

# Mombasa Convening Report

LEADERSHIP RETREAT  
AND MAIN CONVENING



Africa Systems Change  
Community of Practice  
Engage, Learn, Impact

SEPTEMBER 15-18, 2025  
VOYAGER BEACH HOTEL,  
MOMBASA, KENYA

# Executive Summary

From September 15–18, 2025, the Africa Systems Change Community of Practice (CoP) held a Convening in Mombasa, Kenya. This four-day gathering brought together leaders and practitioners from across the continent to deepen learning, reflect on leadership practices, strengthen collaboration, and co-create the next phase of the CoP's journey. The convening built a number of years of implementation experience by CoP members and provided a critical space for collective sensemaking at a pivotal moment in the community's evolution.

Before the main convening, a Leadership Retreat was held bringing together 24 senior leaders from 18 organizations for a day of structured reflection and peer exchange. The retreat focused on the unique demands of leading systems change work amidst complexity, uncertainty, and shifting political landscapes. Through interactive sessions including leadership case clinics, group discussions, and thematic explorations, participants unpacked the leadership mindsets and practices that enable sustained transformation. The intimate setting fostered vulnerability and trust, with leaders openly sharing their struggles and insights in ways that would shape the broader convening discussions.



The main convening, held from September 16–18, gathered 53 participants from 20 Co-Impact partner organizations across eight countries: Ghana, Nigeria, Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire, Kenya, South Africa, Uganda, and Tanzania. Using participatory methods that prioritized peer learning and collective wisdom, participants explored strategies for political engagement, norm change, coalition building, public financing, and monitoring and learning. The convening design deliberately created both formal and informal spaces for connection, recognizing that relationship-building is as crucial as technical knowledge transfer in systems change work.

Key insights from the convening emphasized the importance of adaptive leadership, sustained political engagement, values-driven coalitions, and intentional learning systems. Participants demonstrated ownership of the CoP's future direction, with over ten members volunteering to serve on the newly formed Advisory Council and multiple partners offering to lead sessions and share their expertise. The convening concluded with clear commitments for Phase Two, including the establishment of leadership hubs, strengthened monitoring and learning capacity, and deepened collaboration pathways that will extend well beyond the CoP's formal timeline.



# Background and Objectives

The Africa Systems Change Community of Practice (CoP) represents a bold experiment in collaborative learning and collective action across the African continent. Following a successful initial phase that established trust and shared frameworks, the CoP is entering Phase Two with deeper ambitions for collective learning to increased impact on systems change.

The Mombasa convening held particular significance as it marked the move into this second phase of the CoP's work. Partners arrived with their varied experiences implementing systems change strategies in diverse and often challenging contexts. From navigating political transitions in West Africa to building coalitions for educational reform in East Africa, each organization brought practical lessons about what works, what doesn't, and what remains uncertain in the complex work of systems transformation. The gathering provided an opportunity not just to share these experiences but to synthesize them into collective wisdom that could guide the community forward.

The convening's design reflected an understanding of the learning needs and space for the partners. It was curated to ensure that partners have an experience that balanced structured learning with organic emergence. Partners had contributed to the agenda through pre-convening surveys, ensuring that the topics addressed their most pressing challenges and opportunities. This participatory approach to design signaled an important shift in the CoP's evolution from a facilitated network to a self-organizing community of practice.

The objectives of the convening were grounded in practical outcomes.

**The primary aim was to deepen collective learning on core systems change concepts, tools, and approaches through experiential exchange rather than theoretical discussion**

This meant creating spaces where partners could bring real dilemmas and receive thoughtful input from peers who understood the contextual complexities of working in African government systems. The convening also sought to strengthen the relational

infrastructure of the community, recognizing that trust and mutual understanding are prerequisites for the kind of vulnerable learning and bold collaboration that systems change demands.

Beyond individual and organizational learning, the convening aimed to produce a tangible direction for Phase Two of the CoP. These included a co-developed learning agenda that would guide activities for the coming year, operational methodologies and principles for engagement, and the formation of a representative Advisory Council to provide strategic guidance. The gathering also sought to enhance capacity on key systems change themes including political engagement, coalition management, public financing, and adaptive monitoring and evaluation systems.



