



A PRACTICAL PLAYBOOK FOR CIVIL SOCIETY

From Frustration to Influence

Motivating Government Action in Africa

Africa Systems Change Community of Practice
| Convened by Busara Africa



About This Playbook



This playbook was developed by Lilian Best for the Africa Systems Change Community of Practice (CoP) which brings together Co-Impact partners working to make government systems in Africa stronger and more inclusive. It identifies six recurring barriers that stall government effectiveness and provides field-tested strategies from the CoP members that have helped them get unstuck.

It is written for CSO professionals at technical and executive levels who already understand the complexity of government systems and want practical tools to navigate them.

Each chapter examines one barrier: how it appears, why it persists, what has been tried, and what has worked. The insights draw directly from the Africa CoP members who have built credibility with governments, found small openings for reform, and turned incremental progress into durable change. The goal is not to critique the state, but to help CSOs work with it more effectively.

Introduction



Working with government is demanding work. It requires patience, pattern recognition, and a willingness to respect constraints that are not always visible from the outside. These constraints are rooted in history, in political incentives, in the unwritten rules of how institutions function. Yet across Africa, CSOs have shown that real progress is possible when persistence meets understanding.

This playbook begins with a simple but consequential insight: the barriers that stall government action are not, for the most part, signs of apathy. They are symptoms of systems under strain, systems that carry the accumulated weight of under-investment, misaligned incentives, fragmented coordination, and chronic capacity loss. When civil society recognises this, it can respond with empathy and strategy rather than frustration. And when it identifies the specific mechanics of a barrier, rather than treating all government inertia as a single undifferentiated problem, it can intervene with precision.

Getting government unstuck rarely hinges on new projects or slogans. It depends on steady partnership: building

confidence through evidence, consistency, and small wins that accumulate into institutional change. It also depends on honesty, about what is and is not working, about the limits of any single approach, and about the conditions under which CSOs themselves are working.

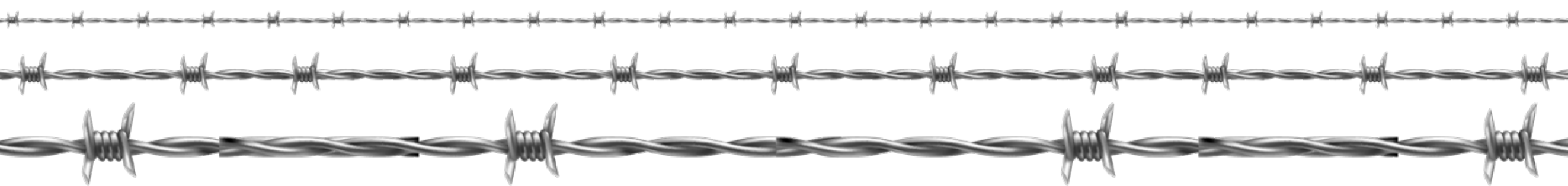
This playbook identifies six recurring barriers that stall government effectiveness and the strategies our CoP members used to help them get unstuck. These barriers are grounded in established governance and institutional economics research, but what this playbook contributes is something different. It provides the practitioner translation of these frameworks into patterns that recur across contexts, and strategies that have been tested in the field.

The Six Barriers

Across different countries and sectors, governments tend to get stuck in surprisingly similar ways. The details vary, but the patterns repeat. Six recurring barriers emerge, each a structural or behavioural friction that slows progress even when commitment is high.

- 1. Principal-Agent Problem:** Misaligned incentives and weak accountability between leaders, officials, and citizens.
Field signal: Compliance rewarded; results invisible; blame avoided.
- 2. Premature Load-Bearing:** Reforms that ask fragile systems to carry too much, too soon.
Field signal: Pilots work; scale collapses. Ambition races ahead of capacity.
- 3. Cultural and Political Constraints:** Norms, loyalties, and risk-averse hierarchies that limit initiative.
Field signal: Reform feels like insubordination. Allies inside government feel exposed.

- 4. Coordination Failure:** Overlapping mandates and fragmented efforts that scatter energy.
Field signal: Everyone owns a piece; no one owns the outcome. Duplication is invisible.
- 5. Information Asymmetry:** Decisions made in the absence of credible, usable, or shared data.
Field signal: Policy is driven by perception and pressure rather than evidence.
- 6. Capacity Drain:** The slow erosion of institutional memory and motivation as skilled people move on.
Field signal: Progress resets with every reshuffle. Training gains fade quickly.



These barriers are grounded in established frameworks from governance research and institutional economics.

- The principal-agent problem is foundational to public administration theory (Przeworski, 2003; Olken & Pande, 2012).
- Premature load-bearing draws on Andrews, Pritchett and Woolcock's Capability Traps framework (2017).
- The role of cultural and political constraints is documented extensively in the political settlements and problem-driven iterative adaptation literature (ODI, 2016; Andrews et al., 2013).
- Coordination failure is analysed in Ostrom's work on collective action (1990) and applied to African governance by Booth & Unsworth (2014).
- Information asymmetry builds on classic public economics literature (Stiglitz, 2002) and more recent work on evidence use in low-capacity states.
- Capacity drain draws on research into institutional memory, brain drain, and civil service reform (World Bank, 2018; Levy, 2014).

