



**Africa Systems Change
Community of Practice**
Engage, Learn, Impact

The Change-makers Pain-points in leading for systems change: Conversations with Organizational Leaders in Africa

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Leading civil society organizations to implement projects and programs is widely documented. However, leading organizations to drive systems change with government and other key players is a different field altogether. In the last few months, a group of twenty (20) leaders of African organizations (male and female) from Ghana, Nigeria, Kenya, and South Africa have been meeting to share their experiences, challenges and pressures in leading organizations to achieve systems change across different sectors including education, health and governance. What struck us, as process facilitators, was how similar the leadership journeys are across the sectors and countries. The leadership sessions highlighted five pain points and five lessons.

Pain Points in Leading Systems Change.

Five key pain points emerged from the conversations:

1. **Moving forward without letting go:** The leaders often struggle to prioritize transformative initiatives that demand significant attention and resources at the system level, while still maintaining the core activities that define their organizations. For some, the challenge is ensuring that the pursuit of long-term systems change does not overshadow or disrupt essential services and advocacy efforts that communities rely on, and where project funding has been obtained. In this regard, they struggle to advance systemic changes without compromising the ongoing work that is vital to the organization's mission.

2. The drawbacks of success: The leaders indicated that some of their organizations have been working on systems change with great success. With this success has come increased visibility, which is appreciated. However, the drawback of this visibility is that it exposes their best staff members to admiration by competitors, particularly the wealthier multinational organizations. This has led to the loss of key team members, forcing their organizations into a cycle of frequent recruitment and onboarding.

3. Leading in complexity, ambiguity and demand for terrestrial agility: Some of the leaders shared that systems change does not solely depend on their efforts but also on everything and everyone else in the system. It is slow, daunting, and exhausting. Leaders in government frequently change, not only at the political level but also within bureaucratic structures, requiring the building of new relationships. Additionally, political interests override the change they are pursuing, further complicating their interventions.

4. The work is demanding; burnout is real: The leaders shared that the demanding nature of their work takes a toll on their wellbeing. Burnout is a real and pressing issue, as they face unrelenting demands, tight deadlines, limited resources, and stretched teams, with constant movement and minimal time for breaks. The difficulty of integrating self-care practices into busy schedules, combined with the emotional exhaustion from navigating complex systems and stakeholder relationships, leaves them drained, demotivated, and vulnerable to burnout by the end of the day.

5. System change stretches the organization: The leaders indicated that systems change stretches their organizations to their limits, demanding new skills, approaches, and strategies that place considerable strain on existing structures and processes. This transformation forces them to adapt and evolve rapidly, pushing beyond comfort zones to drive meaningful change and sustain impact.

What they have Learned about What Works.

Despite the numerous challenges that the leaders face, they have also developed effective strategies and ways of coping:

- 1. Balancing strategic priorities:** The Leaders shared that as much as their organizations struggle with choosing between systems change, advocacy, or service delivery, they have come to learn that these options are not mutually exclusive. Instead of making it an either-or decision, leaders identify the strategy that best aligns with their vision and mission. For some, focusing solely on systems change may be the right path, while others may find a blended approach that combines systems change with advocacy and service delivery more effective. They are learning that systems change is typically a gradual process, requiring continuous organizational transformation. The key lesson is to ensure that the strategy is thoughtfully aligned with both the organization's goals and the needs of its constituents, ultimately creating meaningful and sustainable impact.
- 2. Adopting strategies to retain talented staff:** To counteract staff poaching, leaders adopt strategies to enhance their compensation packages, offer career development opportunities, and foster a positive work environment. By recognising and rewarding employees, improving work-life balance, and providing unique perks, they boost retention. Building strong relationships with their team and regularly reviewing compensation ensures that employees feel valued and see clear paths for growth. When turnover occurs, mentorship and expert guidance are crucial in helping new colleagues integrate smoothly. By addressing these factors, they increase employee satisfaction and loyalty, reducing loss of talent to competitors.
- 3. Adopting flexibility and adaptive approach:** Leaders shared that they are learning to embrace a flexible and adaptive approach to navigate the uncertainty and complexity they face. They are improving their emphasis on learning and experimentation, using available data to inform their decisions, and incorporating diverse perspectives for comprehensive insights.

They are also implementing pilot programs to test strategies on a smaller scale and communicating transparently with stakeholders. This iterative process helps them refine their strategies and enhance their decision-making over time.

4. Prioritizing self-care: To avoid burnout, leaders are learning to manage fatigue and supporting team well-being through prioritising effective time management and encouraging regular self-care. Simple practices such as morning or evening journaling help clear mental clutter, while mindfulness and self-compassion allow individuals to connect with their mind, body, and spirit. By being kind to themselves, acknowledging and celebrating small wins, and consistently focusing on their well-being, they sustain their energy and resilience, as well as that of the teams they lead.

5. Distributive Leadership: To reduce the pressure and responsibility faced by leaders in systems change work, they are recognising the importance of shared leadership. This requires regular communication and keeping the team focused on the bigger picture and agreed-upon strategies. Frequent team meetings are essential for addressing issues openly and ensuring alignment. Tasks are delegated to those best suited for specific roles, allowing for the leverage of individual strengths. Consistent engagement with the leadership team, providing support, and being available for guidance fosters a collaborative environment. By upholding honesty, transparency, and safe spaces for dialogue, they facilitate the emergence of a leadership pipeline in the organization, thus unlocking collective success.

Conclusion

Leading systems change is inherently complex. Leaders are not always in control of the process or outcomes, and this uncertainty often creates tension with funders, stakeholders, and the communities they serve. However, the challenges that Africa faces can only be solved through government collaboration—civil society, on its own, lacks the power and financial capacity to drive large-scale change.

Acknowledging vulnerability has been a significant learning point for these leaders, alongside a strong commitment to peer learning and support networks. As Edmondson and Chamorro-Premuzic argue, adaptive leadership requires humility, courage, and the ability to form genuine connections with others. These leaders are demonstrating that by staying motivated, open, and connected, meaningful systems change is not only possible, it is within reach.