BIS

SUSTAINING
IMPACT
SUMMIT.

ABOUT THIS REPORT

The Sustaining Impact Summit (SIS) is an annual event aimed at promoting the sustenance of impact and impact-focused organizations in Africa.

The eighth edition (SIS8) moved the conversation beyond resources to the wider systems that determine whether social innovation can survive, adapt, grow, and continue delivering impact over time.

This report reflects back on the discussions, examples and practical learning generated through SIS8. It is not intended to be a transcript of the event, nor a collection of speaker summaries. Instead, it brings the conversations together into a set of connected insights for practitioners, policymakers, networks and ecosystem builders, development institutions, funders and investors.

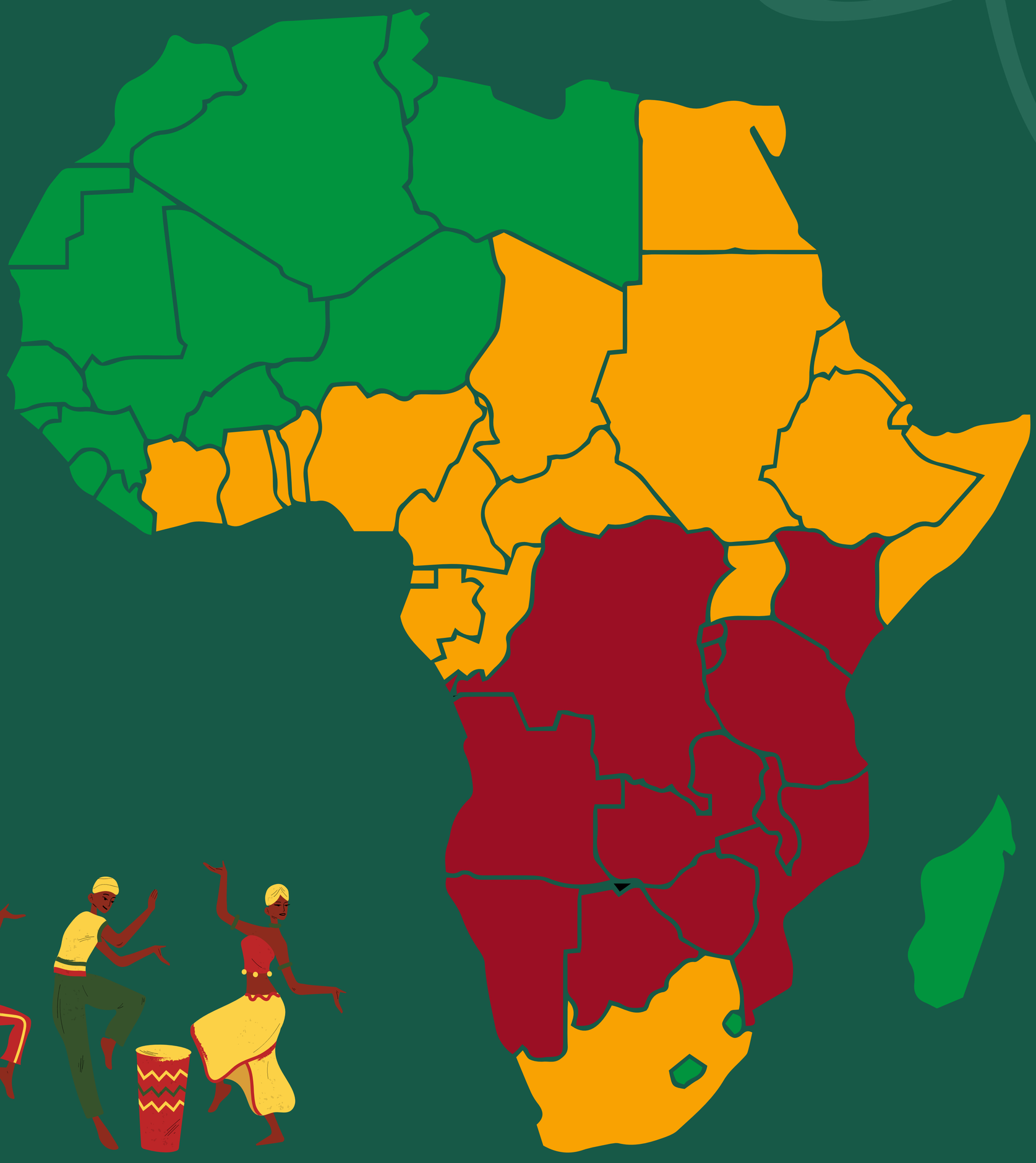
The report deliberately avoids treating Africa as one operating environment. The conditions surrounding social innovation differ between countries, sectors and communities. The purpose of a Pan-African synthesis is therefore not to prescribe one model, but to identify recurring patterns and questions that can help actors interpret their own contexts more clearly.

The evidence base includes the Day 1 opening address, keynote speeches and panel discussions; the Building Systems session; the funder and investor conversation; founder perspectives; the Day 2 Sustaining Impact Prize final; the State of Social Enterprise Africa conversation; the Summit programme and speaker materials; and the practical multi-country masterclass programme.

SUSTAINING IMPACT SUMMIT • 8TH EDITION • 27 - 29 AUGUST 2026

Pan-African Insights Report

Systems that Sustain: Building Impact That Lasts in Africa



A SYNTHESIS OF KEYNOTES, PANEL SESSIONS, FIRESIDE CHAT AND VIRTUAL AND IN-COUNTRY MASTERCLASS INSIGHTS. PUBLISHED BY ASEW

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CONVENER'S REFLECTION

"Lasting impact is rarely produced by one intervention, one leader or one source of money. It is produced when the systems around impact are understood, navigated, strengthened and, where necessary, rebuilt."

DR ADEYEMI ADELEKAN · FOUNDER, ASEW & CONVENER, SUSTAINING IMPACT SUMMI T

Impact in Africa has never suffered from a shortage of people willing to solve problems. Across the continent, social innovators, NGOs, community organisations, enterprises and ecosystem actors continue to build solutions in difficult conditions. The harder question is whether the impact they create can last.

For several years, the Sustaining Impact Summit has explored that question through the lens of resources. SIS6 examined resourcing impact. SIS7 focused on African resourcefulness. SIS8 deliberately moved one level deeper: to the systems within which resources are accessed, converted, governed and sustained.

This shift matters because funding alone does not sustain impact. An organisation may receive a grant and still struggle because there is no viable market for what it offers. It may have customers but remain vulnerable because cash flow is weak. It may have a strong model but operate in a policy environment that does not recognise it. It may have funding, demand and a supportive ecosystem but remain fragile because leadership, governance, people or internal processes are too dependent on one individual. These are not separate conversations. They are connected systems questions.

SIS8 therefore asked participants to look at impact differently: not only at the organisation or project, but at the market, finance, funding, policy, technology, ecosystem and internal systems surrounding it. The Summit also took place at a moment when many of these systems are changing rapidly. Development budgets are under pressure, blended finance is receiving greater attention, AI is changing how work is done, political arrangements are shifting in parts of the continent, and continental market integration is creating new possibilities. The sustainability strategies that worked yesterday may not be sufficient for the operating environment of tomorrow.

Across the three days, one message kept returning in different forms: lasting impact is rarely produced by one intervention, one leader or one source of money. It is produced when the systems around impact are understood, navigated, strengthened and, where necessary, rebuilt. That is why this report is not simply a record of what happened at SIS8. It is an attempt to carry the conversation forward and to identify what different actors can do with the insights generated.

Sustaining impact is a shared systems challenge. Practitioners have work to do inside their organisations. Funders and investors shape the rules through which resources flow. Policymakers influence recognition, regulation and markets. Networks connect actors and can reduce friction. Development institutions can invest in the infrastructure around impact, not only in short project cycles. The opportunity is to make these parts work better together.

