in Africa

STRATEGIC PLAN 2026–2030



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Acronyms and Definitions

CARTA	Consortium for Advanced Research Training in Africa
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APHRC	African Population and Health Research Center
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Wits	University of the Witwatersrand
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JAS	Joint Advanced
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GGWW	Graduate Grant Writing Workshop
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APAS	Academic, Professional, and Administrative Staff
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SW	Supervisors Workshop
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ToT	Trainer of Trainers
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ECR	Early Career Researcher
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PhD	Doctor of Philosophy
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GFGP	Good Financial Grant Practice
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AI	Artificial Intelligence
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KT	Knowledge Translation
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MEL	Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning
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CSR	Corporate Social Responsibility
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STISA	Science, Technology and Innovation Strategy for Africa
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BoM	Board of Management
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RM	Resource Mobilization
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Executive Summary

Established in 2008, the Consortium for Advanced Research Training in Africa (CARTA) is an Africa-based, African-led partnership of universities and research institutions committed to strengthening research capacity across the continent. CARTA works to build a vibrant African academy capable of producing high-quality, policy-relevant, and multidisciplinary research in health and population sciences, including social, data, and policy sciences. Over three five-year strategic cycles (2011–2015, 2016–2020, and 2021–2025), CARTA has evolved from a program focused on doctoral training to a mature consortium that strengthens individual researchers, institutional systems, and collaborative research environments.

The 2026–2030 Strategic Plan represents CARTA’s fourth strategic cycle and builds directly on fifteen years of demonstrated impact. It responds to persistent structural constraints in Africa’s research ecosystem—underinvestment in R&D, limited doctoral supervision capacity, weak research management systems, and uneven institutional ownership. It also addresses emerging global and continental shifts, including digital transformation, demographic change, climate-related challenges, and tightening research funding landscape.

Across these objectives, CARTA will start a systematic transition from centrally delivered programs toward institution-led implementation, supported by training-of-trainers approaches, quality facilitation, and phased technical assistance. Graduate-led, university-based multidisciplinary research hubs will serve as platforms for experiential training, mentorship, collaborative research, and policy engagement. Digital tools and platforms will be used to widen access, enhance collaboration, and support data-driven and ethically grounded research practices.

Resource mobilization will function as a cross-cutting enabler, combining donor funding, university co-funding, strategic partnerships, and selective revenue-generating activities to strengthen sustainability. Monitoring, evaluation, and learning will guide adaptive implementation, with annual reviews and a mid-term independent evaluation in 2028.

By 2030, CARTA aims to have consolidated institution-led doctoral training models, expanded inclusive access to high-quality research training, strengthened multidisciplinary research hubs, and positioned itself as a trusted African platform for research capacity strengthening, knowledge translation, and institutional transformation.

About CARTA

CARTA strengthens research and doctoral training capacity in African universities through a collaborative, multi-institutional model. The consortium supports junior faculty to undertake doctoral training locally and develop into internationally recognized researchers and research leaders, while strengthening institutional research environments and systems.

CARTA's proven theory of change posits that a critical mass of well-trained researchers, supported by strong institutional environments, can drive institutional transformation, train future scholars, and strengthen the African research ecosystem.

Through progressive five-year strategic cycles, CARTA addresses key barriers to research capacity in partner institutions. The program has become internationally recognized for its doctoral training and institutional capacity strengthening, grounded in intergenerational transfer of skills, knowledge, and culture, collaborative research training, and a gender transformative approach.

CARTA's financial and programmatic sustainability is underpinned by a diverse and committed funder base, reinforced by in-kind contributions from partner institutions and CARTA community members who give their time and expertise to the myriad program activities. Programmatically, CARTA has strengthened sustainability by investing in institutional capacity and establishing systems and structures within partner institutions that enable CARTA's approaches to be sustained and scaled.

CARTA is a consortium of eight African universities and four research institutions collaborating with eight non-African partner institutions. It is jointly led by the African Population and Health Research Center (APHRC), Kenya, and the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits), South Africa.

8

African Universities

4

Research Institutions

8

Non-African Partners

CARTA's Achievements

CARTA has significant achievements which are highlighted under four categories, aligned with its 2021–2025 strategic objectives.

