

Looking Back on the Design Phase: What we would tell new partners

Reflections from Africa CoP Design Phase Partners

1. Introduction and Background

The African Community of Practice (CoP) brings together diverse actors committed to advancing systems change in Africa. During the first phase of the Community, partners who were going through the design phase came together to learn and share their experience navigating the design phase. At the end of the design phase, we asked these partners to share a few tips they would pass on to those just beginning the design phase. Here's what they said.

2. Pointers from Those Who Have Completed the Design Phase

Having just completed our own nine-month Design Phase, we want to leave behind some signposts for those about to begin this journey. The Design Phase is not just a procedural requirement; it lays the groundwork for the entire initiative. It is here that fundamental strategies are shaped, partnerships are forged, and key decisions are made. Done well, it sets a strong foundation for long-term impact. Done poorly or rushed, it can create significant challenges later.

Here are some things we wish we had known at the start:

1. **Clarify guidelines early:** Take time at the very beginning to ensure you understand what is being asked for in the guidelines. Use the Design phase webinars to ask others and Co-Impact if you are unsure. Misunderstandings at this stage can cost you time and energy later. Alignment upfront ensures everyone is moving in the same direction.
2. **Assemble your design team quickly:** Don't wait for too long to bring your team together. Having the right people engaged early fosters collaboration, problem-solving, and shared ownership of the process.
3. **Invest in understanding your system:** Early in the process, spend time on analysis and mapping. This deepens your understanding of the system you're working in and helps shape interventions that are not just ambitious but also feasible and grounded in reality.
4. **Expect slow, iterative progress in the early modules:** Modules 1 and 2 often feel frustrating; there's exploration, multiple drafts, and lots of

back-and-forth. This is normal. Set realistic expectations within your team, build in enough time for learning and redesign, and remind yourselves that iteration is the point, not the problem.

5. **Engage stakeholders inclusively:** Bring stakeholders in early and at the right levels. Co-creating with them enriches the process, surfaces diverse perspectives, and builds critical buy-in. The design is stronger when it's not just yours but also theirs.
6. **Follow the guidelines, but don't treat them as a box-checking exercise:** The framework reflects collective experience and best practice; it exists to guide you, not constrain you. Use it as a map to stay on track while adapting it to your unique context.
7. **See the Design Phase as a learning journey:** It's more than a document you hand in. It's about learning how to think differently about systems change, about your organisation, and about partnership. The deeper you engage with this learning, the more transformative the experience will be.
8. **Embrace flexibility and feedback:** The process will evolve. Feedback, whether from your team, stakeholders, or Co-Impact, is part of how the design gets better. Create a culture of openness, adjust when needed, and see iteration as a strength rather than a setback.
9. **Be patient and trust the process:** Progress may feel slow, especially at the start. Stick with it. Meaningful results in complex systems take time, and perseverance pays off.
10. **Seek support where you can:** A coach who understands systems change can be invaluable. They can help you stay aligned, provide strategic perspective, and challenge you to think more deeply.

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Compiled by Busara Africa