Dr. Adeyemi Adelekan

Founder, ASEW & Convener,
Sustaining Impact Summit.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Sustenance depends on interconnection

"Funding is important, but it is only one part of what sustains impact. Long-term impact is shaped by the interaction between markets, finance, policy, technology, relationships, leadership, people and organisational processes. Organisations are therefore more likely to endure when these systems reinforce one another rather than relying on funding alone."

9 Nine broad insights emerged from the Summit.



NO.	INSIGHT
1	Sustainability is a systems outcome — recurring problems sit at the intersection of several systems.
2	Impact must be built beyond the founder and beyond the project cycle.
3	Navigating systems is itself an organisational capability.
4	Finance is not one problem — grants, working capital, investment and cash flow address different constraints
5	Markets belong in the sustainability conversation.
6	Policy and power determine who is recognised and what models can grow.
7	Ecosystems need to reduce friction and create pathways, not just convene.
8	Technology creates value when it expands capability against a real constraint.
9	Internal systems are sustainability infrastructure, not administrative overhead.

"The burden of sustainability cannot sit with the individual organisation alone."

A social enterprise can improve its financial records and still face unsuitable capital. An NGO can diversify income and still be constrained by procurement rules. A founder can build a strong team and still struggle in a fragmented market. Sustainable impact therefore requires action at organisational and system level at the same time.

The shared agenda. Practitioners: understand your critical systems and reduce single-point dependencies. Funders and investors: fit capital to mission, stage and cash-flow reality. Policymakers: reduce friction and open procurement. Networks: move from connection for its own sake to purposeful brokerage.

SIS8 at a Glance

DAY 1

Understanding, Navigating and Building Systems

Participants first explored how systems work, then examined how organisations can operate within existing systems, and finally discussed how those systems can be deliberately strengthened or transformed.

The day established the foundation for the entire summit: lasting impact depends on building strong organisations and mproving the systems around them.

DAY 2

Evidence, Recognition and Practical Model Building

Day 2 connected recognition, evidence, and practical implementation.The central message was that organisations need more than recognition or training. They need viable models, appropriate support, access to markets, and systems that allow their impact to grow and endure.

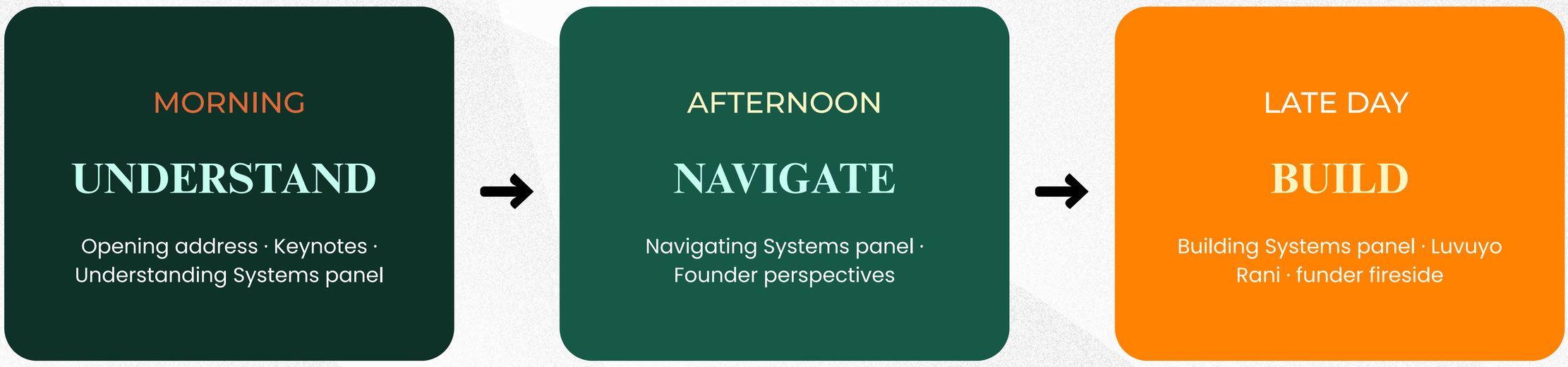
DAY 3

Turning Insight into Practical Support

Day 3 extended SIS8 from discussion into practical support through career coaching and partner-led learning activities. It reinforced the idea that building sustainable impact requires continued development, practical guidance, and learning that can be applied within different local contexts.

Activities at SIS8

The eighth Sustaining Impact Summit was held from 27–29 August 2026 under the theme “Systems that Sustain: Building Impact That Lasts in Africa.” The theme marked a progression in the Summit’s wider journey. Previous editions had focused strongly on the resource challenge facing impact organisations. SIS8 asked what sits underneath that challenge: which systems make resources accessible, which systems convert resources into sustained outcomes, and what happens when those systems are weak, fragmented or changing.



DAY 1: UNDERSTANDING, NAVIGATING AND BUILDING SYSTEMS

The first day of the Sustaining Impact Summit 2026 focused on understanding the systems required to sustain social impact in Africa. Dr Adeyemi Adelekan, founder of ASEW and summit convener, delivered the opening address, introducing six essential systems for lasting impact: markets, finance, funding, policy, ecosystems and technology, and internal organisational systems. Angelou Ezeilo, Co President of Ashoka Africa, and Jeroo Billimoria, founder of One Family Foundation, delivered keynote contributions on building sustainable initiatives and driving systems change.

The day's panel discussions featured Dr Sir Alexander Tetteh Kwasi Nuer, who moderated the session on understanding systems, with contributions from Debbi D. Brock, Dr Edward Nii Amar Amarteifio and Irene Naa Korkoi Armah. Dr Williams Murithi moderated the discussion on navigating systems, featuring Peter Oloo, Catherine Masolia and Maurice Omolo. Okey Uzoechina moderated the session on building systems, with Dr Iman Bibars, Haron Wachira and Shona McDonald as panellists. Luvuyo Rani also shared insights on entrepreneurship and ecosystem development, while Dr Patrick Elf introduced the Journal of Tropical Futures. Founders Omoyemi Oladiran and Oguguamobi Oyesiji shared their experiences, and Yogavelli Nambiar led a funder and investor fireside conversation with Margetta Supuwood.

DAY 2: EVIDENCE, RECOGNITION AND PRACTICAL MODEL BUILDING

The second day focused on practical approaches to strengthening social enterprises, business model innovation and recognising impactful initiatives. Andrew Ochono, Cristianne Wendler and Nike Kerstin Akerele-De Souza served as judges for the Sustaining Impact Prize, which recognised innovative ventures addressing social challenges. Olamide Olajide of Shoeniverse Leathers emerged first, receiving $500, followed by Richard Kuffour of Ellucid Social, who received $300, and Patricia Nagawa of BiliBright, who received $200.

The day's masterclasses explored design thinking and business model innovation, equipping participants with approaches to building more sustainable organisations. Discussions on the state of social enterprise in Africa featured Danson Gichini, Lead at the Schwab Foundation for Social Entrepreneurship, and Shawn Theunissen, Chair of Social Enterprise Academy Africa. Their contributions highlighted the importance of viable business models, supportive ecosystems and appropriate resources in enabling African social enterprises to grow and sustain their impact.



DAY 3: TURNING INSIGHT INTO PRACTICAL SUPPORT

The third day focused on translating the summit's lessons into practical guidance and action. The programme featured Career Coaching Studio discussions and partner led masterclasses designed to help participants strengthen their skills, explore relevant challenges and apply insights within their respective contexts. These activities extended the summit's focus on sustainable impact by connecting learning with practical support and locally relevant solutions.