What the playbook adds is the view from the ground: how these patterns actually show up in practice, and what has worked to address them.



CHAPTER 1

Principal-Agent Problem



Barrier Overview

In this context, the ‘principal’ is whoever is supposed to direct and hold the ‘agent’ accountable e.g. citizens hold politicians accountable; politicians hold officials accountable; officials hold frontline workers accountable. The problem arises when these accountability relationships break down: when officials and frontline workers are judged more on compliance and loyalty than on results, and when citizens have limited ways to hold anyone accountable for outcomes. When good performance is invisible and poor performance carries little cost, effort shifts from solving problems to avoiding blame. CSOs can help realign incentives by making results visible, credible, and valued.

Practice Shifts: What Works in the Field

1. Support accountability mechanisms.

Help communities create concrete tools that connect commitment with delivery e.g citizen scorecards, public hearings, or service charters. When people can track what was promised and what was done, accountability becomes practical rather than rhetorical.

The International Budget Partnership (IBP) Nigeria works with communities and movements to demand accountable service delivery and make public budget systems work for people. In Nigeria, they developed community charters of demand and budget scorecards. These tools gave residents direct influence over how local governments allocate resources turning vague political commitments into trackable obligations.

2. Promote transparency tools.

Work with government teams to open up budgets, work plans, and performance data in forms that citizens and supervisors can both interpret. Transparency changes the incentive structure by making achievement visible and excuses harder to defend.

Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL) Africa works with Ministries of Education to strengthen education systems, ensuring every child gains foundational reading and maths skills. TaRL Africa uses transparency to shift teacher performance incentives by making learning outcome data visible at the school level. This has shifted the focus from attendance records to measurable results that teachers and communities could both see.

3. Co-develop incentive structures.

Collaborate with reform-minded leaders to design institutional safeguards that reward reliability and learning, not just hierarchy. Recognition schemes, simple feedback dashboards, and routine public reporting can convert informal good behavior into formal norms.

Lwala Community Alliance works to improve health outcomes by making the Kenyan health system work for the communities it serves. To shift incentives, they worked with health committees and local government officials to establish routine accountability sessions. This created a predictable rhythm of joint review that neither side could easily skip. Over time, showing up and responding became the expected norm. As one committee member put it: we are **“walking together until the system starts to walk on its own.”**

4. Amplify citizen voice.

Use media, arts, and storytelling to project local perspectives into government decision spaces not as a complaint, but as credible evidence of public experience that officials can act on. Visibility from below can strengthen the hand of reformers inside the system.



When This is Hard!

These shifts work best when introduced gradually and paired with deliberate trust-building. The goal is not to expose individual underperformance. This approach can trigger defensiveness and resistance. Instead, the goal is to create an environment where doing the job well is easier and safer than avoiding it. In contexts where political patronage is strong, accountability tools can be co-opted or sidelined; starting with low-stakes transparency exercises and building toward higher-stakes mechanisms incrementally reduces this risk.



Case Snapshot: IBP South Africa/Asivikelane

The Problem

Urban service failures persisted because residents' complaints were fragmented, poorly documented, and politically easy to ignore. Informal settlement residents also lacked formal channels or mechanisms through which to report service delivery issues and track responses from authorities. Previous efforts to raise concerns through community meetings and written appeals to officials produced little response. As a result, the data was anecdotal, and the accountability was nonexistent.

What was Tried First

Early efforts focused on advocacy and media pressure, raising the volume of complaints rather than the quality of evidence. Officials responded with reassurances but little action, partly because the data was too diffuse to be actionable.

The Approach That Worked

Asivikelane is a coalition of 8 grassroots organisations working together to amplify the voices of informal settlement residents about basic services in South Africa. With support of (International Budget Partnership South Africa), they trained communities to generate consistent, verifiable data on service quality, water, sanitation, and waste management, and to share it directly with the municipal officials responsible for fixing the problems. The key shift was making data specific and regular.

Result

This simple feedback loop increased the speed of local government responses and improved municipal budgeting for service maintenance. Officials who responded quickly gained public recognition, creating a quiet but powerful reputational incentive for performance.

Adaptation Tip

Start small. Choose one service that matters locally, collect brief but credible data regularly, and publish both the problem and the fix. Over time, transparency builds a new equilibrium where delivery earns legitimacy, and excuses lose their value.

CHAPTER 2

Premature Load-Bearing



Barrier Overview

‘Premature load-bearing’ borrows from engineering: a structure that is made to carry weight before its foundations are set will crack. The same is true of government reforms. Governments are often asked to deliver complex changes before the basic systems, skills, or resources exist to support them. The result is the reform is structurally sound on paper, but the institution cannot yet bear its weight. Ambition races ahead of capacity, pressure to perform replaces space to learn, and when programmes collapse under their own weight, blame is assigned, enthusiasm fades, and the system retreats to business as usual. CSOs can help governments pace reforms, strengthen foundations, and build credibility through incremental success.

Practice Shifts: What Works in the Field

1. Advocate for pacing and sequencing.

Encourage governments and donors to break reforms into manageable phases. Each stage should have clear goals, reflection points, and learning loops before moving to scale. Premature scaling is one of the most common causes of reform failure in African public systems.

