NAIROBI EASTERN & CENTRAL REGIONAL BUDGET HUB

THE SYSTEMS LENS

Budget Advocacy for a Devolved Kenya



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MESSAGE FROM THE COORDINATOR

Learning to See the Whole Board

There is a particular frustration familiar to anyone who has spent years in budget advocacy: you win a line item, and eighteen months later, the same problem returns wearing a different name.

A health facility gets its essential medicines restored, only for stock-outs to return the following quarter. A public participation forum is held successfully, only for its recommendations to gather dust because no institution owns the follow-through.

For years, across the Nairobi Eastern and Central region, we treated these as separate problems requiring separate campaigns. We won battles — but we were not changing the system that kept producing the same failures.

That is why, at the beginning of the 2026–2028 project cycle, the NEC Regional Budget Hub, supported by Bajeti Hub, made a deliberate choice to introduce Systems Thinking as the organising method for our budget advocacy.
Systems Thinking asks a harder question before we act: Why does this problem exist, and what is it connected to?

During this reporting period, fourteen counties formed County Systems Think-Tanks bringing together budget champions, civil society, media, persons with disabilities, youth leaders, health advocates and community representatives. Their entry points differed from Primary Health Care and public participation to disability inclusion, gender-based violence, youth policy and non-communicable diseases. But their method was shared: map the system as it actually works, identify the real leverage points, and then decide where to push
.

Four lessons stand out.

First, naming a system is itself a form of advocacy. In Murang'a, the CSTT identified how public participation functions are fragmented across three departments. In Nyandarua, it highlighted that Public Participation and Civic Education share one budget line, leaving both inadequately funded.

In Nairobi, participants mapped the barriers facing different groups, including youth, women, older persons and persons with disabilities. These problems were not new. What was new was the willingness to name them clearly and collectively.

Second, Systems Thinking forces us to confront power, not just process. Embu documented concerns that public participation can favour political loyalists while excluding entire communities and demographic groups. In Kajiado, participants estimated political goodwill for youth policy reform at only about ten percent.

These are uncomfortable findings but honest advocacy must be willing to document uncomfortable truths.

Third, systems change is often about activating what already exists. Laikipia found that its Primary Health Care Technical Working Group already exists but has not met for a year because of inadequate funding. Nyeri has informal facility-level think tanks that can be strengthened. Meru has a legally grounded Sector Working Group model that needs consistent implementation and alignment with the budget cycle. The lesson is simple: systems change is often about plumbing, not architecture.

Fourth, genuine inclusion improves the analysis itself. In Kiambu, persons with disabilities helped reveal gaps in health facilities that a purely technical budget review might miss from sign-language interpretation to accessible infrastructure and equipment.

In Kitui, bringing legal and health perspectives together connected disability, chronic disease and access to justice. Diversity is not simply about who sits at the table; it determines what the table is able to see.

So where do we go from here?

The formation of these fourteen CSTTs is only the beginning. Over the coming quarters, they will build evidence through baseline surveys, disaggregated data and indicator tracking. We will test our assumptions, learn what works, acknowledge what does not, and adapt.

I want to be candid: we cannot yet claim systems change. What we can claim is that fourteen counties have begun the harder work of drawing an honest picture of the systems they want to change and agreeing where to press first.
That is not a small achievement. It is the foundation for meaningful change.

To our county budget facilitators and every CSTT member who gave their time, experience and candour to this process: thank you. This publication exists because you were willing to describe the system as it is, rather than as we wished it to be.

The journey ahead will be longer and less linear than any of us would prefer. But, for the first time in this Hub's history, we are walking it with a map rather than a flashlight.
And that is the shift this edition seeks to document.



Nelson Maina
NEC Regional Budget Hub
Coordinator

Message from the Executive Director - JAEC

The County Systems Think Tank (CSTT) is a model under the NEC Regional Budget Hub that brings together county government, civil society, citizens, experts and other stakeholders to discuss and find solutions to challenges affecting counties. These challenges are related to governance, planning, budgeting and service delivery in different areas.

