



LEARNING, MONITORING & EVALUATION BRIEF

Reimagining LME for Government Systems Change in Africa

Insights from the Africa Systems Change Community of Practice | Mombasa Convening, September 2025



About This Brief

This knowledge brief is written for practitioners within the Africa Systems Change Community of Practice (Africa CoP), and for anyone working on learning, monitoring and evaluation (LME) in the context of government systems change. It draws on discussions from a session on LME at the Africa CoP Mombasa Convening (September 2025), where members shared their approaches, innovations, and honest struggles.

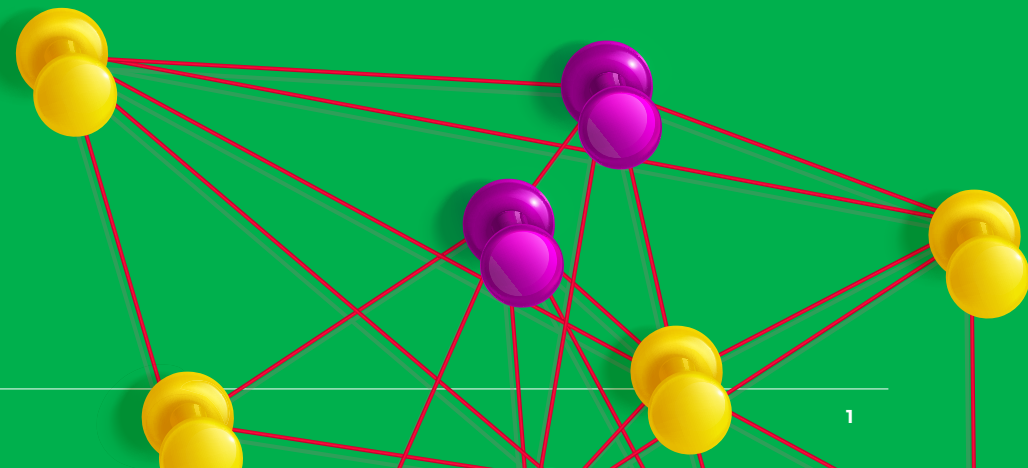
We use the term LME deliberately throughout, placing Learning first, to signal that monitoring and evaluation serve a deeper purpose: helping us think together, adapt in real time, and stay honest about the complexity of the systems we are trying to change.



At the Africa CoP Mombasa Convening, Co-Impact partners from across the continent came together after a sustained period of implementation. They arrived carrying hard-won insights about what it takes to build LME systems that can keep pace with shifting government systems.

The session on LME was rich, honest, and at times contested. What emerged was far more than a catalogue of tools and methods. It was a collective reckoning with a deeper question: how do we build LME systems that serve the work, rather than just satisfy reporting requirements?

This brief captures six interconnected lessons from that conversation. It is not a prescription. It is an invitation to reflect on your own practice, compare notes with peers, and collectively push the boundaries of what LME can do in the context of African government systems change.



Learning as a System: From Documentation to Collective Intelligence

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One of the strongest themes to emerge from the session was deceptively simple: **learning does not happen because we document things**. It happens because we create ongoing spaces to think together, across organisations, sectors, and geographies. In the context of government systems change, where shifts happen slowly and unevenly, this distinction is critical.

Partners shared a range of practices they have built to make learning continuous rather than episodic:

- **Virtual learning cohorts and weekly reflection calls** that keep distributed teams connected between formal review moments.
- **Telementoring platforms**, including Project ECHO (Extension for Community Healthcare Outcomes) and its automated i-ECHO backend, use technology to distribute expertise across geographies where specialist knowledge is scarce.
- **Internal routines** such as “Friday radios”, after-action reviews, and staff-led learning briefings make reflection a regular habit rather than a project milestone.
- **Knowledge products** such as fact sheets, dashboards, policy briefs, and peer-reviewed articles that move learning beyond internal teams and into the broader system.



What was striking across all of these practices was their deliberate intent to distribute competence, not just capture it. In a landscape where government systems are slow to change, and frontline realities shift faster than policy frameworks, these spaces help teams respond quickly, learn from failure, and stay calibrated to what is actually happening.

One principle stood out as a marker of a genuinely learning-oriented culture:

**Everyone writes,
Everyone gets a byline.**

— SHARED PRACTICE ACROSS
MULTIPLE COP MEMBERS

This approach, in which knowledge production is not reserved for senior staff or external evaluators, ensures that everyone in a team becomes both a holder and a contributor of institutional intelligence. In systems change, where the most important signals often come from the frontline, this is not just good practice. It is a strategic necessity.