TaRL Africa supports governments to sequence implementation by region and adjust intensity based on local capacity, reducing their external support where systems are maturing and deepening it where they continue to struggle. This graduated approach is intended to enable national scale without the collapse that typically follows rushed rollouts.

2. Invest in foundational systems.

Help government strengthen what holds everything else together, recordkeeping, HR systems, supervision, data use, and feedback channels. These unglamorous basics make bigger reforms possible. Skipping them to focus on visible outputs is the single most common form of premature load-bearing.

Asivikelane convenes peer-learning hubs among municipalities so that local governments can exchange templates, share practical solutions, and avoid re-inventing weak systems from scratch. It also brings together different government departments to collaborate on service delivery challenges.

3. Provide embedded support.

Place trusted advisors or coaches inside government teams. Accompaniment during design and rollout allows real-time course correction and skills transfer. It also signals that the CSO is a genuine partner in implementation, not a critic waiting to document failure.

The Center for Girls Education (CGE) is an organisation working in northern Nigeria to delay marriage of girls by helping them stay in school or gain a vocation. CGE works closely with state governments in this respect and has learned that embedded support works best when it is sustained.

As a result, rather than deploying an external consultant for a single design workshop, CGE Nigeria placed advisors within state education offices throughout the rollout of their girls' education programme. CGE's experience shows that sustained, embedded support strengthens government ownership, improves real-time implementation, and increases the likelihood that reforms for girls' education will last beyond a single project.

4. Focus on process, not just results.

Celebrate progress in system maturity such as routines established, roles clarified, feedback acted upon as much as in outputs or coverage. CGE Nigeria uses a Master Trainer model so that government teachers, not external consultants, carry forward mentoring and training, building capacity that stays in the system.

By slowing down to build the right capacities first, governments move faster later because what they build actually holds.



When This Is Hard!

Pacing and sequencing are difficult to advocate for when donors are under pressure to show results within project cycles. The tension between adaptive programming and reporting requirements is real, and CSOs often absorb the cost of this tension doing the foundational work that doesn't show up in log frames. Making this work visible, and negotiating with donors to recognise it as a legitimate output, is itself an advocacy task that takes deliberate effort.



Case Snapshot: CERATH Development Organisation — Ghana Fisheries

The Problem

In Ghana, a new fisheries data system was expected to improve accountability, but the monitoring and evaluation framework was too complex for local teams to operate. Data collection stalled, reports were incomplete, and the Ministry of Fisheries' confidence in the system eroded within months of launch.

What was Tried First

The initial design was driven by what the data system theoretically should capture, rather than what local officers could realistically collect and use. A technically comprehensive framework was built without sufficiently assessing whether the people responsible for operating it had the time, skills, or tools to do so.

The Approach That Worked

CERATH Development Organization is a developmental organization focused on rural and urban poor development in African countries, including Ghana. To address the problem described earlier, CERATH redesigned the system to track a small set of actionable indicators and embedded coaching for field officers throughout the roll-out. Rather than building the full framework at once, they started with three to five indicators that decision-makers could actually act on, and expanded the dashboard only after data collection routines and data use had become consistent.

Result

Data quality and use improved steadily. The ministry gradually expanded the dashboard on its own initiative, building confidence through demonstrated success rather than imposed ambition. By right-sizing ambition to actual capacity, the system gained credibility and sustainability.

Adaptation Tip

Before designing a data system, map the full operational chain: who will collect, who will clean, who will interpret, and who will act. If any link in that chain is weak, start there, not at the dashboard end.

CHAPTER 3

Cultural & Political Constraints



Barrier Overview

Cultural and political constraints are the invisible architecture of every reform environment. They are not obstacles imposed by bad actors. They are the accumulated logic of how power, relationships, and social norms actually organise collective life. In many systems, loyalty, seniority, or ethnic balance outweigh performance as organising principles. Innovation can look like insubordination; enforcement can look like betrayal. Political incentives reward short-term visibility over long-term system change, and cultural norms often penalise those who challenge hierarchy. CSOs can help by reading these constraints clearly, and working with them rather than against them, to expand what is politically and socially possible.



Practice Shifts: What Works in the Field

1. Identify and support champions.

Find reform-minded officials and strengthen their credibility quietly. Create coalitions or peer circles that give them safety and visibility without exposing them politically. A reformer with no protective network is a reformer who will eventually be transferred, marginalised, or worn down.

Asivikelane protects reformers by embedding their work in collective forums where accountability is shared, while strengthening collective action among informal settlement residents. By equipping communities with budget data and advocacy skills, Asivikelane enhances their collective bargaining power to demand transparency and accountability in public spending, influence budget decisions, and negotiate with governments for a fairer distribution of resources.

2. Work with the grain.

Adapt advocacy and programming to existing hierarchies and norms. Align reforms with narratives that leaders already value dignity, prosperity, and stability. This might work better than abstract rights language. The goal is to make reform feel like a natural extension of what leaders already stand for, not an external imposition.

Gender Dynamix is an organisation in South Africa focused on trans and gender diverse communities. In their work with Government, they strengthen reform legitimacy by holding leaders accountable to their own public commitments and institutional charters using the system's own stated values as leverage.

