

OUTCOME PAPER FROM THE LEARNING CIRCLE ON

"Sustaining System Change
Amid Political Transitions:
Strategies and Insights"

Introduction

To achieve success in systems change efforts, sustained engagement with government entities over an extended period is crucial. However, changes within government can sometimes disrupt or delay these efforts. Several Co-impact partners in Africa, gathered through a Community of Practice, discussed the challenges they faced and the strategies they employed to address them. This learning brief summarizes the challenges and strategies shared at the gathering.

The changes that affect Systems changes work

Although government undergoes various changes, those involved in systems change often encounter two common types of changes.

- ❖ **Departure of Government allies:** Successful systems change relies heavily on cultivating robust relationships with key government stakeholders who support and advocate for the desired changes. However, these allies may leave their positions due to transfers, job losses, or changes in political leadership with a new administration. When such departures occur, civil society organisations (CSOs) must re-establish relationships and secure buy-in from new stakeholders, which can result in a significant loss of momentum for the systems change initiatives. Building relationships and gaining access to key government decision-makers can be challenging, especially during political transitions when new leaders are in place.
- ❖ **Changes in Government priorities and mandates.** Government commitment to partnering on systems change is often driven by current priorities and policy agendas. However, these priorities can shift, leading to decreased attention and focus on specific issues. Changes in government can exacerbate this, as new administrations may have different priorities and policy agendas compared to their predecessors. Political transitions can also lead to changes in budget allocations and the availability of government resources to support initiatives.

Key Strategies for sustaining systems change amid political transitions

Organisations have used the following strategies to manage these changes:

- 1. Go beyond relationships with individuals to sustainable relationships with groups across governments:** To ensure continuity and stability in systems change efforts despite political transitions, focus on working with committees or teams of government officials rather than relying solely on individual contacts. Engaging with established committees or working groups enables one to build a network of influential focal points who collectively support the initiative. Furthermore, this approach helps to create a more resilient support structure that is less vulnerable to the impacts of political turnover. This is because committees and teams often have a broader mandate and institutional backing, which can sustain momentum and ensure that the systems change agenda remains a priority even when individual members of the government shift. Additionally, empowering these groups with the tools, resources, and authority they need can further solidify their commitment to the change process and foster a more collaborative and enduring partnership.

Build sustainable, institutionalised relationships across government levels to navigate political changes and continue driving systems change. This involves creating connections not only with high-level officials but also with key stakeholders at regional, municipal, and local levels. Engaging with a diverse range of government actors enables one to develop a more robust support network that transcends individual changes in leadership.

- 2. Document and institutionalise engagements and commitments:** To safeguard progress and maintain momentum through political transitions, document and institutionalise engagements and commitments with government partners. Creating formal records, such as through detailed Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs) or official thank-you letters, establishes a clear and enduring paper trail. These documents also serve as a reference for both parties, ensuring that agreements and understandings are preserved even when personnel changes occur.

In addition, formal documentation not only provides a tangible record of commitments but also reinforces the seriousness and formality of the agreements. MOUs, for example, outline specific roles, responsibilities, and expectations, which can be critical in maintaining clarity and accountability. Such records help to institutionalise the commitments within the governmental framework, making it more challenging for changes in personnel to disrupt ongoing initiatives. Additionally, having these documents on hand can facilitate smoother transitions by offering new stakeholders a clear understanding of past agreements and ongoing objectives, thereby supporting continued collaboration and progress.

3. **Frame systems change as supporting government priorities:** To address the challenge of new personnel potentially not supporting the change agenda, position the systems change work as complementary to and enhancing the government's broader development agenda. By framing it as an integral part of the government's overall priorities, rather than the focus of a single individual, the initiative is presented as beneficial for the entire administration. This broader alignment makes it more difficult for new personnel to shift focus, as the systems change agenda is embedded within the government's comprehensive objectives and seen as contributing to its overall success.
4. **Leverage civil society coalitions to sustain advocacy efforts:** To mitigate the risk of shifting government priorities and ensure continued focus on systems change initiatives, it is essential to build and strengthen collaborative networks of civil society actors. By forming robust coalitions, civil society organisations (CSOs) can pool their resources, expertise, and influence to sustain advocacy efforts and maintain consistent pressure on the government.
5. **Engage the support of outgoing Government supporters & allies.** For example, one can request outgoing government allies to personally introduce the organisation to their successors or other key figures within the incoming administration. These introductions can help establish early connections and ensure that new officials are aware of and engaged with ongoing initiatives. The introductions could take the form of joint meetings or discussions involving outgoing allies, the CSO, and incoming officials. These meetings can provide a platform for a smooth handover of responsibilities and ensure that new officials are briefed on the current status and future plans.

One can also ask outgoing allies to advocate for the systems change initiatives with their successors. Their endorsement can provide valuable credibility and reinforce the importance of the work, helping to secure continued support from the new administration. Finally, one can collaborate with outgoing allies to create comprehensive briefings or transition documents. These materials should summarise the progress, goals, and impact of the systems change initiatives, offering new officials a clear understanding of the work and its significance.

Conclusion

In conclusion, recognising the potential challenges that political transitions can pose to systems change efforts in Africa is crucial. Proactively addressing these challenges by implementing the proposed strategies during the systems change process can help mitigate the disruptions that political transitions might cause. By staying vigilant and adaptive, systems change initiatives can better withstand political shifts and continue to make progress toward their goals.

Systems Change Community of Practice

The Africa Systems Change Community of Practice (CoP) was created to strengthen the capacity of partners of **Co-Impact** to design and implement systems change through peer and shared learning and collaboration.

The members of the CoP work across West, Southern, and East Africa in various sectors including Education, Health, Women's Leadership, and Economic Opportunities.

The **Africa Systems Change Community of Practice** is coordinated by **Busara Africa**. Busara Africa is a Leadership and Organisational Development Consulting Firm based in Accra, Ghana.

Founded a decade ago, Busara has been serving clients across Africa and globally.

More specifically, we have supported a wide range of organisations to navigate change and improve their effectiveness to better deliver on their mandates.

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