The Summit in numbers

594
REGISTERED PARTICIPANTS

48
SPEAKERS, MODERATORS & FACILITATORS

33
PARTNER ORGANISATIONS

3
DAYS 27-29 AUGUST 2026

17
COUNTRIES WITH MASTERCLASS HUB

35
VOLUNTEERS

MASTERCLASS HUBS

DESIGN THINKING AND BUSINESS MODEL INNOVATION MASTERCLASSES RAN VIRTUALLY AND THROUGH PARTNER HUBS IN 15 COUNTRIES: GHANA, KENYA, NAMIBIA, UGANDA, ZAMBIA, ETHIOPIA, TANZANIA, NIGERIA, ZIMBABWE, MAURITANIA, RWANDA, TUNISIA, CÔTE D'IVOIRE, SOUTH AFRICA AND MALAWI

Meet the Speakers



Adeyemi Adelekan, PhD.
Founder, ASEW & Convener,
Sustaining Impact Summit.



Angelou Ezeilo
Co-President, Ashoka Africa



Jeroo Billimoria
Founder, One Family Foundation



Okey Uzoechina
Global Leadership Group Member of Ashoka and Youth Years Leader, Ashoka Africa



Shona McDonald
Founder, Director & Partnership Development, Shonaquip Social Enterprise



Catherine Masolia
Chief Executive Officer, Somo Africa



Alexander Tetteh Kwasi Nuer, PhD
Senior Lecturer/Academic Advisor and Coach, University of Cape Coast, Ghana.



Shawn Theunissen
Chair, Social Enterprise Academy Africa



Debbi Brock
Co-Founder, Social Change Innovators



Luvuyo Rani
Executive Director, Africa Forward



Maurice Omolo
Manager, CPF Group Foundation



William Murithi
Senior Faculty Consultant, Strathmore University/SUNSEP, Kenya



Peter Oloo
Chief Executive Officer, Social Enterprise Society of Kenya (SESOK)



Dr. Edward Nii Amar Amarteifio
Senior Lecturer & Researcher, Design Thinking and Innovation Hub, University of Cape Coast.



Dr. Iman Bibars
Vice President of Ashoka: Innovators for the Public and the Regional Director of Ashoka Arab World



Haron Wachira
Ashoka Fellow, CEO Akili Group



Irene Naa Korkoi Armah
Entrepreneurial Consultant,
University of Capecoast, Ghana.



Danson Gichini
Lead, Schwab Foundation for Social Entrepreneurship, World Economic Forum



Margretta Supuwood
Community Relationship Officer,
Mortenson Family Foundation



Yogavelli Nambiar
Director of Policy & Ecosystem Development,
Africa Forward



Omoyemi Oladiran
El Plethora Vocational Academy



Oguguamobi Oyesiji
Mobi Designs



Edwin Zu-Cudjoe
Executive Director, Social Enterprise Ghana



Haimbodi Pennina
Program Coordinator, UHILI NECESSITY WELLNESS TRUST



Dr. Zipporah Muiriri
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Chembo Ndinawe Litana
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Jane Thiongo
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Adenew Mesfin
Chief Executive Officer, Social Enterprise Ethiopia.



Semu Gasper
Managing Director, Nana Hub



Rita Chikwem
Programs & Partnership Manager, African Social Enterprise Workshop (ASEW)



Diarra Sylla
Coordinator, Innovrim, Mauritania.



Fasoranti Damilola
Chief Catalyst, Prikkle Academy Rwanda.



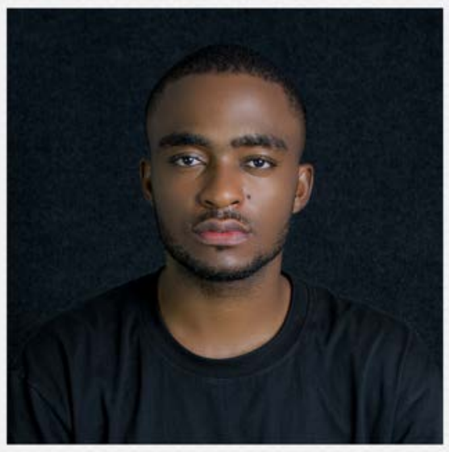
Susan Mwihaki Maina
Social Innovation Consultant & Lead Researcher, African Founders Notebook.



Everiste Aohoui
Cote d'Ivoire Masterclass



Joseph Makuvaza
Founder & Chief Executive Officer,
Great North Business Incubator, SA.



Arnold Sigala
Creative Director (Design Strategist / Human-Centered Design Practitioner), ULEVUS



Amoré Scholtz
Technologist, Innovation & Industrial Research Division, NCRST



Walelign Sewunetie
Researcher, AIMS Research and Innovation Centre



Damilola Obidairo
CEO 8thGear Hub & Venture Studio



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Cameroon Design Festival

CUSP

KENAMISMASPU
Kenya National Micro & Small Manufacturer Service Providers Umbrella Organization

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swalisano

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Understanding the Systems that Sustain Impact.