3. Use narrative change.

Shift perceptions by showcasing insiders who model problem-solving and integrity. Normalize good practice instead of condemning failure.

4. Facilitate safe spaces.

Convene off-the-record retreats, dialogues, or reflection sessions where public servants can analyse obstacles, share experiences, and test new ideas without fear of sanction. These spaces help reformers protect momentum in environments where progress depends as much on relationships as on policy.

“Cultural norms aren’t barriers; they’re starting points if you listen long enough.”

- CGE Nigeria.

When This Is Hard!

Working with the grain requires genuine political intelligence and it has limits. There are contexts where existing norms are so hostile to reform that working within them risks legitimising the very structures that block change. CSOs need to be honest with themselves about the difference between pragmatic adaptation and unacceptable compromise. The test is not comfort, but whether the approach is genuinely moving toward the goal even slowly.



Case Snapshot: CGE Nigeria

CGE Nigeria — From Sensitivity to Permission

The Problem

In Northern Nigeria, efforts to expand girls' education faced persistent cultural resistance despite strong national policies. Schools were formally open, but attendance remained low. This was particularly the case in communities where religious and traditional leaders had not been engaged, and where education for girls was implicitly associated with western or external values.

What was Tried First

Earlier advocacy approaches framed girls' education primarily as a rights issue, with messaging drawn largely from international frameworks. While technically accurate, this framing generated passive tolerance at best, and active resistance among key community leaders who felt the agenda was being imposed from outside.

The Approach That Worked

CGE mapped power holders such as traditional councils, faith leaders and parent groups. It then engaged them through extended dialogue and public endorsement campaigns. The critical shift was reframing education as a prosperity strategy rather than a rights agenda: showing community leaders how girls' education connected to the economic and social futures they already wanted for their communities.

Result

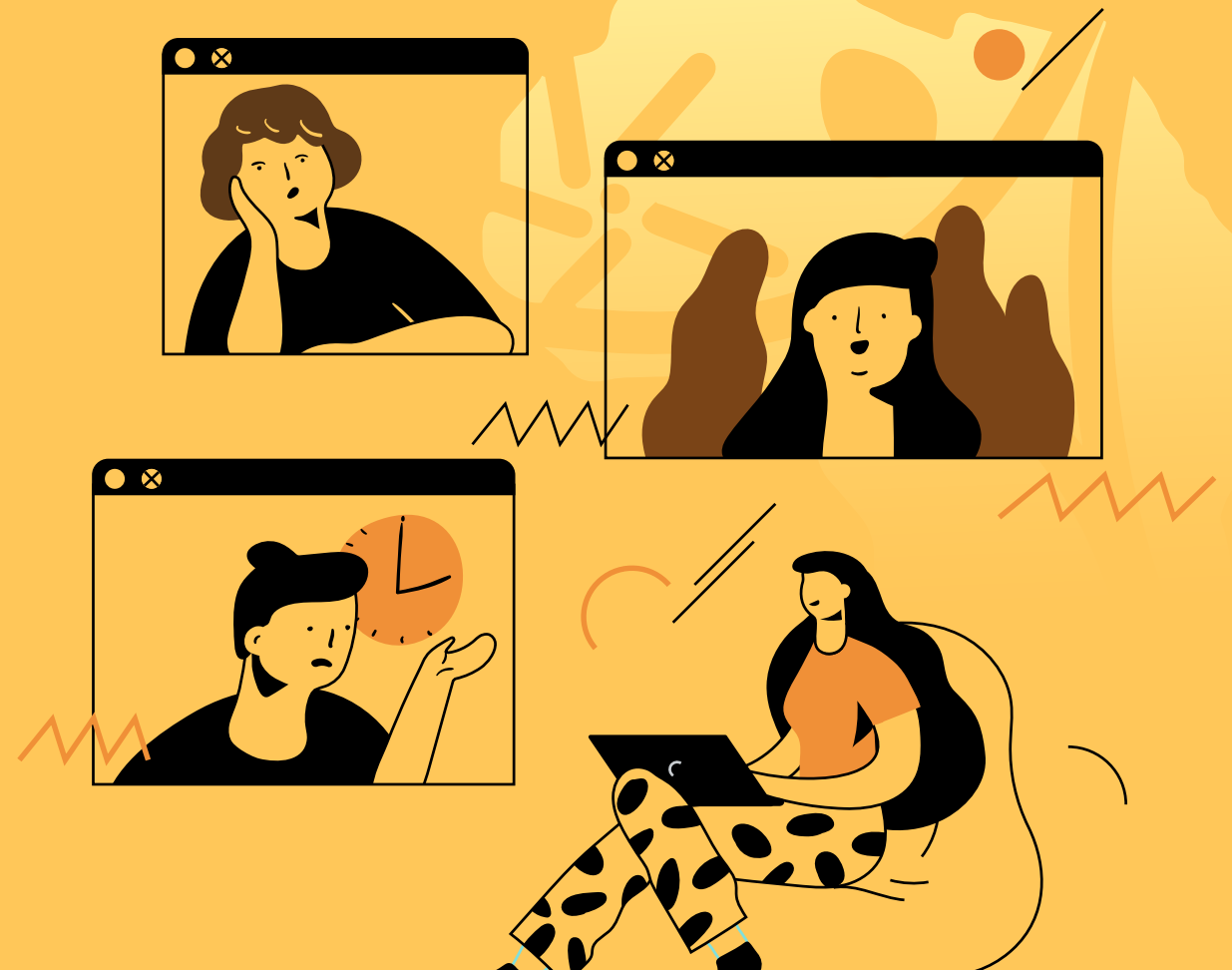
Community and religious leaders began publicly endorsing delayed marriage and continuous schooling, giving officials the political cover to enforce attendance policies. The change in framing converted passive tolerance into active advocacy from within the community.