PRACTICE SPOTLIGHT

Building Cultures of Learning and Reflection

Bajeti Hub and IBP(International Budget Partnership)

These two organisations each use periodic reflection and review meetings as a core part of how they work, not as a project requirement, but as an organisational habit.

Bajeti Hub builds structured reflection retreats into its annual calendar - not as an add-on, but as a core part of how the organisation steers its work. Held twice a year with partners, these sessions create a dedicated space to surface what is actually happening in the system: what assumptions are holding, what has shifted, and what the organisation needs to do differently as a result. The discipline is simple but rare - stopping long enough to let experience inform strategy, rather than letting strategy run ahead of experience.

IBP runs a biannual Review and Reflection (R&R) process with its partners - not as a reporting exercise, but as a genuine interrogation of whether their assumptions are held. Learning questions drive the conversation: How are outcomes actually emerging? What pathways are we seeing that we did not anticipate? What power dynamics are shaping, what is and is not possible? One of the clearest lessons to come out of these reflections is that systems change rarely happens through a single relationship or channel. Reform coalitions are most effective when they can engage both formal accountability actors, such as Supreme Audit Institutions, and informal ones, such as the media and civil society networks. The R&R process is what keeps IBP's strategy responsive to this reality, adapting to shifting political and institutional contexts rather than executing a fixed plan.

Tools and Methods: Innovation Rooted in Accessibility

2

Partner organisations across the CoP are expanding the boundaries of monitoring and evaluation by embracing digital, adaptive, and community-friendly tools. But the conversation in Mombasa was not simply about which tools are the most sophisticated. It was about which tools are genuinely fit for the contexts in which systems change work happens, including limited internet connectivity, smartphone barriers, multilingual communities, and sometimes, politically sensitive environments.

Several digital tools were widely used across organisations:

- **KoboToolbox and ODK¹** for flexible, offline-ready data collection. KoboToolbox was identified by organisations including CERATH Development Organisation, Maternal & Reproductive Health Research Collective (MRHRC), Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL) Africa, Africa for Alliance (AfA), Bajeti Hub, The Action Foundation (TAF), and Gender Dynamix (GDX), making it arguably the most widely adopted tool in the Africa CoP.
- **TolaData²** used by IBP to collect, manage and analyse data in one centralized platform.
- **Power BI, Tableau, and Looker Studio** for real-time dashboards that make data visible to decision-makers, including government counterparts.
- **QR-code feedback systems** to make data collection quick, low-barrier, and community-friendly in settings where written forms create resistance.
- **Behavioural and qualitative tools** to track shifts in norms and attitudes forms of change that do not appear in quantitative datasets but are often the most important signals of systems movement.

1 ODK (Open Data Kit) is an open-source mobile data collection platform. It enables users to fill out forms offline and sync data to a server when connectivity is restored.

2 TolaData is an impact management platform that helps organisations plan, measure, learn and report in one centralised web platform.



Beyond digital tools, partners shared innovative outcome measurement approaches designed specifically for the non-linear nature of systems change:

- **Most Significant Change (MSC) storytelling**³ a participatory technique in which stakeholders collect and analyse stories of change, rather than tracking pre-set indicators. MSC can also be applied within broader evaluation approaches, alongside methods such as process tracing, to help explain how and why outcomes unfold in context.
- **Walls of resilience** is a community-driven story collections that make change visible in human terms.
- **Difference-in-Difference analysis** to estimate the degree to which observed change can be attributed, or more precisely, contributed, to programme activities.

PRACTICE SPOTLIGHT Technology That Travels

Project ECHO and i-ECHO (Multiple CoP Organisations)

In many African health and education systems, specialist knowledge is concentrated in a handful of urban centres leaving frontline practitioners in rural and peri-urban areas without access to the expertise they need. Project ECHO addresses this directly, connecting specialists and frontline practitioners through structured virtual learning networks. Its programme management tool, i-ECHO, automates what would otherwise consume significant staff time: attendance tracking, cohort management, and reporting broken down by geography. The result is that systematic learning becomes possible at scale not because the technology is sophisticated, but because it removes the administrative burden that typically prevents it from happening at all.

³ **Most Significant Change (MSC)** is a participatory technique for organisations monitoring and evaluating complex programmes, in which stakeholders collect and analyse stories of change rather than tracking pre-set indicators.