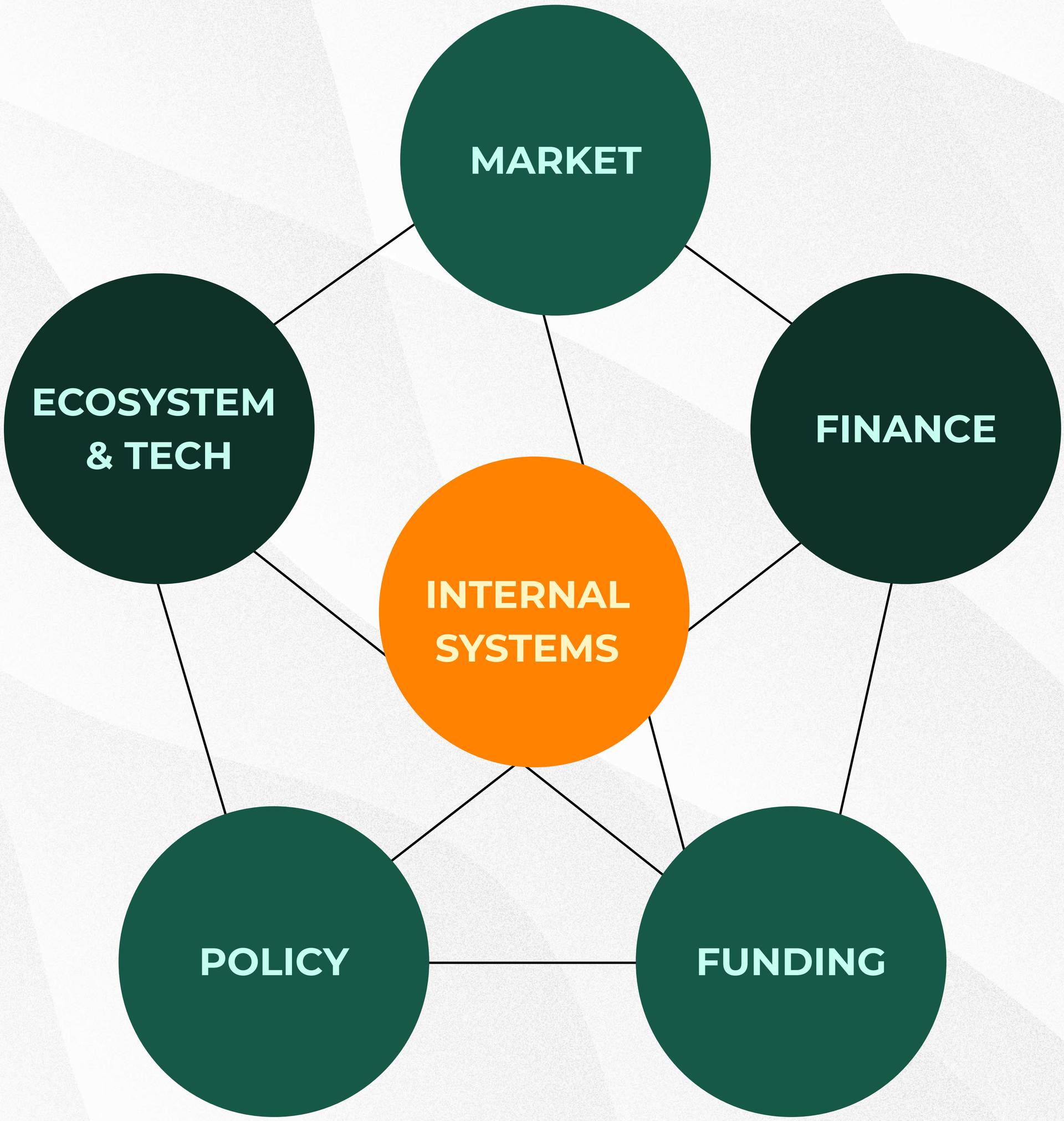


Systems enable sustenance. In nature, survival is not produced by one resource or one process. Energy, water, nutrients, regeneration and interdependence work together. Impact, too, is sustained by several systems working together — each influencing the others.

This perspective matters because conversations about organisational sustainability can become too narrow. When an organisation is struggling, the immediate explanation is often “funding.” Yet the underlying constraint may be weak demand, delayed customer payments, restrictive regulation, poor access to technology, limited partnerships, founder dependency or weak internal financial management. Funding can temporarily mask these problems without resolving them. A systems perspective asks what combination of conditions must work for the desired outcome to continue.

The market system concerns demand, customers, buyers, procurement, supply chains and the organisation’s ability to convert value into recurring income. The finance system concerns cash flow, financial management, investment and access to appropriate capital. The funding system concerns grants, philanthropy and other external resources, including the relationships and trust through which those resources flow. Policy shapes legal recognition, taxation, regulation, procurement and the wider enabling environment. Ecosystem and technology systems shape connections, infrastructure, digital capability and access to expertise. Internal systems include leadership, governance, people, processes, data and organisational structures.

Six systems. One outcome.



None of these systems operates in isolation. A policy change can create a new market. A new market can improve revenue and cash flow. Better cash flow can make investment more realistic. A strong network can connect an organisation to a buyer or policymaker. Technology reduces cost only where skills and infrastructure exist to use it.

When an organisation is struggling, the immediate explanation is often “funding.” Yet the underlying constraint may be weak demand, delayed payments, restrictive regulation, founder dependency or weak internal financial management. Funding can temporarily mask these problems without resolving them.

A Simple Way to Read Systems



A four-part lens, proposed by Dr. Adeyemi Adelekan in the opening address, to move analysis beyond symptoms.

PARTS

Who or what is involved?
Actors, institutions, resources and infrastructure

CONNECTIONS

How do they interact?
What flows between the parts — money, information, trust, goods.

RULES

What shapes those interactions?
Formal regulation plus informal norms, incentives and mental models.

OUTCOMES

What does the system produce?
Including outcomes different from what the system claims to intend.

If an organisation cannot access capital, the problem may not simply be that “there is no money.” The parts may include enterprises, banks, investors, donors and intermediaries. The connections between them may be weak. The rules may require collateral, track records or legal forms that exclude particular organisations. The resulting outcome may be a system in which capital exists but does not reach those who need it.

The same diagnostic can be applied to markets, policy, technology, ecosystems and internal organisational systems. The lens helps move analysis beyond symptoms — and prevents solutions that treat one part of the problem while the system continues to produce the original outcome.

The Understanding Systems panel reinforced this deeper reading. Dr Edward Nii Amar Amarteifio used youth unemployment to illustrate why systems thinking asks more than whether there are enough jobs. Education, skills, employers, technology, government policy, finance and entrepreneurship interact to produce the outcome. Debbi Brock added that systems work also requires going beneath what is immediately visible. Design thinking and stakeholder engagement can help identify root causes, but social entrepreneurs also need self-awareness, resilience and the capacity to question the mental models through which they interpret a problem.

> “With design thinking, one of our challenges is that we tend to see what is on the surface level and what is in front of us, but we do not go down to the deeper levels of why the system is happening. When you get the community and stakeholders together, you are trying to understand the system at those deeper levels — what are the root causes?”
>
> **— Debbi D. Brock | High Point University**

WHY THIS MATTERS NOW

The systems surrounding impact are changing quickly. The opening address drew attention to pressure on international development funding, increasing interest in blended finance, the rapid adoption of AI, changing political arrangements and the expansion of continental market possibilities through the African Continental Free Trade Area. Each of these shifts can create opportunity and risk at the same time.

For an impact organisation, the practical implication is not that it must become an expert in every external system. It does, however, need enough systems awareness to notice when the environment is changing. If a funding model is becoming less reliable, what other resource pathways exist? If AI can reduce administrative cost, what skills and data are required to use it responsibly? If a larger continental market is opening, what standards, logistics and buyer relationships are needed to participate? If policy is changing, which parts of the model become easier or harder? Systems literacy becomes a form of preparedness.

SUSTAINABILITY IS A SYSTEMS OUTCOME

INSIGHT #1

A recurring lesson across the Summit was that persistent impact challenges are rarely caused by one factor. Organisations experience them as separate problems — funding, market access, policy, staffing, technology or leadership — but in practice these problems often reinforce one another. This is why a solution that works on one part of the problem can still fail to produce a durable outcome.

The Navigating Systems discussion made this particularly visible. Catherine Masolia reflected on work with micro and small enterprises in underserved communities and noted that impact is rarely constrained by a single problem. An enterprise may need finance, but its finance readiness may depend on record keeping, governance or a clearer business model. It may have a viable product but struggle to reach buyers. Market access may depend on certification or regulation. Growth may require technology and standardised processes, but those same processes can distance decision-making from the community relationships that made the model work.

The implication is that sustainability needs to be diagnosed differently. When every challenge is treated as an isolated problem, organisations and their supporters often create temporary fixes. For example, a grant can close an immediate cash gap without strengthening recurring income and a training can improve skills without changing the rules that prevent market entry.

The State of Social Enterprise conversation reinforced the same point from sector evidence. Finance emerged as a major barrier, but it sat alongside support services, market competitiveness, cash flow, regulation and skills. The significance of this is not that finance matters less. It is that finance works inside a wider architecture. Capital is more useful when there is a viable route to demand, an organisation capable of managing it, and rules that allow the model to operate.

This also changes how responsibility is understood. The sector often asks individual organisations to become more resilient, more investment ready and more innovative. Those capabilities matter, but they cannot compensate indefinitely for systems that are inaccessible or poorly designed. A stronger sustainability agenda therefore needs to work in two directions at once: strengthen the organisation and improve the environment around it.

For practitioners, this means diagnosing recurring problems across systems before choosing an intervention. For funders, it means understanding the conditions required for a funded activity to hold after the grant. For policymakers, it means looking at how rules interact across registration, taxation, procurement and sector regulation. For networks, it means using a view across many organisations to identify bottlenecks that appear individual but are actually structural.

LASTING IMPACT HAS TO BE BUILT BEYOND THE FOUNDER AND BEYOND THE PROJECT

INSIGHT #2

SIS8 repeatedly returned to the difference between creating activity and creating something that can continue. Angelou Ezeilo's keynote, "Built to Last," explored this through the long development of the Greening Youth Foundation. The lesson was not simply that programmes should run for longer. It was that sustainability comes from building pathways, leadership, governance and relationships that allow the work to regenerate rather than restart each time funding or leadership changes.