Adaptation Tip

Find the story that makes reform locally legitimate. When reform aligns with identity and aspiration, resistance turns into ownership. This takes patience. The mapping and dialogue process took months before the first public endorsement was secured.

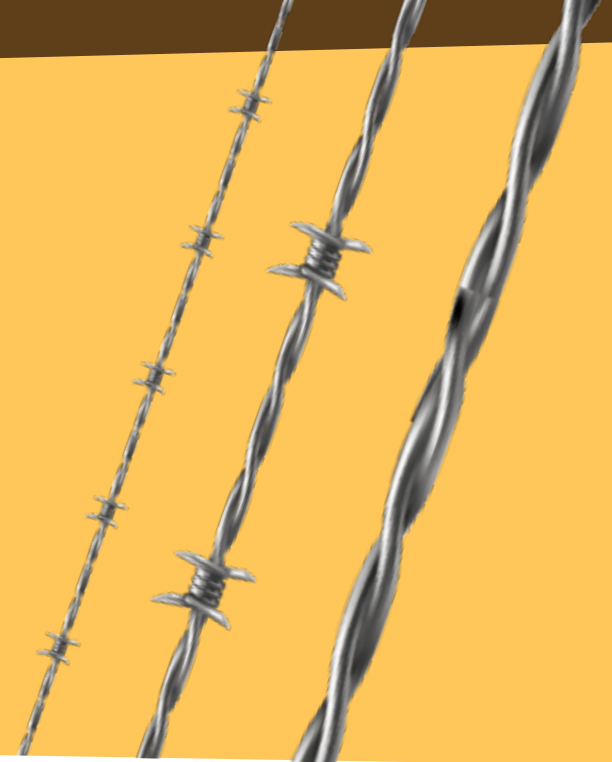
CHAPTER 4

Coordination Failure



Barrier Overview

Coordination failure occurs when actors who would all benefit from working together cannot achieve that cooperation. This is not because they disagree on the goal, but because the incentive structures, mandates, and information flows push them toward fragmentation. Public systems are crowded with actors, ministries, agencies, donors, and implementers, often chasing the same goals without alignment. Mandates overlap, communication falters, and accountability blurs. When everyone owns a piece of the problem, but no one owns the outcome, effort fragments and resources are wasted. CSOs can help governments regain coherence by clarifying roles, convening coordination, and embedding shared routines that hold across political cycles.



Practice Shifts: What Works in the Field

1. Act as a convener.

Use neutrality and trust to bring ministries, local governments, and partners into the same room. A single facilitated conversation can surface duplications and coordination gaps that months of memos cannot. The convening role is most effective when the CSO is seen as a neutral and trusted actor, one that does not compete for ownership of outcomes but has a strong interest in ensuring coordination works. By helping stakeholders align efforts, reduce duplication, and focus on shared goals, CSOs can strengthen collective action while maintaining credibility as trusted conveners.

2. Support joint reviews and planning.

Facilitate periodic after-action reviews or annual planning sessions where actors compare data, define responsibilities, and commit publicly to next steps. Shared planning creates shared ownership and makes invisible fragmentation visible.

CGE Nigeria established multi-sector task forces for its Safe Spaces programme, reducing duplication across ministries and creating a structure where accountability was collective rather than siloed.

3. Help clarify roles and procedures.

Map who does what, where handoffs fail, and which decisions are bottlenecked. Support the creation of practical coordination tools such as standard operating procedures, shared calendars, or joint dashboards. Girl Effect convened stakeholders across the teenage pregnancy ecosystem within the Ministry of Health, helping departments better understand and align their respective roles and efforts. This strengthened coordination, reduced siloed working, and enhanced the system's ability and mandate to deliver more effective responses to teenage pregnancy.

“Once we pooled efforts and respected each other’s mandates, the government trusted us more.”

– IBP South Africa / Asivikelane

4. Coordinate your own coordination.

Model the behaviour you advocate by aligning CSO and donor interventions with government plans and with one another. Be sure your support to the government stays within your mission and competencies. If needs fall outside your scope, coordinate or devolve support to others better suited to provide it. Coherence is contagious and CSOs that fail to practise it undermine their own credibility as conveners.

TaRL Africa worked within a Ministry-led framework, enabling national scale by removing the fragmentation that had previously meant different donors driving different priorities in different regions.

When This Is Hard!