01 Maintaining a Pipeline of High-Quality Early Career Researchers

- Enrolled 265 PhD fellows (55% women), of whom 195 (56% women) had graduated by December 2025, with 44 still in active fellowship.
- Developed, refined, and tested a structured PhD curriculum that imparts transferable research skills.
- Awarded 84 post-doctoral awards to 64 graduates (49% women) as of April 2025.
- Graduates and fellows have produced over 4,000 publications and secured more than USD 46 million in external grants.
- Of those who have graduated, 94.4% have taken leadership roles within their universities and countries, and 26 have received awards and recognition.
- Graduates actively mentor new fellows, lead projects, and build global networks, enabled by CARTA's voluntary cross-cohort, cross-institutional, and cross-disciplinary mentorship framework.



265

Fellows Enrolled (55% Women)



195

Graduates (56% Women)



84

Postdoctoral Awards to 64
Graduates



4000+

Publications



\$46M+

Externally Secured Grants

02 Creating Research Hubs

- Established two graduate-led research hubs within partner institutions that will develop into regional centers of excellence. These hubs promote collaborative research, training, and mentorship, replicating CARTA-like training.
- Research hubs have strengthened south-south networks, attracted funding, and demonstrated the multiplier effect of the CARTA model, influencing institutional research environments and increasing continental visibility for African academics.
- CARTA network has facilitated many research collaborations between partner institutions, further extending the research hub model.

03 Creating a Research-Conducive Environment

- Embedded its doctoral training and PhD support interventions (Joint Advanced Seminars [JASes], Graduate Grant Writing Workshops [GGWW], Academic, Professional, and Administrative Staff [APAS] Workshops, and Supervisors' Workshops [SW]) in African partner institutions.
- Digitized the interventions and published four open-access modules for adaptation and use.
- Over 1,300 staff members have been trained in supervision and enhancing the research support system.
- CARTA training has reached 258 staff members through Trainer of Trainers (ToTs) Workshops. These trainers have subsequently strengthened the capacity of an additional 314 institution-based staff members, helping sustain high-quality training programs.
- CARTA's interventions, andragogical approaches, digitized interdisciplinary curricula, and Good Financial Grant practices (GFGF) are continuously institutionalized.

1,300+ Staff members trained in supervision & research support

258
Reached through ToT workshops

trained



314
Further institution-based staff trained by ToT participants

04 Enhancing Engagement with Society

CARTA advances societal impact through policy-relevant research, community engagement, science communication training, and knowledge translation. Key achievements include:

- Through science communication training, fellows are equipped to effectively engage policymakers, communities, and the public. As a result, fellows have influenced 25 policies and over 60 community projects.
- Partner institutions are increasingly aligning PhD training with techniques that foster critical thinking and locally relevant research agendas.
- The CARTA brand is respected, with fellows and graduates influencing pedagogy, health policy, and global discourse in health and development.
- CARTA has established the CARTA Evidence platform, which amplifies African-led research, facilitates collaborations, and deepens societal relevance.
- The program and its fellows have leveraged media platforms to disseminate research and engage wider audiences, contributing to over 86 media features across print, broadcast, and digital outlets.
- CARTA engages wider audiences through written and digital platforms, including blogs, stories of change, thought leadership articles, newsletters and its website, which translate African-led research into accessible insights for researchers, funders, policymakers, practitioners, and the public.