The keynote identified familiar forms of fragility: projects that arrive and disappear, programmes that fall off a funding cliff, and organisations in which too much knowledge, authority or relationship capital sits with one leader. The alternative is to build a pipeline rather than a sequence of disconnected interventions. Exposure can lead to learning; learning can lead to opportunity; opportunity can create leadership; and those leaders can become part of the next cycle of change. The system becomes capable of reproducing impact.

This is particularly important for founder-led social organisations. Founder energy is often a major asset in the early stages. It creates momentum, attracts relationships and holds the mission together. Over time, however, the same concentration can become a vulnerability if decisions, networks and institutional knowledge remain too dependent on one person. Sustainability therefore requires a deliberate shift from personal capability to organisational capability.

Jeroo Billimoria's contribution pushed this question further. Drawing on a long history of founding and handing over organisations, she asked participants to think about what would happen if the founder were no longer present. The question is uncomfortable precisely because it exposes whether an organisation has become an institution or remains an extension of an individual.

“How do I create it such that if I die tomorrow, or if I am not there tomorrow, it does not matter? How will it survive? That is the question you have to ask when you are building an organisation and when you are building a system.”

— Jeroo Billimoria | One Family Foundation

Building beyond the founder therefore involves more than succession planning at the point of departure. It includes distributed decision-making, leadership development, documented processes, institutional memory, board capability, shared external relationships and enough organisational depth for others to carry the work. It also means designing programmes so participants and communities can become actors in the system rather than remaining permanent recipients of support.

For funders and boards, this has an important implication. Leadership development, governance, documentation, middle-management capability and succession may be less visible than programme outputs, but they are part of the infrastructure through which programme outcomes persist. Underfunding these areas can produce organisations that look successful externally while remaining fragile internally.

COLLABORATION IS A MECHANISM FOR SYSTEMS CHANGE

INSIGHT #3

Collaboration was one of the strongest threads running through SIS8, but the discussions moved beyond the familiar language of partnership. The deeper question was what collaboration actually does inside a system. A complex social problem usually involves actors who control different pieces of the solution: government may control regulation or public infrastructure; businesses may control supply chains and markets; communities hold lived knowledge and legitimacy; funders control resources; networks can convene and broker; researchers can produce evidence. No single organisation can substitute for all of these functions.

Jeroo Billimoria framed this as a shift from the organisation to the issue. If the starting point is “my organisation,” collaboration can easily become a search for partners who help advance an existing plan. If the starting point is the problem, the organisation has to ask who else is necessary, what each actor can contribute, and what might need to be designed collectively. This changes the centre of gravity from ownership to shared problem solving.

The Navigating Systems panel brought this idea into organisational practice. Maurice Omolo argued that the value of partnership is not simply money changing hands but what different actors can unlock together. His distinction between “partnerships of convenience” and “partnerships of complementarity” is useful because it asks organisations to be more deliberate about why a relationship exists. A complementary partnership combines assets, access, knowledge or legitimacy in ways that neither party could reproduce alone.

Peter Oloo similarly described strategic partnership as central to work on climate resilience, equitable finance, youth employment and digital transformation. The wider lesson is that collaboration becomes system infrastructure when it creates a durable connection between previously fragmented parts of the system.

This also means networks should not measure success only by how many organisations they bring into the same room. The stronger test is what the connection changes. Did it reduce a transaction cost? Did it open a market? Did it improve access to capital? Did it create shared evidence? Did it change a rule? Did it allow organisations to coordinate around a problem that none could solve alone? Collaboration becomes meaningful when it changes how the system functions.

> “When you are trying to create any sort of systems change, right up front ask yourself: how do we involve the government? If it is linked to the corporate sector, how do we involve the corporate sector? How do we involve the stakeholders that are necessary? All of a sudden, your enterprise is not going to be about you. Your enterprise is going to become about the system.”
>
> **— Jeroo Billimoria | One Family Foundation**

NAVIGATION IS A CAPABILITY: UNDERSTAND THE SYSTEM WITHOUT LOSING THE MISSION



INSIGHT #4

Many social innovators work inside systems they did not design. The legal categories already exist. Procurement rules already exist. Funding priorities are set elsewhere. Markets have established gatekeepers. Technology and policy can change faster than small organisations can respond. The Navigating Systems panel focused on what organisations can do in this reality without confusing navigation with surrender. The first capability is reading the environment. Organisations need to understand who makes decisions, how resources move, which rules matter, what customers value, where influence sits and what is changing.

Peter Oloo's discussion of legal form illustrated how an apparently administrative decision can later affect access to funding. In contexts where there is no dedicated social-enterprise legal category, organisations may register under the closest available form and discover later that particular funders or programmes exclude them because of that choice. The lesson is that legal structure is not only a registration question; it can shape future pathways through the system.

The second capability is translation. Impact organisations routinely move between different institutional languages. Funders may ask for evidence, governance and risk management. Investors may focus on cash flow, growth and repayment. Government may focus on compliance, jobs or public value. Customers focus on whether the product or service solves a problem at an acceptable price. Organisations need to communicate their value in ways that different actors can understand without allowing the mission itself to be rewritten by whichever system they are currently trying to access.

The third capability is adaptation without losing local fit. Catherine Masolia's reflections on scaling were especially important here. As organisations grow, they introduce targets, reporting, standardisation and technology. These can make scale possible, but they can also move decision-making away from the communities and relationships that made the intervention effective. Replication is therefore not the same as scale. Organisations need to understand why something worked in the first place and which elements must remain locally owned.

Navigation also involves relationships. Regulators, funders, buyers, peers and ecosystem actors are more useful when trust already exists, rather than when an organisation approaches them only in a crisis. Relational capital is therefore part of organisational infrastructure. It helps organisations interpret change, access information and find allies when rules or conditions become difficult.

“As you scale, you start introducing targets, reporting requirements, standardising processes and technology. While those things are necessary, they can start to move decision-making away from the communities and the stakeholders you need to be close to. So when you are scaling, it is not simply replicating what happened in one place; you have to be very clear about why the intervention worked in the first place.”

— Catherine Masolia | Somo Africa

Finally, navigation does not mean accepting every rule as fixed. Organisations can comply where necessary, adapt where useful, influence where possible and organise collectively where structural change is required. This is where navigation connects back to system building: repeated friction experienced by many organisations is often evidence that the system itself needs to change.

FINANCE IS NOT ONE PROBLEM: SUSTAINABILITY REQUIRES A FINANCIAL ARCHITECTURE

INSIGHT #5

Finance was one of the clearest cross-cutting themes of SIS8, but the discussions also showed why “access to finance” can be too broad to be useful. Different organisations face different financial constraints at different stages. An early-stage social enterprise may need grant capital to test a model. A growing organisation may have revenue but lack working capital because customers pay slowly. Another may need patient investment for equipment. A nonprofit may need unrestricted funding to maintain the internal systems that make programme delivery possible. Treating all of these needs as one finance gap risks matching organisations with the wrong instrument.

The State of Social Enterprise conversation brought this mismatch into focus. Social enterprises can sit awkwardly between conventional categories: too commercially active for some grant frameworks, but not designed to maximise financial return in the way conventional investors expect. This can leave viable impact models underserved even when capital exists. The question is therefore not only how much finance is available, but whether the available finance fits the organisation’s mission, cash-flow cycle, risk profile and stage of development.

The opening address also distinguished funding from finance. Grants remain important, particularly where social value cannot be fully captured through a price or where organisations serve people who cannot pay the full cost. The vulnerability arises when grants become the entire financial architecture. A more resilient model may combine grants, earned revenue, contracts, philanthropy, partnerships, investment or other instruments, but the right mix depends on the mission and operating context. Diversification is not an instruction to commercialise everything; it is a way of reducing dependence on one fragile channel where alternatives genuinely fit.