Coordination is often easier to convene than to sustain. Initial meetings generate goodwill, but maintaining alignment across political cycles, staff turnover, and competing donor incentives requires ongoing investment. CSOs that build coordination structures and then withdraw prematurely often find that the fragmentation returns. Embedding shared routines, regular joint reviews, shared indicators and published commitments gives coordination the best chance of holding after the CSO steps back. Leadership ownership is equally important. Securing buy-in from senior decision-makers helps align stakeholders around a common agenda, reduce fragmentation, and sustain coordination over time. In our experience convening teenage pregnancy stakeholders, strong leadership engagement was critical to fostering alignment and coordinated action.



Case Snapshot:

Food for Education, Kenya — Aligning School Feeding Through a Shared Policy Framework

The Problem

School feeding programmes across counties in Kenya were expanding rapidly, but often without harmonized policy guidance, institutional structures, financing frameworks, or implementation standards. Different counties, development partners, and implementers operated using varied approaches, creating fragmentation in governance, budgeting, procurement systems, nutrition standards, and accountability mechanisms. In many cases, school feeding remained programme-driven rather than institutionally anchored within county systems.

What was First Tried

Early coordination efforts largely focused on stakeholder meetings, ad hoc technical support, and parallel county engagements. While these created visibility for school feeding, they did not sufficiently address the underlying governance fragmentation. Counties continued developing isolated approaches, and implementation depended heavily on individual champions, donor support, or short-term projects rather than standardized systems.

The Approach That Worked

Food for Education worked alongside the Council of Governors and county stakeholders to support the development and adoption of the Model Pre-Primary School Feeding Policy for County Governments. Rather than creating parallel structures, the approach strengthened government-led systems through a shared policy and governance framework that counties could adapt and implement.

The model policy clarified roles across education, health, agriculture, nutrition, and finance, while promoting coordination between county and national actors. It also provided a common framework for sustainability, budgeting, nutrition standards, procurement, monitoring, and accountability.

By anchoring coordination within a government-recognized framework, counties and partners could align around shared priorities rather than operating through fragmented interventions.

Result

The model policy created a stronger foundation for institutionalizing school feeding within county systems rather than treating it as a stand-alone project. Counties gained a clearer roadmap for coordination, budgeting, and governance, while development partners had a common reference point for technical and financial support. The process also strengthened government ownership and reduced duplication across actors working within the school feeding ecosystem.

Adaptation Tip

Where multiple actors are working on the same issue, start by developing a shared government-owned framework that clarifies roles, standards, and coordination mechanisms. Alignment becomes easier when institutions are coordinating around a common system rather than around individual projects or organisations.

CHAPTER 5

Information Asymmetry



Barrier Overview

Information asymmetry means that different actors in a system have access to very different information. These differences shape power and decision-making in ways that often work against accountability and good governance. Citizens lack information about what government is doing and why. Officials lack reliable data on what is actually happening at the frontline. Senior leaders base decisions on reports that have been filtered, delayed, or selectively presented. The result: data on budgets, service delivery, and performance is outdated, inaccessible, or too complex to use in practice. Policies are judged by perception rather than results. CSOs can bridge these gaps by making information credible, digestible, and actionable not just available.

Practice Shifts: What Works in the Field

1. Simplify and package data.

Translate research, budgets, and performance results into formats people can read and act on such as briefs, dashboards, infographics, or visual scorecards. The volume of data available in most government systems is not the problem; the problem is that almost none of it is in a form that decision-makers can use under time pressure.

CERATH Ghana addresses this by both generating missing evidence and packaging it for action. In the fisheries post-harvest sector, CERATH conducted a baseline study to fill critical data gaps on women workers, particularly the most disadvantaged groups, and to capture their perspectives on system change. The findings are translated into concise policy briefs, simplified strategy

documents, and project summaries tailored to policy-makers and stakeholders. At the same time, CERATH is supporting the Fisheries Commission to develop a gender-responsive and inclusive MEL framework that strengthens the collection and use of disaggregated data and community feedback in service delivery.

2. Close feedback loops.

Collect and relay data from the field back to decision-makers, and ensure responses travel in the other direction. Learning depends on movement, not storage. IBP South Africa (Asivikelane) gathers simple, gender-disaggregated data on service quality and provides municipalities with regular, actionable feedback. This closes the loop between community experience and government decision-making.

3. Build data-use capacity.

Train officials and community representatives not just to collect data but to interpret and apply it to real decisions in terms of procurement, staffing, and planning. TaRL Africa built real-time data systems on learning outcomes and embedded their interpretation into routine education reviews, ensuring that data informed teaching decisions rather than accumulating in databases.

“Transparency is not data dumps, it’s clarity that someone can act on.”

- CERATH Ghana

4. Integrate local knowledge.

Pair formal statistics with lived experience. Community insights make data meaningful and often more persuasive to policymakers.

Harambee Youth Employment Accelerator is a South African social enterprise working with partners to tackle youth unemployment. They model the employment impact of programmes and present findings in simple visual formats making the numbers accessible. But the numbers alone are not what moves policymakers. Harambee pairs every evidence presentation with a structured feedback session, bringing the lived experience of young jobseekers into the room alongside the data. It is that combination, quantitative rigour grounded in human context, that makes the evidence actionable.

When This Is Hard!

Data can be used to control as well as to empower. In contexts where transparency exposes community members or reformers to political risk, the act of making information visible can create danger rather than accountability. CSOs working on information asymmetry need to think carefully about who gains access to data, in what form, and with what protections particularly when working on sensitive issues such as gender, ethnicity, or political finance.