# Key Discussions and Insights

The thematic discussions during the convening revealed both the sophistication of the community's collective understanding and the persistent challenges facing systems change practitioners across the continent. Rather than abstract theorizing, conversations were grounded in concrete experiences and practical wisdom accumulated through years of navigating complex change processes. This section synthesizes the key insights that emerged across multiple sessions and informal discussions, organized thematically to highlight patterns and connections.

## Leading Systems Change: Mindsets and Practices

The exploration of systems change leadership revealed a fundamental tension between traditional organizational leadership models and the adaptive approaches required for systemic transformation. Participants reflected deeply on how leading systems change differs from conventional leadership, acknowledging that it requires a profound shift in mindset from control to cultivation, from authority to influence, and from certainty to curiosity. The discussions surfaced the emotional and psychological demands of maintaining vision and momentum through long periods of ambiguity and apparent lack of progress.

Leaders shared candidly about the personal transformation required to become effective systems leaders. Many described a journey from technical expert to systems facilitator, learning to hold space for multiple perspectives rather than pushing singular solutions. The importance of developing what participants called "systems sensibility" emerged as a key theme, the ability to sense patterns, relationships, and leverage points within complex systems while remaining humble about one's ability to predict or control outcomes. This sensibility develops through practice and reflection rather than formal training, making peer learning and mentorship especially valuable.

The conversation also addressed the challenge of developing future systems leaders within organizations primarily structured for service delivery or advocacy. Participants explored strategies for creating learning environments that cultivate systems thinking, including rotation through different roles and organizations, exposure to diverse stakeholder perspectives, and structured reflection on failure and adaptation. The need to balance investment in individual leader development with building distributed leadership capacity across teams and coalitions emerged as an ongoing tension requiring careful navigation.



## Navigating Uncertainty and Complexity

The session on navigating uncertainty proved particularly resonant given the political transitions, funding shifts, and global uncertainties affecting many partner organizations. Through examining real cases brought by participants, the group identified patterns in how successful leaders and organizations maintain effectiveness during periods of intense uncertainty. The discussion moved beyond generic change management frameworks to explore the specific challenges of uncertainty in African contexts, where formal institutions may be weak and informal networks play crucial stabilizing roles.

Effective strategies for navigating uncertainty centered on maintaining strong relationships and trust networks that can provide both emotional support and practical resources during crises. Participants emphasized the importance of what they termed "purposeful grounding", staying connected to organizational mission and values while remaining flexible about strategies and tactics. The ability to communicate honestly about uncertainty while maintaining hope and direction emerged as a critical leadership capability, particularly when working with communities that have experienced repeated disappointments from development initiatives.

The group also explored how organizational systems and cultures either enable or constrain adaptive capacity during uncertain times. Organizations with diverse funding sources, strong learning cultures, and distributed decision-making authority demonstrated greater resilience when facing unexpected changes. Conversely, rigid hierarchies, over-dependence on single funding sources, and cultures that punish failure created brittleness that could transform manageable challenges into existential crises. The discussion produced practical frameworks for assessing and strengthening organizational adaptive capacity, which several partners committed to implementing upon return to their home organizations.



## Political Savviness and Government Engagement

The exploration of political engagement strategies revealed sophisticated understanding of the delicate dance required to influence government systems while maintaining independence and integrity. Participants shared nuanced approaches to building and maintaining relationships across political divides, recognizing that sustainable systems change requires working with whatever government is in power while not becoming overly aligned with particular political factions. The discussion acknowledged the additional complexity in contexts where political and ethnic identities intersect, requiring even greater sensitivity and strategic thinking.

Successful engagement strategies emphasized the importance of speaking the language of government priorities while maintaining focus on systemic rather than partisan goals. This involves translating systems change objectives into terms that resonate with political incentives such as electoral success, economic development, or international reputation. Participants shared examples of how they frame equity and inclusion initiatives in terms of economic growth and stability. They also described positioning transparency and accountability measures as tools for improving government effectiveness rather than as criticism of current practices.

The group explored the challenge of maintaining momentum through political transitions, which can result in loss of champions, reversal of policies, or shifts in priorities. Strategies for continuity included building relationships at multiple levels of government rather than depending on single champions, embedding changes in systems and procedures rather than relying on political will alone, and creating constituencies for change that span political divides. The importance of patience and playing the long game emerged repeatedly, with recognition that systems change often requires working through multiple political cycles before achieving sustainable transformation.