The CSTT encourages stakeholders to use evidence, share their experiences and learn from one another. It also helps them understand how different parts of the county system are connected and how working together can lead to better services and development for citizens.

Through the CSTT, the NEC Regional Budget Hub aims to support practical solutions, meaningful public participation, transparency and accountability in county decision-making. It also strengthens partnerships among relevant stakeholders by providing a space to share information and experiences, identify gaps and agree on actions that can improve county policies, plans and budgets.

The CSTT promotes inclusive participation by ensuring that women, youth, persons with disabilities and other groups that are often left out have an opportunity to share their views and take part in decisions that affect their lives and communities.



Regina Wambui
Justice, Advocacy and Empowerment Centre (JAEC)
Executive Director

ABOUT NEC HUB

The NEC Regional Budget Hub's 2026–2028 project spans fourteen focal counties across the region. This edition documents the formation of all fourteen CSTTs — Nairobi, Kiambu, Murang'a, Nyeri, Kirinyaga, Embu, Meru, Machakos, Kitui, Laikipia, Nyandarua, Kajiado, Tharaka Nithi and Makueni — reported between May and July 2026

Vision

A region in which county budgets are transparent, participatory and responsive — shaped by evidence generated with the communities they are meant to serve and sustained by institutions rather than individual champions.

Mission

To strengthen evidence-based, systems-informed budget advocacy across the Nairobi Eastern and Central (NEC) region of Kenya, enabling county governments, civil society and citizens to jointly identify and address the structural drivers of poor public finance management, weak governance and inequitable service delivery.

Focus areas:
Primary Health Care (PHC) financing and governance; public participation legislation and practice; gender-based violence prevention and response; disability inclusion; youth policy; climate financing; and social accountability more broadly — with the specific entry point determined by each county's own CSTT rather than imposed centrally.

Approach: Rather than campaigning on isolated budget lines, NEC Hub convenes multidisciplinary County Systems Think-Tanks (CSTTs) — budget champions, county executive and assembly representatives, civil society organisations, media, persons with disabilities, youth and women's representatives and technical experts — to jointly map current systems, identify root causes and leverage points, envision a future system, and commit to collective, evidence-based action.

Theory of Change

If county stakeholders from across government, civil society and affected communities jointly diagnose the systemic — not merely symptomatic — drivers of a public finance or service delivery problem and commit to coordinated, evidence-based action at identified leverage points, then county budgets and institutions will become more responsive, transparent and equitable over the 2026–2028 period, because systemic solutions address root causes that isolated advocacy campaigns cannot reach alone, and because multi-stakeholder ownership sustains action beyond any single funding cycle.

UNDERSTANDING SYSTEMS THINKING: A READER'S GUIDE

Don’t Treat Symptoms. Fix the System

Imagine a health facility that keeps running out of essential medicines. The conventional advocacy response is direct: identify the stock-out, write a memo, push for emergency restocking, celebrate when the shelves refill. Three months later, the shelves are empty again.

This is the failure mode that Systems Thinking is designed to interrupt. It does not ask "how do we get medicine onto this shelf" — it asks "what set of relationships, incentives, funding flows and institutional habits produced an empty shelf, and will keep producing one, until something in that underlying structure changes?"

A simple analogy:

Traditional advocacy is like repeatedly bailing water out of a leaking boat. It works, for a moment, and it is not wrong to bail — people are getting wet right now and need help. But Systems Thinking asks where the leak is, why it opened, and whether the boat's design makes new leaks inevitable.

Sometimes the leak is a single loose board (an easy fix). More often, in the county systems documented in this edition, it is something structural: a budget line that has never existed, a mandate split across three offices with no one accountable for the whole or a feedback loop that never closes because no one collects the data that would let citizens or officials know whether last year's fix actually held.

Why traditional advocacy sometimes fails:

Not because it is wrong, but because it is incomplete.