25

Policies Influenced

60+

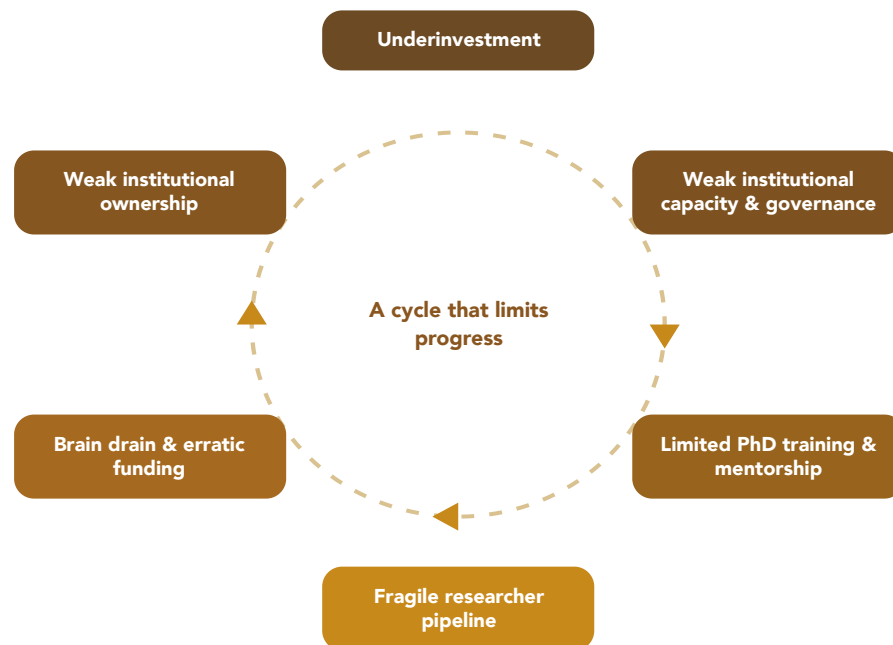
Community Projects

Context of CARTA Strategy

Challenges in the African R&D Ecosystem

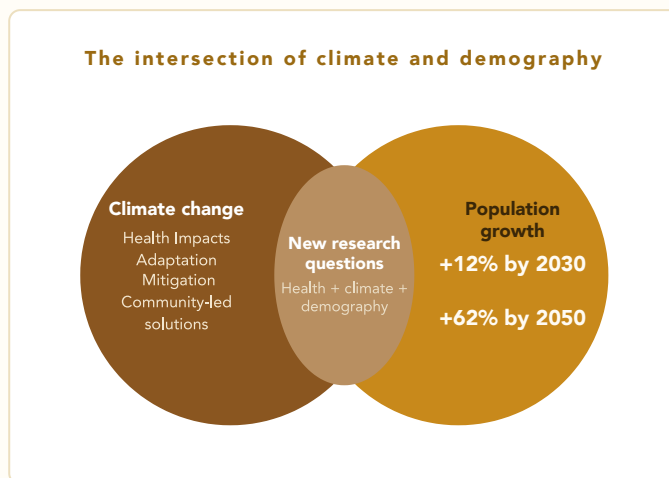
Africa's higher education and research landscape faces structural and systemic challenges that limit its ability to cultivate and retain world-class scholars. Public R&D spending remains under 0.59% of GDP, well below the global average of 1.79% [1], suppressing infrastructure, research output, and graduate training. Despite accounting for 18% of the global population [2], the continent produces only 3% of research publications [3]. Chronic underinvestment has left universities with inadequate infrastructure, weak governance, and limited capacity to train and mentor early-career researchers. Many institutions report less than 20% of faculty holding PhDs [4], constraining postgraduate education and mentorship. These gaps contribute to brain drain, a fragile researcher pipeline, erratic funding, and weak institutional ownership of research capacity strengthening initiatives [5,6].

A self-perpetuating cycle that limits progress in African research capacity



Mega Trends

Africa continues to face persistent health and development challenges, with emerging trends likely to shape its future both positively and negatively. The climate crisis continues unabated with the continent expected to bear the brunt of the negative consequences [7]. As global responses falter, there is increasing focus on country- and community-led mitigation, adaptation, and solutions that integrate both health and climate rather than treating them separately. This shift requires rethinking methodologies and approaches as well as greater multi and trans-disciplinary research. Meanwhile, rapid population growth presents significant demographic shifts: Africa's population is projected to rise by 12% by 2030 and 62% by 2050 [8], contrasting with declines in other regions. The intersection between these demographic trends and the climate crisis remains unexplored.



Geopolitical Shifts

Recent geopolitical shifts add another dimension to the contextual factors in the African R&D ecosystem that the CARTA program seeks to address. The shifts have included a steady decline in overseas development with a shift in priorities for Europe-based funders where resources previously available for international development, health, and research support have in some cases been reprioritized, including toward humanitarian needs Ukraine, thereby tightening the funding environment for African institutions. In the more recent past, the actions of the US government in dismantling large sections of its foreign assistance architecture, coupled with its "America first" policy have brought added complexity to the research funding landscape on the continent. Encouragingly, most funding bodies have adopted localization as a guiding principle and so these shifts create opportunities for African academic and research institutions to access more funding and address health and development issues relevant to the continent.