Measuring Impact in Government Systems: From Attribution to Contribution

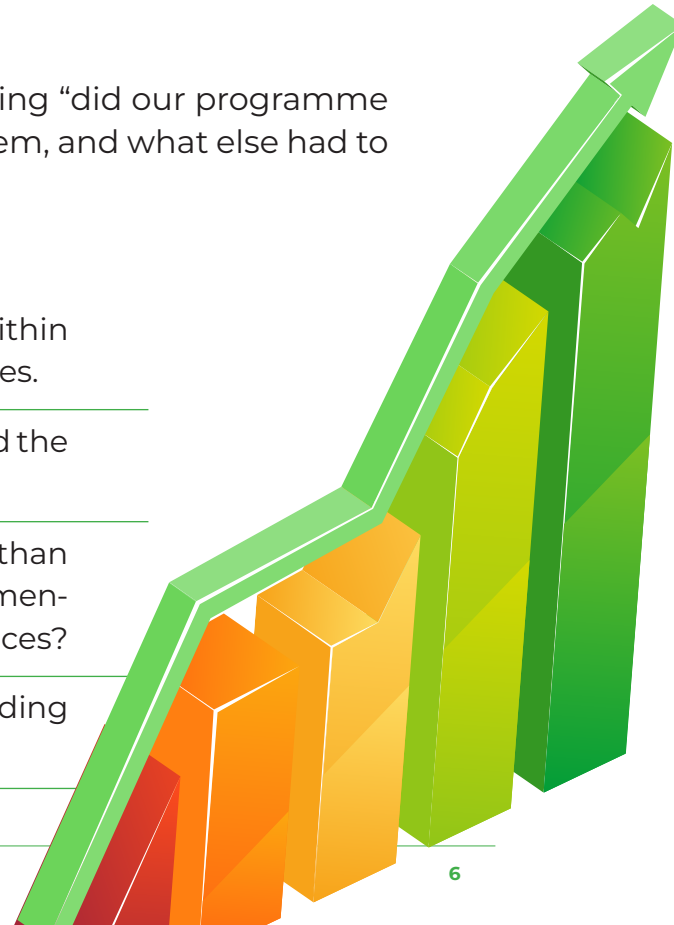
3

Perhaps no tension in the session generated more agreement than this one: traditional LME pressures organisations to prove impact, as if a single programme can be isolated from the complex system around it and made solely responsible for observed change. In government systems change, this framing is not just methodologically problematic; it is actively misleading.

The CoP's emerging consensus is a shift from attribution to contribution: rather than asking "did our programme cause this change?", organisations are asking "how did we contribute to a shift in the system, and what else had to be true for that shift to happen?"

This distinction has practical consequences. It requires:

- Using national datasets and independent research to situate programme-level change within broader system-level trends, rather than claiming ownership of trends that reflect wider forces.
- Combining population-level surveys with granular community data to see both the forest and the trees, and to capture the dynamics that only appear at the micro level.
- Capturing unintended and emergent outcomes through regular reflection pauses, rather than waiting for project endlines. Several organisations described deliberately stopping mid-implementation to ask: What is changing that we did not plan for? What are the unintended consequences?
- Using tracer studies to track long-term influence on people, institutions, and policies, including influence that only becomes visible years after a programme ends.



**We stopped waiting for endlines to ask hard questions.
We pause midstream, even when it is uncomfortable,
because that is when adaptive programming is still possible.**

— PARTNER ORGANISATION,
MOMBASA CONVENING

This approach requires a different relationship with donors and with government counterparts, one in which admitting uncertainty and complexity is seen as evidence of rigour, not weakness. Building that relationship takes time, and the Africa CoP is actively working on it.

PRACTICE SPOTLIGHT

Making the Case Through Independent Evidence

Building Shared Evidence Infrastructure for ECD in South Africa

Ilifa Labantwana, working in partnership with South Africa's Department of Basic Education, co-developed eCares - a digital administrative platform that brings data on ECD programmes, registration, and funding into a live government system. Rather than generating evidence that sits in a CSO report, eCares puts data directly into the hands of the people responsible for planning, targeting, and resourcing ECD delivery. The shift is subtle but significant: instead of Ilifa presenting findings to government, government and Ilifa are looking at the same data together. No single organisation can claim the system change that follows but all can see it, measure it, and build on it. That is contribution logic in practice.

PRACTICE SPOTLIGHT

Measuring Contribution to Systems Change

Transforming the Public Governance Resource System

IBP has developed a three-level framework for tracking contribution in complex systems one that resists the temptation to claim more than can honestly be shown. At the service delivery level, they track tangible changes in access to water, sanitation, health services, and infrastructure, using community-generated data and direct feedback. At the budget level, they monitor shifts in public spending linked to their engagement, allocations for essential services, maintenance, and repairs, tracking their own submissions and advocacy engagements alongside the budget decisions that followed. At the systems level, they look for changes in how governments plan, finance, and deliver services: policy reforms, regulatory shifts, and strengthened accountability mechanisms. Taken together, these three levels tell a richer story than any single indicator could, not “did we cause this?” but “where did our contribution show up, and what moved as a result?”