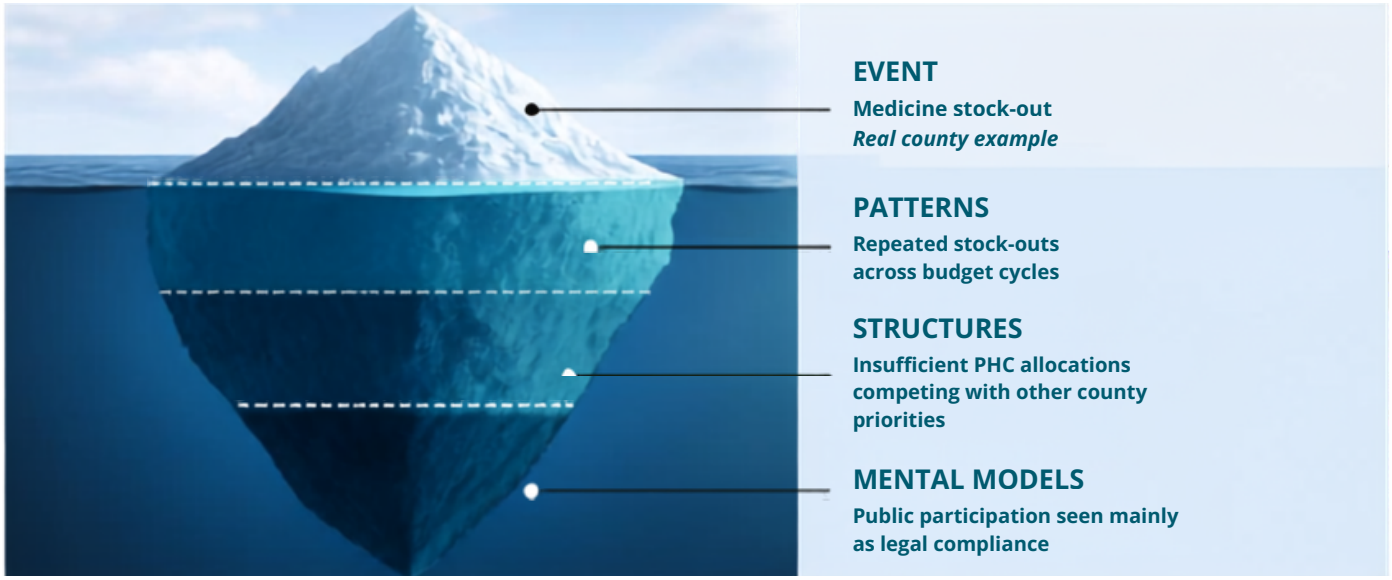
Securing one additional line item in one budget cycle can be undone the following year by a change in leadership, a fiscal squeeze or a structural gap the campaign never addressed because it was never mapped.

Nyandarua's CSTT found exactly this:

Public Participation and Civic Education have historically been merged into a single budget line. Advocating for "more funding for civic education" without first separating that line risks the new money simply disappearing into the same undifferentiated pool.

KEY CONCEPTS, EXPLAINED SIMPLY

Systems Thinking looks below the surface. Problems we see (events) are shaped by patterns, structures, and mental models we can change.



Feedback loops — the mechanisms, or their absence, that let a system learn from its own results. Meru's CSTT found irregular Sector Working Group meetings with no Terms of Reference, a feedback loop that exists on paper but has effectively gone silent, so lessons from one budget cycle never reach the next.

Root causes — the underlying drivers beneath a visible symptom. In Machakos, the visible symptom is stock-outs of essential medicines and limited ambulance coverage: the root causes include insufficient PHC budget allocations competing against other county priorities within a constrained fiscal envelope.

Leverage points — places in a system where a relatively modest, well-targeted intervention produces outsized change. Lakikipia's CSTT identified the gazettement of its three Primary Care Networks, operational since 2023–24 but never formally recognised, as a leverage point: one administrative act could unlock dedicated budget lines and legal standing for an entire tier of health infrastructure.