Response to Systemic Challenges

The CARTA 2026–2030 Strategy has been developed against the backdrop of long-standing challenges in the African R&D ecosystem and emerging global mega trends. These include climate change and the growing climate–health nexus, significant demographic shifts, rapid advances in data science and artificial intelligence (AI), and geopolitical upheavals that have disrupted the development sector, including funding cuts.

The strategy seeks to contribute to bridge the gaps in underinvestment in research, weak governance and limited supervisory capacity. These gaps undermine the production and retention of high-quality researchers and constrain institutional research systems. CARTA addresses them by scaling regionally inclusive PhD and postdoctoral recruitment, mainstreaming equity across program pathways, and investing in digital research operations. Through these measures, the program will widen access for marginalized groups and equip African universities to participate in a modern, digitally enabled research ecosystem, positioning CARTA as a capacity-builder, a driver of institutional transformation and continental research leadership.

CARTA’s 15+ years of experience partnering with African universities has enabled it to reshape research policies and governance, strengthening institutions’ contributions to an African-led research agenda. Applying this model, CARTA aims to create research-conducive environments that address mentorship gaps, institutional fragility, and the need for sustainable, locally embedded research ecosystems. Through longitudinal PhD training, postdoctoral support, and trainer-of-trainers programs, CARTA seeks to strengthen and expand a critical mass of African scholars equipped to lead, mentor, and innovate [9]. By integrating multidisciplinary, locally relevant approaches into curricula, CARTA challenges colonial knowledge legacies and advances research aligned with the African Union’s Agenda 2063 and Science, Technology and Innovation Strategy for Africa (STISA) 2024 priorities for transformative leadership, inclusive growth, and regional integration through science and innovation [10].

CARTA’s new strategy aligns with contemporary debates on decolonizing and localizing knowledge by shifting power to African researchers so they can lead contextually grounded studies and translate findings into policy and social impact [11]. Rather than perpetuating “parachute science,” the CARTA model equips scholars with the tools and resources platforms such as public engagement channels ensuring that research is not only published but also used to inform decision-making and development agendas [12].

Expanding CARTA's Impact

CARTA's 2026–2030 Phase represents an evidence-driven evolution, building on proven successes while innovating and testing new approaches to meet Africa's dynamic R&D landscape. In this strategic cycle, CARTA will cultivate and sustain a critical mass of change agents dedicated to the continuous renewal of African universities, driven by research, participatory training, and community engagement. We will continue to transform institutions in several ways.

First

Enhance member institutions' own capacity to adapt and enhance their research training.

Second

Strengthen partners' capacity to support and manage research through improved research systems.

Third

Ground PhD graduates by strengthening multidisciplinary research hubs and networks as platforms for research leadership.

As CARTA institutionalizes best practices in research training and management, we will promote institutional mentorship beyond current Consortium partners to reach additional African regions. This will be achieved by seeking collaboration with regional bodies and like-minded institutions to foster vibrant, multidisciplinary research ecosystems that nurture PhD scholars and postdoctoral researchers as global influencers. We will increase access for individuals and institutions to CARTA interventions, test new models of partnership and explore new methods of extending our reach.



The CARTA Strategy 2026–2030 presents a scalable, contextually grounded model for transforming African research systems from within—training and empowering scholars who are retained and strategically positioned to drive institutional change.

Strategic Framework



Vision

A vibrant African academy that leads world-class multidisciplinary research, transforming the knowledge ecosystem and improving lives and livelihoods.



Mission

Advance a resilient African research ecosystem by mentoring emerging scholars, generating actionable insights, driving innovation, influencing policy, and strengthening institutional capacity for long-term impact.

Values



Merit

Recognition and opportunities are earned—not influenced by connections, status, or hierarchy.



Equity

Fairness through inclusive recruitment and balanced access across our Consortium.



Integrity

The highest ethical standards—transparency, accountability, and trust in all actions.



Inclusivity

Embracing diversity of voices, disciplines, and backgrounds for impactful research.



Respect

Valuing people, cultures, and local knowledge with dignity and mutual empowerment.

Strategic Objectives



SO1

Expand the Pipeline of Early Career Researchers

Strategy: To build and sustain a critical mass of African researchers who drive the continuous renewal and transformation of universities, respond to community needs through high-quality, policy-relevant research, impactful research leaders, and participatory training.