## Equity, Inclusion, and Norm Change Strategies

Discussions about equity and inclusion went beyond technical approaches to explore the deep cultural and normative work required to shift entrenched patterns of exclusion. Participants acknowledged that while policy and programmatic interventions are necessary, they are insufficient without addressing underlying beliefs, attitudes, and social norms that perpetuate inequality. The conversation explored how to work simultaneously at multiple levels, from individual consciousness to institutional cultures to societal narratives, recognizing that change at each level reinforces and enables change at others.

The group examined strategies for making equity and inclusion integral to systems change work rather than add-on considerations. This involves ensuring that marginalized voices don't just participate in predetermined processes but actually shape agendas and define success metrics. Participants shared approaches for creating authentic partnerships with grassroots organizations and social movements, recognizing that technical expertise must be balanced with lived experience and community wisdom. The challenge of navigating power dynamics within coalitions, where well-resourced organizations may inadvertently dominate despite commitments to equity, received particular attention.

Strategies for norm change emphasized the importance of storytelling and narrative shift alongside policy advocacy and service delivery. Participants explored how to identify and work with positive deviants, individuals and communities that have already adopted more equitable practices, as catalysts for broader change. The role of media, both traditional and social, in either reinforcing or challenging discriminatory norms was discussed, with examples of successful campaigns that shifted public discourse on issues like gender-based violence and disability rights. The group also acknowledged the personal work required of systems change leaders to examine and address their own biases and privileges.



## Coalition and Partnership Building

The examination of coalition dynamics through the ALiVE case study and other examples revealed both the potential and pitfalls of collaborative approaches to systems change. Participants explored the fundamental tension between maintaining organizational identity and truly collaborative action, acknowledging that genuine partnership requires surrendering some autonomy and control. The discussion distinguished between transactional partnerships focused on resource exchange and transformational partnerships that create new collective capacities beyond what any single organization could achieve.

Trust emerged as the foundational element of effective coalitions, but participants went beyond platitudes to examine what trust-building actually requires in practice. This includes transparency about organizational capacities and limitations, consistency between words and actions, and willingness to share both credit and blame. The group explored how to build trust across significant differences in organizational culture, size, and approach, recognizing that diversity strengthens coalitions but also creates friction that must be actively managed.

The conversation addressed practical challenges of coalition management including decision-making processes, resource allocation, and accountability mechanisms. Participants shared innovative governance models that balance efficiency with inclusion, such as rotating leadership, consent-based decision-making, and differentiated roles based on organizational strengths. The importance of investing in coalition infrastructure, dedicated coordination capacity, communication systems, and learning processes, was emphasized, with recognition that this often receives insufficient attention and resources. The group also explored strategies for managing the lifecycle of coalitions, including how to evolve, merge, or gracefully conclude partnerships as contexts and needs change.



## Public Financing for Systems Change

The session on public financing revealed a deep understanding of how government budget processes can either enable or constrain systems change efforts. Participants moved beyond lamenting resource constraints to explore how civil society organizations can engage strategically with public financial management systems to influence resource allocation and utilization. The discussion acknowledged that in many African countries, the challenge is not just insufficient resources but also inefficient and inequitable distribution of available funds.

Strategies for engagement ranged from technical support to government agencies on budget preparation and execution to citizen mobilization for participatory budgeting processes. Participants shared experiences with budget tracking and expenditure monitoring, highlighting how transparency about public spending can create accountability pressures for better resource utilization. The importance of building technical capacity within civil society organizations to engage credibly with public finance issues was emphasized, including understanding of budget cycles, fiscal policies, and public financial management regulations.

The group explored innovative approaches to leveraging public resources for systems change. These included social contracting mechanisms where government funds civil society service delivery, matched funding models that blend public and private resources, and policy reforms that direct percentages of certain revenues to specific purposes. The discussion also addressed the political economy of public financing, recognizing that budget decisions reflect power relations and that technical arguments alone are rarely sufficient to shift resource allocation. Successful examples emphasized the importance of building coalitions that span civil society, private sector, and reform-minded government officials.



## Learning, Monitoring and Evaluation

The exploration of Learning, Monitoring, Evaluation approaches for systems change revealed significant evolution in thinking and practice within the community. Participants have moved beyond linear theories of change and simple indicator frameworks to develop adaptive learning systems that can capture emergence, unintended consequences, and systemic shifts. The discussion emphasized that LME for systems change is not just about accountability to donors but about creating intelligence systems that enable continuous adaptation and improvement.