Mental models — the assumptions stakeholders bring that shape what they notice. Embu's CSTT surfaced a shared but previously unspoken mental model: public participation exists primarily to satisfy legal compliance, rather than to generate a genuinely different decision.

Adaptive learning — treating a roadmap as a hypothesis to be tested and revised, not a fixed plan. Every CSTT in this edition ends its report with a 'way forward' table of next actions, deliberately built for revision.

A public participation forum with strong attendance can still fail systemically if there is no dedicated budget line, no legal mandate for the coordinating office, and no mechanism for citizen input to reach the final budget document. Murang'a, Embu, and Kirinyaga found the forums exist; the system connecting them to real decisions does not.

FEATURE STORY:
FROM BUDGET ADVOCACY TO SYSTEMS CHANGE

The Room Where the Map Gets Drawn

There is a moment that repeats itself, with small variations, in nearly every County Systems Think-Tank formation meeting documented in this edition. It happens somewhere in the second or third session, after the introductions and the mandate-explaining are done, when someone — a health coordinator, a legal officer, a persons-with-disabilities representative — says a version of the same sentence: I didn't realise it connected to that.

In Laikipia, it was the moment a Primary Health Care Coordinator's presentation on ungazetted Primary Care Networks landed alongside a Finance Officer's explanation of facility budgeting, and the room understood, together, that the reason nine hub facilities cannot access dedicated budget lines is not neglect but a missing legal signature.

In Meru, it was the moment community representatives describing lived service-delivery gaps sat across from the County Assembly's Health Committee Clerk explaining budget approval bottlenecks, and both sides realised they had been describing the same failure from opposite ends without ever comparing notes.

In Kitui, it was a legal practitioner and a police OCPD sitting beside a Ministry of Health official, discovering that a data dashboard already exists — nearly finished — but has never been formally validated because no one owns the next step.

This is what Systems Thinking looks like in practice: not a workshop technique, but a room engineered so that people who hold different pieces of the same broken system are finally sitting at the same table, at the same time, looking at the same picture.

Why a new method, now

The Nairobi Eastern and Central region's civil society and budget advocacy landscape did not lack effort before 2026. Budget champions have tracked county allocations for years. Civil society organisations have submitted memoranda, attended public participation forums and flagged gaps in disability inclusion, gender-responsive budgeting and health financing. What was frequently missing was connective tissue — a shared, structured way of seeing how a gap in one department's budget line produces a visible failure three departments away.

Murang'a's finding that public participation functions are split across the Devolution, Planning and Coordination offices shows the value of a Think-Tank bringing together these offices, the County Assembly, and civil society to map institutional roles and identify gaps. Similarly, Nairobi's finding that public awareness of participation processes remains low despite existing engagement mechanisms highlights the importance of bringing together health workers, ICT actors, urban planners, and community-based organisations to understand how these mechanisms are experienced from the community's perspective.

What the Mapping revealed

Read across all fourteen counties in this edition, a handful of structural patterns recur with striking consistency, even though the counties chose different entry points — PHC financing, public participation reform, gender-based violence, youth policy, climate financing, disability inclusion.

1 **The first is fragmentation without ownership**. Public participation, in particular, keeps surfacing as a mandate distributed across multiple offices with no single accountable owner — in Murang'a explicitly across three departments, in Embu split unevenly between an under-resourced executive-side directorate and a more robust Assembly-facilitated process, in Nyandarua merged into a single underfunded line with civic education.

2 **The second is data that does not exist, or exists but cannot travel.** Meru's CSTT could not access "aggregated or reliable data to inform decisions" even among its own members. Kitui's GBV Think-Tank identified a nearly complete data dashboard sitting unvalidated for want of an institutional signature. Nyeri's mental health discussion kept circling back to a stark ratio: 30 of 2,510 Community Health Promoters trained on depression screening, against 400 trained separately by a different partner using different criteria — two efforts running in parallel, neither able to see the other.