Cash flow deserves particular attention because revenue or grant income on paper does not guarantee that an organisation can meet obligations when they fall due. Delayed payments, restricted grants and seasonal revenue can create stress even in organisations that appear financially healthy. Finance strategy therefore needs to include liquidity, working capital and realistic forecasting, not only fundraising targets.

The Summit also surfaced questions of inclusion. The State of Social Enterprise evidence discussed strong representation of women among social-enterprise leaders alongside lower success in accessing finance for women-led enterprises. Shona McDonald brought the question of outcomes and agency into the discussion through decades of disability-inclusion work. Her experience showed why a system cannot be called inclusive simply because services exist. Transport, education, health, social development, architecture, business practice and public attitudes interact. If one part remains inaccessible, people can still be excluded from the wider economy. She also challenged the language of passive beneficiaries, arguing that people and families need information, choice and the agency to reject solutions that do not fit their needs.

> “People with disabilities and their families are not beneficiaries. They are clients and they need choices just like everybody else. They need to be informed, but they also need the agency to action that information and permission to say no when what is provided is not appropriate.”
>
> **— Shona McDonald | Shonaquip Social Enterprise**

This is a reminder that finance systems can reproduce exclusion even in sectors built around inclusion. Readiness matters, but so do the criteria, networks, collateral expectations and decision-making practices through which capital is allocated.

The funder and investor fireside conversation added a relational dimension. The session highlighted that capital flows through relationships, judgement and trust as well as formal applications. Organisations benefit from understanding the decision logic of the capital they seek; funders benefit from understanding the operational realities of the organisations they assess.

The wider implication is a move from funding dependency to financial architecture. Practitioners need to separate the question “How do we fund this activity?” from “How does the organisation remain financially healthy?” Funders and investors need to diagnose before prescribing, and development institutions need to ask whether their instruments are reaching the organisations and outcomes they were designed to support.

MARKETS ARE PART OF IMPACT SUSTAINABILITY, NOT A SEPARATE COMMERCIAL CONVERSATION

INSIGHT #6

One of the most important shifts in SIS8 was the insistence that sustainability conversations cannot stop at grants and investment. For organisations that sell products or services, markets determine whether value can be converted into recurring income. Even for nonprofits, markets matter through procurement, service contracts, supply chains and the wider economic environment in which beneficiaries, partners and funders operate.

Peter Oloo made the issue concrete by asking how a social entrepreneur actually reaches the market and whether the market is there. This sounds basic, but it is often overlooked when programmes support enterprises primarily through training or finance. Capital does not create demand by itself. An organisation can become “investment ready” and still struggle if it cannot reach customers, meet standards, enter procurement systems or compete with established providers.

The State of Social Enterprise conversation pushed this further by challenging the charity framing that can surround social enterprise. Shawn Theunissen argued that many social entrepreneurs are not asking to be treated as permanent recipients of support; they are asking for opportunities to transact. This reframes market access as part of the enabling environment for impact.

“It is not charity. We are asking for opportunities. It is not aid that we are looking for; it is trade that we are looking for.”

— Shawn Theunissen | Social Enterprise Academy Africa

The implication is not that every social mission should become a commercial business. Some public and social goods will continue to require subsidy or grant support. The practical task is to identify where genuine demand exists, who benefits, who uses the service, who is willing and able to pay, and whether a third-party payer or procurement mechanism is required. Clear answers to these questions help organisations distinguish need from a viable market.

The continental market context also matters. The Summit highlighted the opportunity associated with the African Continental Free Trade Area and larger cross-border markets. Yet a large market on paper is not the same as accessible demand. Standards, logistics, payment systems, information, procurement rules, trust and local relationships still determine who can participate. Market-building therefore requires more than encouraging enterprises to “scale across Africa”; it requires practical infrastructure that lowers the cost and uncertainty of entering new markets.

For policymakers and development institutions, this makes procurement and supplier development powerful sustainability tools. For networks, it creates a role in buyer intelligence, introductions and crossborder learning. For practitioners, it means testing willingness to pay and routes to market as carefully as the social need itself.

POLICY AND POWER ARE PART OF THE OPERATING MODEL

INSIGHT #7

Policy appeared throughout SIS8 not as background context but as one of the systems directly shaping whether impact models can operate. Legal recognition influences how organisations register and what support they can access. Tax rules affect cost. Procurement determines whether public markets are open. Sector regulation can enable or restrict innovation. Trade rules, standards, data policy and public infrastructure can all influence viability

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Peter Oloo's account of efforts to develop a social-enterprise policy in Kenya showed both the value and difficulty of policy engagement. Ecosystem stakeholders came together, a steering process was created and a draft policy was developed with public participation. Yet moving the policy forward through changing political leadership remained difficult. The example demonstrates why policy work is rarely a one-off technical exercise; it requires ownership, continuity and relationships across institutional change.

The discussion also raised the issue of tax treatment. Where social enterprises are expected to compete under the same tax and compliance conditions as conventional firms while also carrying explicit social or environmental objectives, actors may question whether the system adequately recognises the public value being created. The answer will differ by country, but the broader point is that policy design affects incentives and can either encourage or constrain particular organisational forms.

The Building Systems panel added a deeper question about political time horizons. Haron Wachira argued that long-term system design becomes difficult when solutions are too tightly tied to short political cycles. His example of community-level change emphasised patient engagement, education and local adoption — processes that may not fit the timetable of political visibility but are often necessary for durable change.

At the same time, the Summit did not frame government simply as an obstacle. Dr Iman Bibars stressed the importance of finding champions inside public institutions and approaching government as a potential ally where policy change is required. Haron's example from a Maasai community in Kenya similarly described starting from the ground, building community ownership and then bringing government and investors into a process that local actors already understood and supported. These examples suggest that effective policy engagement can move in both directions: from institutions downward and from communities upward.

Policy is also about power. Formal rules matter, but so do the actors able to influence which problems are recognised, whose evidence counts and which solutions receive legitimacy. Practitioners therefore need policy literacy and collective voice, while policymakers need channels that bring implementation experience into rule design. Networks can play an important intermediary role by aggregating experiences that would otherwise remain isolated complaints.

ECOSYSTEMS NEED TO REDUCE FRICTION AND CREATE PATHWAYS

SIS8 repeatedly highlighted networks, intermediaries and ecosystems because organisations rarely possess all the resources they need internally. Yet the Summit also pointed to a distinction between an ecosystem that is busy and one that is useful. A crowded calendar of events does not necessarily mean organisations can find finance, buyers, expertise, talent or policy access when they need them.

A useful ecosystem reduces friction. It helps actors find each other and understand what each can offer. It creates referral pathways rather than forcing organisations to restart their search at every stage. It can connect early-stage support to finance readiness, local enterprises to larger buyers, practitioner evidence to policymakers and organisations in one country to learning or opportunity elsewhere. It can also provide shared infrastructure — information, templates, data, standards, trusted intermediaries — that lowers the cost of participation for smaller actors.

The collaboration discussions help clarify why this matters. When Jeroo Billimoria asked participants to move from “I” to “we,” the practical requirement was a system capable of bringing the necessary actors together. When Maurice Omolo called for partnerships of complementarity, the ecosystem’s role was not merely to introduce organisations but to help complementary capabilities find each other. When Peter Oloo described strategic partnerships across climate, finance, youth employment and digital transformation, he was describing connections that cross conventional sector boundaries.

Luvuyo Rani’s journey also illustrated a progression from organisation building to ecosystem building. His experience began with a specific enterprise responding to technology access in underserved communities and later expanded into work connecting entrepreneurs, policymakers, funders, businesses and development partners through Africa Forward. The wider lesson is that successful organisations often discover that their own growth is constrained by conditions around them. At that point, strengthening the ecosystem can become part of sustaining the original mission.