Key Priorities and Actions

- Transition from centrally managed cohorts to university-led doctoral training programs by strengthening faculty and facilitator capacity across partner institutions.
- Increased number of ECRs enabled by partner universities managing curricula, supervision, and cohort administration independently, with CARTA providing quality assurance, training-of-trainers, and phased technical support to ensure sustainability and excellence.
- Promote institution-initiated fundraising and cost-sharing between CARTA and partner universities to catalyze the transition to partner-led cohorts.
- Open select CARTA events (e.g., JAS, GGWW, APAS, Supervisors' Workshops) to non-consortium members via cost-sharing and strategic partnerships.
- Establish a multi-level mentorship structure to clearly guide fellows through their research career paths, utilizing senior faculty, near-peer mentors (advanced PhD students/postdoctoral researchers), and graduates.
- Establish collaborative, multidisciplinary, and specialized research hubs that enhance ECR research skills to generate policy-relevant evidence and scalable solutions.



SO2

Foster Sustainable Research-Conducive Environments

Strategy: Embed CARTA's model across African partner universities by institutionalizing high-quality research training and robust research management through institution-led adaptation of proven interventions, supported by targeted technical assistance and quality facilitation

to support that adaptation. Scale via phased, feasibility-driven expansion to strengthen governance, deepen institutional ownership, and ensure context-sensitive sustainability across Africa.

Key Priorities and Actions

- Develop and deploy CARTA institutional capacity-strengthening packages to institutionalize CARTA training interventions while ensuring quality, learning, and brand integrity in model adaptation.
- Strengthen research management practices by complementing existing institutional skills with CARTA approaches, integrating them into administrative and governance structures.
- Provide targeted technical support and facilitation to guide adaptation and quality training while maintaining fidelity to CARTA principles.
- Collaborate with regional bodies to define and promote quality PhD training, innovation, and policy engagement standards informed by CARTA's proven concepts.
- Support CARTA partners to participate in contemporary debates on global health and contribute to anticipated reform processes in the global health architecture at national, regional and global levels in support of a truly African knowledge system.
- Expand and consolidate the work of research hubs by taking lessons from the pilot hubs to inform the next phase in building strong shared research infrastructure in partner universities and developing niche areas for policy-relevant research.



SO3

Drive Research, Innovation and Digital Transformation

Strategy: Strengthen partner institutions' capacity in data driven research and ethical use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) by embedding AI literacy and its implication to research into curricula, adapting research-relevant technologies, and forging strategic industry partnerships. Harness digital and virtual platforms to enhance training delivery, collaboration, and resource sharing. Deploy interoperable digital tools through technology partnerships and advanced online seminars. Support adaptation of robust governance, ethics, and data-sovereignty standards to scale multidisciplinary, policy-relevant research and build a self-sustaining intra-African digital research ecosystem.

Key Priorities and Actions

- Enhance CARTA Digital Learning Hub providing synchronous/asynchronous modules and low-bandwidth online/hybrid training to widen access across partner institutions.
- Embed AI literacy with its implication in research modules, and robust data-governance/sovereignty principles into curricula and training programs.
- Co-design governance frameworks for digital research ecosystems that can be adapted by partner universities to build a self-sustaining intra-African digital research ecosystem through shared knowledge, pooled resources, and collaboration.
- Partner with technology firms and experts to co-develop interoperable digital toolkits, standards, and protocols to enable improved cross-institutional collaboration.
- Pilot facilitator and institutional support for digital adoption; ensure inclusion strategies for low-bandwidth settings.



SO4

Advance Knowledge Translation for Societal Impact

Strategy: Embed Knowledge Translation (KT) across partner universities by strengthening institutional capacity, leveraging digital platforms, and convening strategic policy and public engagements. Transform research findings into actionable policies and innovations that advance evidence-informed decision-making and generate tangible societal impact across Africa.

Key Priorities and Actions

- Embed KT roadmaps and deliverables (policy briefs, stakeholder dialogues, multimedia outputs) into PhD and postdoctoral projects.
- Strengthen KT capacity at partner institutions through training, dedicated KT functions, and digital engagement platforms.
- Support partner universities link, and/or co-design national knowledge systems with linkage to regional knowledge ecosystems by mapping institutional repositories to national platforms and co-developing APIs and metadata standards for sector-tagged evidence integration.
- Enhance the CARTA Evidence platform with AI-enabled synthesis and impact-tracking features to monitor uptake.