Case Snapshot:

Harambee Youth Employment Accelerator — Evidence That Moved Policy

The Problem

Youth employment policies suffered from poor evidence on what actually created sustainable jobs. Governments were making decisions based on anecdote, political pressure, and programme reports that measured outputs rather than outcomes. The result was investment in interventions with weak employment effects, and scepticism about CSO-led evidence.

What was Tried First

Initial efforts to influence policy relied on presenting programme data directly to government showing what Harambee's own interventions had achieved. This was received as advocacy rather than evidence, and officials discounted it as self-interested.

The Approach That Worked

Harambee shifted to partnering with economists to model the long-term impact and fiscal returns of employment interventions across the broader system not just their own programmes. These findings were then presented to government in accessible visual formats and accompanied by regular engagement with decision-makers. This shift strengthened the credibility of the evidence and changed how officials engaged with and applied it in policy and budget discussions.

Result

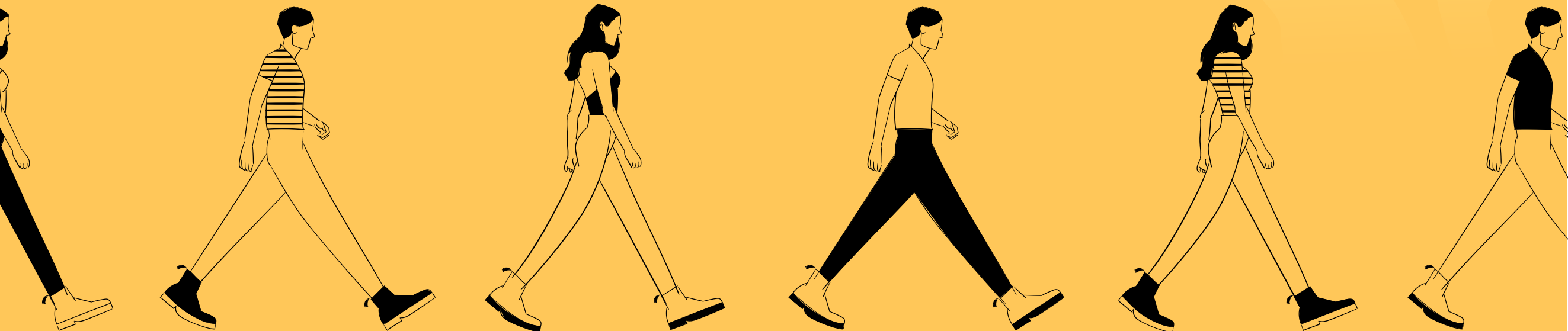
Evidence-based dialogue increasingly replaced anecdote and political pressure, helping to inform more effective policy decisions and investment priorities. Government officials began drawing on Harambee's evidence in budget and planning discussions, using it as a shared analytical resource that could support collective decision-making, rather than viewing it solely as an advocacy input.

Adaptation Tip

Start with a policy question that matters politically and bring credible, system-level data that speaks directly to that decision. Importantly, ensure findings are surfaced through active dialogue and engagement, not simply presented in documents.

CHAPTER 6

Capacity Drain



Barrier Overview

Capacity drain describes the slow, cumulative erosion that happens when skilled people, institutional knowledge, and organisational motivation flow out of the system faster than they are replaced. It is not a single event. It is a chronic condition. Skilled staff leave for better-paying private sector or international roles. Mid-level managers are overstretched and under-supported. Institutional memory, the accumulated understanding of how things actually work, what has been tried, and who to call, fades with every departure. When knowledge lives in individuals instead of institutions, progress resets with every reshuffle. CSOs can help governments build resilience by investing in people, routines, and retention moving capacity from individuals into the structures around them.



Practice Shifts: What Works in the Field

1. Provide ongoing coaching and mentoring.

Move beyond workshops. Pair training with real-time accompaniment, feedback, and peer learning to turn knowledge into practice. A one-week training that is never reinforced is not capacity-building. It is a temporary addition to individual knowledge that leaves the institution unchanged.

IBP Nigeria combines peer convenings for policymakers with targeted technical assistance to close knowledge gaps while reinforcing government ownership. This ensures that what is learned is immediately applied in context, not stored for later.

2. Support peer and multi-level learning networks.

Facilitate groups of officials to troubleshoot together and exchange lessons across levels. Shared learning sustains motivation and problem-solving capacity. Gender Mobile Initiative is an organisation in Nigeria that seeks to complement the program and policy efforts of government in advancing intersectional gender quality and eliminating all forms of sexual and gender-based violence. They apply adaptive learning approaches to strengthen staff capacity continuously across levels of the education system. This builds a network of practitioners who can support one another rather than depending on external input.

3. Contribute to retention strategies.

Work with HR units to develop recognition programmes, career development paths, or leadership pipelines that reward good performance and institutional loyalty. Gender Dynamix in South Africa for example, delivers accredited in-service training for public health workers, embedding reforms into professional standards making continued engagement with the system a credential, not just an expectation.