Networks are particularly well placed to identify structural problems because they see patterns across many organisations. A repeated funding difficulty, procurement barrier or policy confusion may look like an individual weakness when seen one organisation at a time. Across a network, it becomes evidence of a system problem. This gives ecosystem builders a role in collective intelligence and constructive advocacy, not only convening.

The test of ecosystem value should therefore be practical. Do connections lead to finance, contracts, stronger capability, credible partnerships, better information or policy influence? Are organisations spending less time navigating fragmented support? Are local actors connected to wider opportunities without losing contextual fit? These are stronger indicators than membership or event attendance alone.

TECHNOLOGY AND INTERNAL SYSTEMS DETERMINE WHETHER OPPORTUNITY CAN BE ABSORBED

INSIGHT #9

Technology featured in SIS8 as both a rapidly changing external system and an internal capability question. AI and digital tools can lower administrative burden, improve data use, widen communication and allow small teams to do more. Peter Oloo also highlighted digital adoption as a barrier for social enterprises and linked technology use to the possibility of reducing business costs.

The Summit's systems framing, however, suggests caution against technology adoption as an end in itself. The useful question is not whether an organisation is using AI or the newest platform. It is what constraint the tool removes, whose capability it increases, what data and skills it requires, what it costs to maintain, and whether it creates new dependencies or excludes people central to the mission. Connectivity, language, trust, governance and data quality can determine whether a promising tool actually improves outcomes.

This connects directly to internal systems. External opportunities only become useful when an organisation can absorb them. For example, new funding can create strain if financial controls are weak and rapid growth can overwhelm teams if roles and decision rights are unclear.

The Understanding Systems panel added a human dimension to this point. Debbi Brock's emphasis on self-awareness and resilience recognised that systems work is emotionally and relationally demanding. Social entrepreneurs operate through periods of resource abundance and scarcity, momentum and setback. The capacity to reflect, adapt and maintain relationships is part of the system, not separate from it.

Angelou Ezeilo's keynote similarly connected sustainability to governance, succession and the ability of others to carry the work. The lesson across these conversations is that internal strength is not simply about efficiency. It includes leadership that can be distributed, governance that supports good decisions, financial information that makes risk visible, processes that survive staff changes, data that supports learning, and people systems that allow teams to develop and remain well enough to continue the work.

A recurring tension is that impact organisations are often rewarded for visible delivery while the systems that make delivery sustainable remain difficult to fund. The result can be organisations that appear successful from the outside while carrying internal fragility. A serious sustainability agenda has to make these less visible systems legitimate areas of investment.

WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE DIFFERENTLY?

A shared responsibility, not four separate agendas



FOR FUNDERS , INVESTORS & DEVELOPMENT INSTITUTIONS





The Summit's finance conversations point to a mismatch between the diversity of impact organisations and the narrowness of many funding instruments. Social enterprises can be commercially active without being designed to maximise profit. NGOs can generate income without becoming conventional businesses. Early-stage organisations may need grants before investment is appropriate. Growing organisations may need working capital rather than another training programme. A more useful approach could begin by diagnosing the organisation's actual constraint before prescribing an instrument.

This means paying attention to stage, mission, cash-flow cycle, revenue model and the nature of the social value being created. Where an organisation delivers public or community value that cannot be fully monetised, grant or concessional support may remain appropriate. Where there is a credible revenue model but payment cycles create liquidity pressure, working capital may matter more. Where assets or expansion can generate sustainable returns, investment may fit. The purpose of finance design is therefore to help the model function, rather than force the model into the preferred instrument of the capital provider.

Funders may also need to recognise the organisation behind the project. Governance, financial management, leadership, data, people and core operating systems are part of impact delivery. Repeatedly funding visible activity while refusing to support the infrastructure behind it can leave organisations more fragile even as their programme portfolio grows. Longer horizons and greater flexibility may be particularly relevant where systems change requires time, relationship building and adaptation.

The discussions also suggest that capital could be considered alongside the wider constraints around it. If market access is the bottleneck, finance without buyer access may not solve the problem. If weak governance is the constraint, technical support may be more valuable than additional debt. If regulation is the barrier, policy engagement or an intermediary may be necessary. Development institutions are particularly well placed to combine capital with market building, ecosystem infrastructure and evidence rather than treating finance as a standalone intervention.

Finally, funders and investors may benefit from examining who their rules exclude. Application burden, due diligence, collateral, legal-form requirements, language, network access and expectations around growth can all shape who reaches the decision table. The relevant question is not only whether organisations are ready for capital, but whether capital systems are designed to recognise credible forms of impact.





FOR POLICYMAKERS AND PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS

Public systems shape social innovation even when government is not directly funding it. Registration categories determine how organisations are recognised. Tax and compliance rules affect cost. Procurement determines whether public demand can become a market. Sector regulation can open or close pathways for innovation. Public data and digital infrastructure influence access and scale. Policy is therefore part of the operating model of impact organisations.

A first priority could be to reduce unnecessary friction. This does not mean removing accountability. It means examining whether administrative rules are proportionate and whether smaller organisations can understand and comply with them. Where hybrid or social-enterprise models do not fit existing categories, policymakers could consider whether clearer recognition or tailored pathways are appropriate to the national context.

A second priority could be to use procurement more strategically. Public institutions are major buyers. Procurement can therefore become a market-building mechanism for credible social enterprises and local impact providers, provided rules do not unintentionally exclude them through scale, track-record or process requirements designed only for larger conventional suppliers. Procurement policy can help convert social value into repeatable demand rather than leaving organisations permanently dependent on grants.

A third priority is greater consideration of policy design with practitioners rather than only for them. The Kenya social-enterprise policy experience discussed at SIS8 illustrates the importance of stakeholder participation but also the difficulty of maintaining momentum across political change. More durable policy may benefit from implementation feedback, institutional ownership and channels through which practitioners can continue to contribute evidence after consultation closes.

Finally, long-term system building may require greater continuity. Some outcomes require patient behaviour change, local adoption and institutional learning that do not fit short electoral cycles. Public institutions can support this continuity by embedding policy capability beyond individual political champions, working with communities and ecosystem actors, and creating mechanisms through which learning survives changes in leadership.





FOR NETWORKS AND ECOSYSTEM BUILDERS

Networks occupy a distinctive position because they can see across organisations and systems. They can identify repeated barriers, connect actors who would not otherwise meet, translate complex opportunities for smaller organisations and aggregate practitioner experience into credible evidence. SIS8 suggests that this role becomes more valuable when networks move beyond general networking toward purposeful infrastructure.

Purposeful brokerage means knowing why a connection is being made. An organisation may need a buyer rather than a mentor, working capital rather than a grant-writing workshop, a policy introduction rather than another accelerator. Networks can potentially reduce the search costs that small organisations face by developing referral pathways and maintaining practical intelligence about finance, procurement, standards, technical support and relevant public institutions.

Networks may also be well placed to improve the quality of collaboration. Maurice Omolo's distinction between convenience and complementarity offers a useful test. Rather than connecting organisations because they operate in the same sector or attend the same event, ecosystem builders could look for complementary assets: one actor may have community trust, another technical expertise, another market access and another policy influence. The value lies in what the combination makes possible.

A further potential role is building collective intelligence. When many organisations report the same problem, the network can help document the pattern and move the conversation from anecdote to evidence. This can strengthen policy engagement, improve programme design and help funders see where a system-level intervention may benefit many organisations at once. Cross-country learning can add value here, provided differences in context are made explicit rather than erased.

A more meaningful measure of ecosystem performance may therefore be not only how many actors are connected, but what those connections unlock: finance, contracts, partnerships, capability, shared infrastructure, policy change or reduced duplication. Tracking these outcomes could provide networks with a clearer picture of the value their connections create.