Innovative practices shared included outcome harvesting approaches that capture unexpected results, most significant change techniques that surface diverse perspectives on impact, and developmental evaluation models that position evaluators as learning partners rather than external judges. Participants explored how to use digital tools and data visualization to make complex system dynamics more visible and understandable to diverse stakeholders. The importance of building LME capacity across entire teams rather than relegating it to specialist units was emphasized, recognizing that everyone involved in systems change work needs to be a learner and sense-maker.

The conversation also addressed the challenge of aligning organizational learning needs with donor reporting requirements, which often emphasize predetermined indicators and linear causation. Strategies for managing this tension included negotiating for adaptive programming provisions in grant agreements, educating donors about complexity-aware evaluation approaches, and developing parallel learning and accountability systems that serve different purposes. The group explored how to tell compelling impact stories that honor complexity while still being accessible to audiences accustomed to simple cause-and-effect narratives. The importance of investing in documentation and knowledge management systems to capture and share learning across the community was recognized as essential for collective advancement.

# Outcomes and Next Steps

The Mombasa convening led to concrete results that go well beyond the four days of the event, laying the groundwork for ongoing collaboration and learning that will guide the CoP's future. The most important outcomes are the shared learning and relationships formed, which not only strengthen the CoP but also build the capacity of partners to advance their systems change work.

Agreement on priority themes for Phase Two emerged through extensive dialogue that balanced expressed needs with available resources and expertise. Political engagement strategies will receive sustained attention given the number of countries experiencing or approaching electoral transitions. Coalition strengthening will focus on both technical aspects of partnership management and deeper work on power dynamics and authentic collaboration. LME capacity building will emphasize practical tools and approaches that can be immediately applied while building conceptual understanding of complexity-aware evaluation. Each theme will be explored through multiple modalities including peer learning exchanges, technical workshops, action learning projects, and documentation of emerging practices.

The formation of the Advisory Council marks an important governance milestone for the CoP. The overwhelming response to the call for council members, with over ten qualified candidates volunteering, reflects both the value members see in the CoP and their commitment to its success.

Perhaps, most significantly, the convening catalyzed bilateral and multilateral collaborations that will continue independently of formal CoP activities. The planned visit by the Centre for Girls Education in Nigeria to Lwala Alliance in Kenya exemplifies the organic partnerships emerging from relationships built during the convening. These peer-to-peer connections may ultimately prove more valuable than any formal programming, creating a resilient network of mutual support that transcends institutional boundaries.

The commitment to documentation and knowledge sharing ensures that insights from the convening will reach beyond those who attended. Knowledge products will be developed from each major session, translating rich discussions into accessible resources for practitioners across the continent and beyond. These products will include both technical guidance documents and narrative case studies that capture the human dimensions of systems change work. All materials will be made available through open access platforms, contributing to the broader movement for knowledge democracy and African thought leadership on systems transformation.

# Conclusion

The 2025 Mombasa Convening stands as both a milestone achievement and a launching pad for the next phase of the Africa Systems Change Community of Practice's evolution. The gathering demonstrated the growth of a community that has moved beyond initial relationship building and concept introduction to engage in sophisticated analysis and strategic action for systems transformation. The quality of dialogue, depth of peer support, and commitment to collective advancement signal that the CoP has developed the trust, shared language, and collaborative muscles necessary for tackling increasingly complex challenges.

The convening's success lay not just in what was discussed but in how the community showed up for one another. The vulnerability demonstrated in leadership case clinics, the generosity of partners sharing both successes and failures, and the enthusiasm for taking on leadership roles within the CoP all indicate a community that has claimed ownership of its collective journey.

Looking forward, the insights and commitments from Mombasa provide clear direction while maintaining flexibility for emergence and adaptation. The identified priority themes offer focus while remaining broad enough to accommodate diverse partner needs and contexts. The strengthened relationships and emerging collaborations create resilience that will help the community weather inevitable challenges and changes ahead.

As the CoP enters Phase Two, it does so with enhanced clarity about both the magnitude of the systems change challenge and the collective capacity to address it. The Mombasa convening reinforced that systems change is not a technical problem to be solved but an ongoing process of learning, adaptation, and transformation that requires both individual leadership and collective action. The community's commitment to continuing this journey together, supporting one another through uncertainty and complexity while maintaining focus on systemic impact, offers hope for transformational change across the African continent.





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