- Convene ministerial roundtables, policy dialogues, and an annual impact forum to amplify research uptake and policy influence.
- Release rapid-response briefs and public webinars to position CARTA as a continental anchor for doctoral capacity and KT.



SO5

Leverage CARTA to Strengthen African Research Ecosystems

Strategy: Leverage CARTA's training resources, evidence base, and networks to strengthen, scale, and sustain interconnected African research ecosystems. Promote refinement of common standards through engagement with standards-setting bodies, enabling seamless collaboration across linguistic and regional boundaries, and ensuring research excellence and sustainability across the continent.

Key Priorities and Actions

- Review consortium composition with a clear partner-status framework and appoint dedicated liaison roles to guide engagement and expansion across regions in Africa.
- Position research hubs as cross-institutional platforms for connectivity, joint programming, and pilots on interoperability, fostering collaboration and knowledge exchange across institutions and regions.
- Mainstream CARTA PhD interventions into regional and national frameworks by engaging authorities in higher education through rapid-response policy briefs, structured partnership forums and regional roundtables.
- Pilot the CARTA model in new institutions based on feasibility and readiness assessments, document lessons from early adopters, and scale via phased, context-sensitive expansion.
- Convene a flagship forum showcasing outcomes, partner testimonies, and investment cases.

Resource Mobilization

CARTA's long-term sustainability hinges on strategically diversifying its funding streams. This involves mobilizing support from traditional donors, unlocking local and regional co-funding opportunities, and positioning CARTA as a catalyst for sustained investment across Africa's research and innovation landscape.

Resource mobilization will be a cross-cutting enabler integrated into every strategic objective, adopting a blended model that combines donor funding, university co-funding, philanthropy, private-sector partnerships, subscription/commercial pilots, and pooled contributions from multiple funders.

Resource mobilization will pursue three complementary paths:

PATH 01

Diversify International Support

PATH 02

Secure Partner University Co-investment & Cost-sharing

PATH 03

Tap National and Regional African Funding Streams

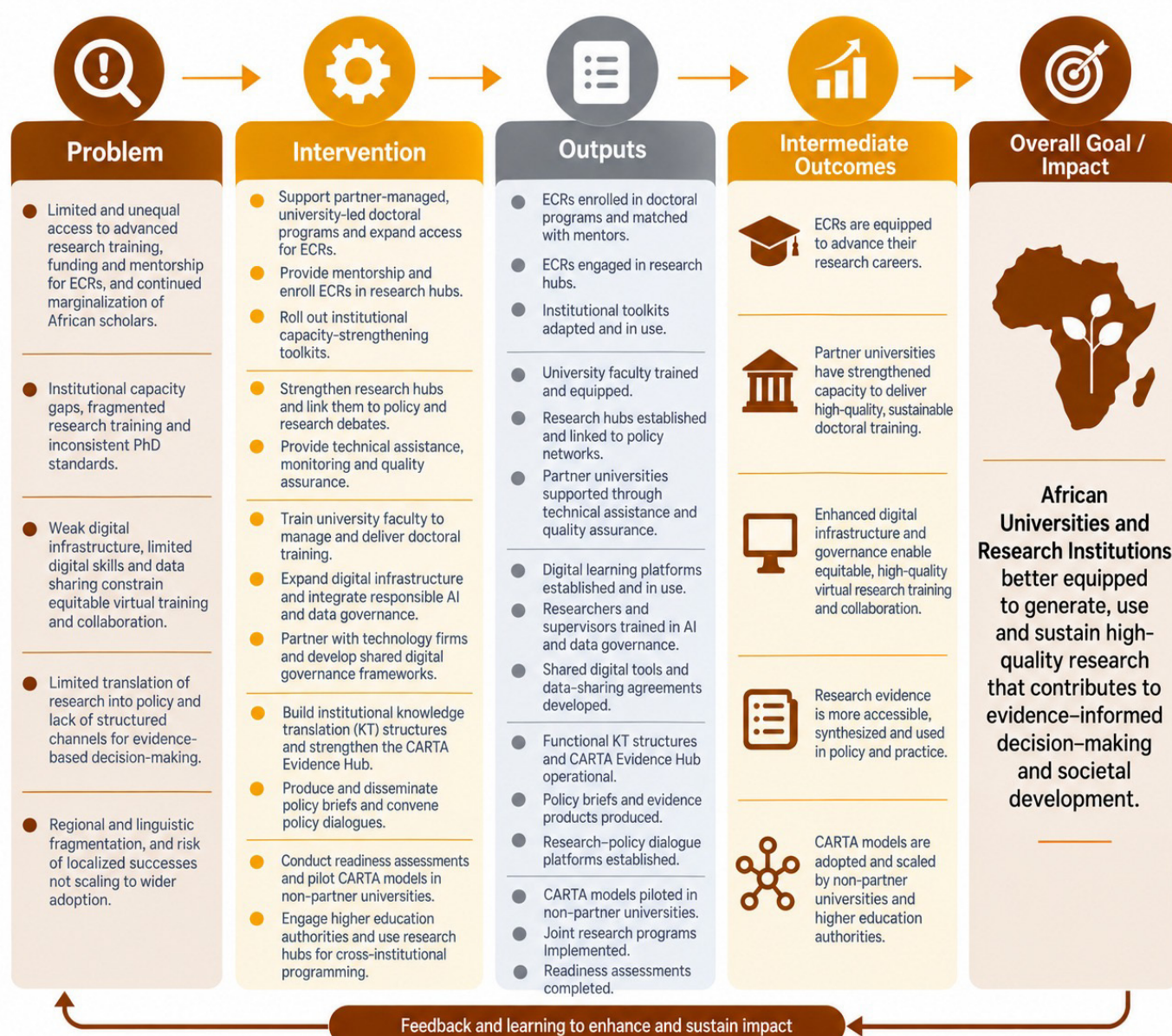
Strategy: Expand the concept of resources to include in-kind support and strategic partnerships with organizations ensuring mobilization of shared expertise, platforms, and influence to maximize impact.