FOR PRACTITIONERS AND IMPACT ORGANISATIONS





Systems can feel too large for one organisation to influence, but SIS8 also showed that practitioners have practical choices. One starting point could be to map the systems most critical to the organisation's model. Which market, funding, finance, policy, technology and ecosystem relationships determine whether the work continues? Where are the single points of dependency? Which changes in the external environment could materially affect the organisation in the next two or three years?

A second priority could be to reduce avoidable fragility. One founder, one funder, one buyer, one key employee or one route to market can become a point of failure. Diversification does not mean multiplying everything at once. It means identifying where concentration creates unacceptable risk and building alternatives deliberately. This may involve leadership development, a broader funding mix, additional buyer relationships, documented processes or stronger partnerships.

Third, it can be useful for practitioners to understand the economics of their own impact. Which activities generate income? Which create public value but require subsidy? What are the real costs of delivery? How long is the cash cycle? Who benefits, who uses, who buys and who pays? Clear answers make it easier to choose the right funding or finance instrument and to communicate with funders, investors and customers without distorting the mission.

Fourth, organisations may need to protect local knowledge as they scale. Standardisation is useful when it reduces unnecessary variation, but it can become harmful when it removes the relationships and agency that made the model work. Before replicating an intervention, organisations could consider which elements are core and which need to be redesigned for a new context. Local ownership is likely to be stronger when it includes real decision-making power, not only consultation.

Fifth, practitioners may benefit from investing in relationships before they are urgently needed. Funders, regulators, buyers, peers, researchers and networks can all become part of the organisation's operating infrastructure. Strategic relationships help organisations interpret change, access information and build collective influence. This is especially important when navigating systems that were not designed around social innovation.

Finally, technology may be most useful when adopted against a clear problem. The right question is not whether an organisation is "using AI," but whether a tool improves a process, reduces cost, strengthens learning or expands reach without undermining inclusion, trust or data governance. Technology is most useful when it increases capability rather than adding complexity.

These recommendations are interconnected. For example, a practitioner can improve finance readiness, but a funder still needs an appropriate instrument and a policymaker can open procurement, but networks may be needed to help smaller organisations understand and access the opportunity. Sustainable impact is therefore not achieved when one stakeholder group "does its part" in isolation. It is achieved when changes reinforce one another across the system.

SUSTAINING IMPACT PRIZE 2026

Recognising what is built to last

The Sustaining Impact Prize is the Summit's mechanism for recognising early-stage organisations that are already creating meaningful social or environmental value while thinking deliberately about how that impact will be sustained. For 2026, eligible organisations were assessed around alignment with the Sustainable Development Goals, sustainability of impact and future-proofing of their resource base.

Following earlier screening and interview stages, five finalists progressed to the live final on Day 2. The final stage was designed to reveal more than the strength of the existing intervention. Finalists were asked why their organisation should win, what the Prize would enable them to do that they could not currently do as effectively.

Shoeniverse Leathers

Olamide Olajide

US$500



Ellucid Social

Richard Kuffour

Country Director, Elucid Social Ghana

US$300



BiliBright

Patricia Nagawa

US$200



Beyond the cash prize, all top winners also received exclusive access to the ASEW Fellowship, mentorship opportunities, global recognition and visibility, and a platform to showcase their work to funders and investors.

"Three winners emerged: Olamide Olajide of Shoeniverse Leathers won the 1st Prize, while Richard Kuffour, representing Elucid Social Ghana, and Patricia Nagawa of BiliBright emerged as the 1st and 2nd runners-up, respectively".

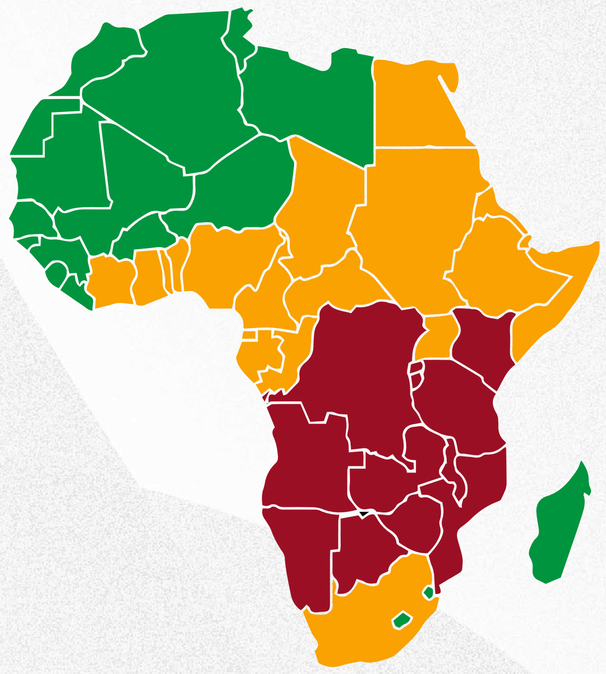
The final was judged by Andrew Ochono, Development Consultant; Cristianne Wendler, Founder and CEO of Vanhu Tech; and Nike Kerstin Akerele-De Souza, Founder / Strategic and Board Advisor at Dressler KBO Consulting.

Beyond the cash awards, the Prize also illustrates how relatively small interventions can become part of a wider support system. Winners were welcomed into the wider fellowship and support ecosystem, including mentorship, promotional support and recognition. The session reinforced a wider SIS principle: prizes are most useful when they unlock credibility, relationships, capability and future opportunity rather than operating as one-off cash transfers.



FROM EVIDENCE TO ACTION:

A Pan-African Agenda



SIS8 did not produce one model for sustaining impact in Africa — nor would one model reflect the continent's diversity. Across the Summit, the same broad challenge appeared from different directions: good organisations creating durable outcomes inside environments that are often fragmented, changing or poorly connected. Seven priorities follow.

1. **Broaden the meaning of sustainability** — beyond replacing a grant: demand, cash flow, appropriate finance, enabling policy, partnerships, technology that expands delivery, and the internal strength to adapt.

2. **Invest in continuity** — pathways, pipelines, institutional memory, leadership development and succession, designed so capability remains after the programme ends.

3. **Improve the fit between capital and impact** — grants, patient capital, working capital, guarantees, contracts and investment each have roles; use them deliberately and examine who existing rules exclude.

4. **Treat markets as development infrastructure** — routes to customers, buyers and procurement alongside capacity building; AfCFTA opportunities matter most when standards, logistics, payments and relationships are navigable.

5. **Make policy permeable to practice** — credible channels for implementation evidence, practitioner capacity to engage constructively, networks that aggregate voice, research that converts practice into evidence.

6. **Strengthen ecosystem infrastructure** — trusted pathways into finance, markets, expertise, data, talent and policy influence; intermediaries that translate between institutional worlds; cross-country learning that respects context.

7. **Build for people, not around them** — communities, users and families hold knowledge, preferences and agency; locally sustainable systems emerge when people shape design, make choices and retain ownership.

Closing reflection. The challenge for the next phase is not simply to create more impact. It is to build the conditions that allow good impact to survive, adapt, spread and outlast the people and programmes that first created it.



Photo Gallery



Nigeria



Rwanda



Ethopia



Mauritania



Namibia



Ghana



Ghana



Namibia



Tanzania



Uganda



Ethiopia



Namibia



Ethiopia



Uganda



Nigeria



Uganda



Strathmore University, Kenya



Tanzania



Design Thinking and
Innovation Hub, UCC Ghana



Tanzania



Cote d' Ivoire



Cote d' Ivoire



Design Thinking and
Innovation Hub, UCC Ghana



Strathmore University, Kenya



Build the organisation.

Understand the system.

Strengthen the connections.

Change the rules where necessary.

Design for impact that can last.

SUSTAINING IMPACT SUMMIT.