**“When the person leaves and the work continues, you have built a system.
When the work leaves with the person, you have built a dependency.”**

4. Invest in mid-level staff.

Supervisors and field officers are the system’s transmission belt. Equip them with management and problem-solving skills, not just technical training. Lwala Community Alliance uses a Training-of-Trainers model to spread skills widely and avoid single points of failure. This ensures that capacity is distributed across the system rather than concentrated in the individuals most likely to leave.

Capacity strengthens when learning becomes continuous and valued not episodic or externalized.

When This Is Hard!

Investing in government capacity is sometimes resisted by funders who worry that trained officials will be poached by the private sector or by international organisations. This is a real risk and one that cannot be fully solved at the programme level. But the alternative, avoiding capacity investment to protect against the risk of departure, guarantees the outcome it fears. CSOs can make the case that embedded, systems-level capacity such as routines, documented processes, peer networks is more durable than individual skill, and less vulnerable to attrition.



Case Snapshot: CGE Nigeria — Master Trainers, Lasting Gains

The Problem

Gains in girls' education were repeatedly lost when trained staff were transferred or left the service. Each departure took institutional knowledge, established relationships, and reform momentum with it. This left programmes dependent on the continued presence of specific individuals rather than embedded in the system.

What was Tried First

Earlier training approaches focused on building the skills of individual teachers and officers. These were intensive programmes that produced capable individuals but did not change how knowledge and responsibility were distributed across the institution. When those individuals moved, the capacity moved with them.

The Approach That Worked

CGE created a cadre of 67 Master Trainers within government structures, responsible for continuous refresher training and peer mentoring. The programme tied training schedules to existing government inspection calendars and promoted policy adoption by state education boards. This anchored the capacity-building work within government's own rhythms and accountability structures rather than creating parallel CSO-managed systems.

Result

Capacity shifted from individuals to positions and routines. Knowledge stayed in the system even when people moved. The Master Trainer model created a self-reinforcing structure in which the departure of any one person triggered knowledge transfer rather than knowledge loss.

Adaptation Tip

Select Master Trainers based on influence and stability, not only technical expertise. When authority and knowledge align in the same person, learning endures. Tie training schedules to government calendars, not project timelines, it signals permanence and increases uptake.

Conclusion

From frustration to influence —
one barrier, one relationship, one
solved problem at a time.



The six barriers in this playbook are not a complete picture of all the reasons governments seem to get stuck. They are a map of the terrain that CoP members have most consistently encountered and navigated. Every context adds its own complications, its own personalities, its own political weather.

What these chapters collectively suggest is that the move from frustration to influence is rarely dramatic. It does not usually hinge on a breakthrough meeting, a new policy, or a well-timed advocacy campaign. It happens incrementally, through relationships built over years, through evidence that gradually becomes trusted, through small routines that slowly become institutional norms. Reform endures when it becomes routine, and routine endures when people trust the process.

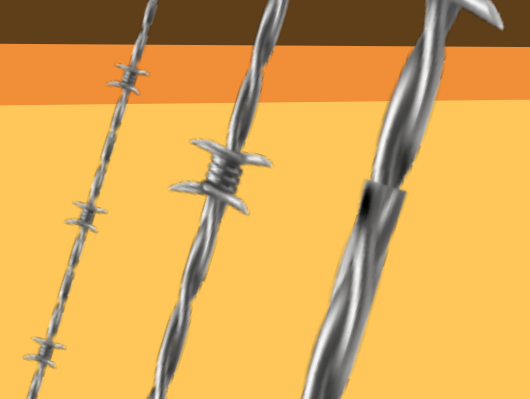
That trust is not given. It is earned through consistency, through showing up when it is inconvenient, through honesty about what is not working as much as what is. It is also

fragile. A change of minister, a shift in funder priorities, or the departure of a key ally can reset progress that took years to build. This is not a reason for despair. It is a reason to invest in systems rather than individuals, in coalitions rather than champions, and in routines that survive the inevitable reshuffles.

The practitioners whose work fills these pages have not solved the problem of government inertia. But they have shown that it can be moved steadily, carefully, and in ways that last. That is the invitation this playbook extends: not to end frustration, but to put it to work.



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Center for Girls Education (CGE) Nigeria - working in northern Nigeria to keep girls in school and delay early marriage through community engagement and government partnership.

CERATH Development Organisation - a development organisation focused on rural and urban poor development across African countries, including Ghana.

Food for Education; committed to mainstreaming school feeding programmes across Africa by designing, operating, and supporting the replication of proven models.

Gender Dynamix - a South African organisation focused on the health, rights, and wellbeing of trans and gender diverse communities.

Gender Mobile Initiative - a Nigerian organisation working to advance intersectional gender equality and eliminate sexual and gender-based violence through government partnership and systems change.

Girl Effect - connecting girls to vital information, supportive networks, and essential services that improve their health, education, and livelihoods.

Harambee Youth Employment Accelerator - a South African social enterprise working with partners to find and scale solutions to the challenge of youth unemployment.

International Budget Partnership (IBP) Nigeria - working with communities and movements to demand accountable service delivery and make public budget systems work for people.

Lwala Community Alliance - a Kenyan organisation working to improve health outcomes by making the health system work for the communities it serves.

Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL) Africa - partnering with Ministries of Education to strengthen education systems so that every child gains foundational reading and maths skills.



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