Key Priorities and Actions

- Establish a governance-level resource management committee with clear mandates, KPI, and quarterly reporting.
- Develop a 3–5-year plan with donor/partner mapping, value propositions, and segmented outreach.
- Produce tailored prospectuses per audience (donors, universities, philanthropy, Corporate Social Responsibility - CSR), including co-funding and in-kind pathways.
- Pilot paid access to modular courses, ToT certifications, and cohort services for non-consortium users.
- Offer advisory services on research training design, KT systems, Monitoring Evaluation and Learning (MEL), and governance reform.
- Mobilize CSR funds and co-develop tools with tech firms for interoperable platforms and digital delivery.
- Aggregate multi-funder contributions into thematic hubs (e.g., doctoral training, KT, data/AI), with shared governance and transparent allocation rules.
- Formalize Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) for in-kind and co-delivered initiatives with organizations (e.g., UNESCO-type bodies, regional commissions, academies).
- Negotiate budget sharing (tuition relief, venue, staff time) and document contributions in resource management dashboards.
- Conduct gap assessments and implement Good Financial Grant Practices (GFGP) strengthening where required.
- Track pipelines, funds secured, co-funding/in-kind contributions, and program impact metrics and publish quarterly highlights.

Theory of Change

The proposed strategic objectives show strong alignment to the CARTA Theory of Change. The focus on skilled ECRs and their clear progression from training to research leadership through research, innovation, digital transformation, knowledge translation and transfer for societal impact. The building of sustainable research-conducive environments. The feedback loop suggests capacity reinforcement in sustaining research training as CARTA graduates join forces to train more.