Seeing the System: Measurement Beyond the Project Boundary

4

If we only measure project outcomes, we miss the story of transformation happening around us. Government systems change is, by definition, about shifts that extend beyond any single organisation's sphere of direct control changes in policy, power, norms, relationships, and resources. Measuring these shifts requires tools and habits that deliberately look beyond the project boundary.

Partners shared several approaches to system-sensitive measurement:

- **Outcome Harvesting¹** is a method for identifying and verifying outcomes that have already occurred, particularly useful when causal pathways are non-linear and emergent.
- **Political Economy Analyses (PEA)²** conducted multiple times a year, not as a one-off contextual exercise, but as a live analytical tool that tracks shifts in power dynamics, stakeholder interests, and political windows.
- **Media monitoring** to track narrative and norm shifts, capturing changes in how government, media, and the public are talking about the issues at stake.
- **Dashboards tracking policy implementation** and gender metrics making system-level data visible and comparable over time.
- **Community listening circles** for deeper, relational insight into how change is being experienced at the level of the people the system is supposed to serve.

1 Outcome harvesting is a method for identifying and verifying outcomes that have already occurred particularly useful when causal pathways are non-linear.

2 Political Economy Analysis (PEA) examines the interaction of political and economic processes within a given context, including power dynamics, incentive structures, and stakeholder interests.

Across these approaches, a common theme emerged: **small wins matter**. A changed government attitude. A new collaboration between previously siloed departments. A reduction in harmful language in official communications. These are not measurable by a standard results framework, but they are often the most reliable signals that a system is beginning to move.

Several organisations also emphasised the importance of documenting the process, not just outcomes. In systems change, how change happens is often as consequential as what changes, and the pathways are rarely the ones anticipated in the original theory of change.



PRACTICE SPOTLIGHT Pausing to see the System

Harambee Youth Employment Accelerator

No measurement tool can replace the discipline of regularly stepping back to ask what the data is and is not telling you. In that sense, this spotlight speaks to both Section 1 and Section 4: it is as much about building a culture of learning as it is about measuring beyond the project boundary.

Harambee has built periodic “systems pauses” into their annual workflow structured moments when the organisation steps back from programme operations to ask a harder question: are we meaningfully shifting the system, or are we only seeing the visible layer of something much deeper? These pauses are not comfortable. They often reveal that what appears to be impact is only an early signal of progress rather than the full extent of the change required. That honesty is precisely the point. By creating space for reflection and strategic recalibration, Harambee ensures that its measurement stays oriented toward the system it is trying to change not just the programme it is running.

Data Quality and Disaggregation: Evidence That Is Fit for Purpose

5

Baseline studies were a major point of discussion in the Mombasa session, particularly in contexts where national data is unreliable, out of date, or simply missing. When you are trying to track change in a government system, the absence of credible baseline data is not a minor technical inconvenience. It is a fundamental challenge to the entire enterprise of measurement.

Organisations across the CoP are responding to this challenge in three broad ways:

- **Designing context-specific baselines**
Rather than defaulting to available national data as a baseline, even when that data does not reflect the specific communities or system dynamics they are working in, organisations are investing in purpose-fit baselines. These combine surveys, focus group discussions, interviews, and community listening circles to build a genuinely contextual starting point for measurement.
- **Disaggregating data that matters**
Gender and demographic disaggregation was described as non-negotiable in virtually every conversation about data quality. But organisations are pushing further: disaggregating by geography, age, disability status, and in some contexts, political affiliation or language group, because the dynamics of government systems change look very different depending on where you stand within the system.
- **Co-creating data tools with partners**
When data collection tools are developed by central M&E teams and handed to community partners to implement, data quality suffers, not because of incompetence, but because the tools do not reflect the realities of the people collecting and providing the data. Organisations shared examples of co-creating data tools with government partners and communities, which produced both better data and stronger ownership of the findings.

Running across all of these approaches was a shared insistence on what one partner called “**meaningful data**”, data that tells a story, positions people as agents rather than statistics, and reflects community realities rather than programme assumptions. In a sector that is prone to “bean counting,” this is a principled and important stance.



PRACTICE SPOTLIGHT Data That Tells Human Stories

Alliance for Reproductive Health Rights (ARHR)

ARHR has made a deliberate choice to collect data that communicates impact in ways that are relatable to the communities they work with not just legible to donors and evaluators. This shapes not only how data is shared, but how it is designed and collected in the first place. Because ARHR invests in qualitative and narrative data from the start, not as an afterthought to quantitative collection, their disaggregation reflects how communities actually experience difference, rather than how funders have pre-defined it. Findings are shared in accessible formats: short videos, illustrated summaries, and oral presentations in local languages. The result is data that serves multiple audiences simultaneously, including the communities themselves, who are often the last to receive information about programmes that are ostensibly designed to serve them.

Donor Alignment: Shifting Power in the LME Relationship

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Of all the challenges discussed in the Mombasa session, donor alignment generated some of the most candid and energised conversations. The fragmentation caused by multiple donors with different reporting requirements, indicators, and LME frameworks is one of the most cited obstacles to effective LME in African civil society organisations. But organisations in the CoP are not simply enduring this fragmentation. They are pushing back, creatively, strategically, and sometimes boldly.

A range of approaches have emerged:

- Developing a single organisational LME framework that is used across all donor relationships, rather than building a separate system for each funder. Several organisations now make this a condition of new funding relationships.
- Negotiating with donors to accept internal quarterly reports in place of bespoke donor formats, a seemingly small change that can save weeks of reporting time per year.
- Proactively defining indicators during the proposal development phase, rather than accepting donor-imposed indicators that do not reflect the organisation's theory of change.
- Consolidating reporting templates across partner networks, so that frontline organisations are not submitting different versions of the same data to multiple intermediaries.
- Co-creating LME requirements during proposal scoping, a more fundamental shift that reframes the donor-grantee relationship from compliance to genuine partnership.



The boldest version of this approach was described by one organisation that has made donor alignment a condition of partnership, rather than a concession they make:

**If a new donor does not buy
into simplified reporting,
we say goodbye**

— PARTNER ORGANISATION,
MOMBASA CONVENING

This is not a position that every organisation in the CoP can afford to take; it requires financial stability and reputational standing that many do not yet have. But it points toward something important: the organisations that are furthest ahead in building genuinely adaptive LME systems are the ones that have found ways to shift, not just manage, the power dynamics in the funding relationship.

In the context of government systems change, this matters beyond the organisational level. When civil society organisations are consumed by donor compliance, they have less capacity to invest in the kind of system-level learning and documentation that could shift how government itself thinks about evidence and accountability.

PRACTICE SPOTLIGHT

Starting with Alignment, Not Adaptation

CERATH Development Organisation

CERATH's approach to donor alignment starts before a funding relationship is confirmed. At the proposal and scoping stage, they document their existing LME structures and open early conversations with potential donors about how requirements can be aligned rather than waiting until implementation to discover where the gaps are. This means that locally generated data feeds into donor reporting frameworks, rather than sitting alongside them as a parallel system. CERATH is clear-eyed about the limits of this approach: some donor frameworks are non-negotiable, and not every tension can be resolved upfront. But by treating their LME foundation as a starting point for negotiation rather than an afterthought, they reduce the fragmentation that consumes so much organisational energy later.

What This Tells Us About the Future of LME in Africa

Six Connected Shifts in How African Organisations are Approaching Learning, Monitoring and Evaluation

The organisations represented in Mombasa are not simply adapting to the demands of systems change work. They are actively rewriting what LME can look like and in doing so, they are challenging some of the deepest assumptions embedded in how the development sector thinks about evidence, accountability, and learning.

Six connected shifts define this emerging practice:

From	To
Episodic documentation	Continuous collective intelligence
Tools chosen for sophistication	Tools chosen for contextual fit
Attribution of impact	Contribution to systems change
Project-boundary measurement	System-sensitive, process-aware measurement
Standardised, top-down data collection	Co-created, disaggregated, humanised evidence
Donor compliance	Genuine LME partnership, or no partnership

None of these shifts are complete. Many organisations in the CoP are navigating the tension between where they want to be and the very real constraints of funding relationships, government timelines, and organisational capacity. What is clear, however, is the direction of travel, and the fact that it is being charted collectively, across organisations, contexts, and approaches, is itself an expression of the kind of learning that systems change requires.

This brief was developed by the Africa Systems Change Community of Practice, drawing on discussions from the LME session at the Mombasa Convening, September 2025. We are grateful to all partner organisations who shared their experiences, including: Bajeti Hub, IBP, CAMFED, CERATH, MRHRC, TaRL Africa, AfA, TAF, GDY, Harambee Youth Employment Accelerator, Ilifa Labantwana, and ARHR.



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