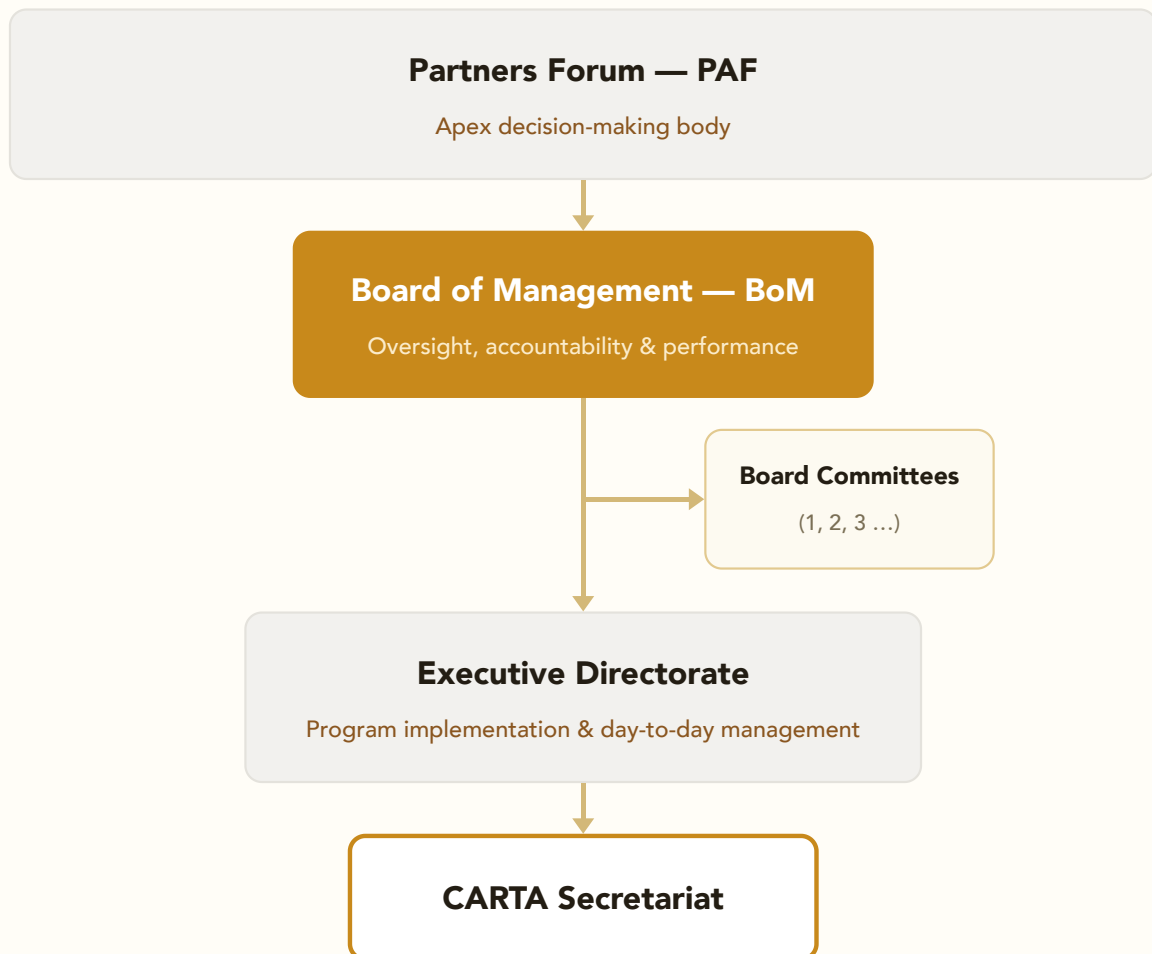
Governance Structure

To ensure operational efficiency during this strategic cycle, CARTA will be governed by a multi-tiered structure that combines strategic oversight, inclusive partnership and operational delivery to institutionalize research excellence across the consortium. It enhances distributed ownership, transparency and accountability to align vision with execution and mobilize resources for sustained impact.

Partners Forum: apex decision-making body made of CARTA Focal Persons from partner institutions and the Executive Directorate. Funders and associate members may be invited.

Board of Management: provides oversight governance, accountability and performance assurance; supported by specialized committees offering expert advice.

Executive Directorate: accountable to the CARTA Board of Management; leads program implementation and day-to-day management.



Timelines, MEL and Risk Management

Timelines and High-Level Milestones



Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning

- Annual progress reports and consortium review meetings.
- Mid-term (2028) independent evaluation to assess institutionalization, quality standards uptake, digital adoption, and RM performance.
- Use reviews as continuous learning loops; roll out corrective actions where needed.

Risk Management



Funding Risk

Mitigate through diversified funding and commercialization pilots.



Quality Risk From Decentralization

Mitigate with phased handovers, accreditation linkages, certified facilitators, and regular hub reviews.



Digital Inclusion Risk

Mitigate with low-bandwidth solutions, targeted grants, and phased tech rollouts.

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