3 **The third is exclusion that survives good intentions.** Nearly every county report names, specifically, the populations still left out of processes ostensibly designed to include everyone — persons with disabilities in Kiambu's newly built but inaccessible health infrastructure; residents of Mbeere North and South alongside PWDs, youth and professional bodies in Embu's public participation forums; caregivers of children with disabilities in Nyeri, whose stress and support needs go almost entirely unmeasured.

4 **The fourth is financing structures inherited from a paradigm that has already shifted.** Nairobi's CSTT flagged delayed equitable share disbursements and reimbursements alongside high county debt obligations. Nyeri's account of the Health Service Fund-to-FIF-to-Social Health Authority transition captures a county mid-transition, with rural facilities suddenly holding large cash balances while urban facilities wait, and no settled system yet for reimbursing care for indigent patients. Kajiado's youth policy remains in draft precisely because, as the report bluntly states, political goodwill for the reform sits at an estimated ten percent — a financing gap that is, at root, a political-will gap.

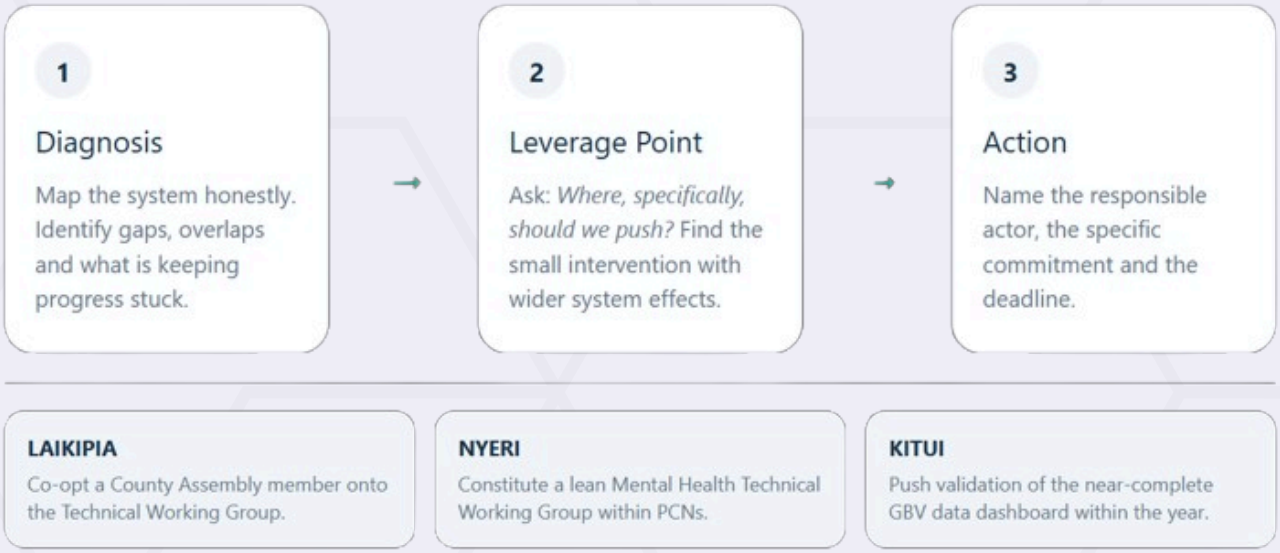
From diagnosis to leverage

A system honestly mapped is not, by itself, a system changed. What distinguishes the CSTT model from a conventional needs assessment is the discipline of moving from what is wrong to where, specifically, should we push and then naming who is responsible, and by when.

This is visible in the "way forward" tables that close every county report in this edition: modest, specific, time-bound commitments rather than sweeping aspirations. Laikipia commits to co-opting a County Assembly member onto its existing but dormant Technical Working Group.

Nyeri commits to constituting a lean Mental Health Technical Working Group (within the PCNs) by the end of September 2026, explicitly choosing not to wait for the heavier, slower process of standing up a full statutory Mental Health Council first.

Kitui's GBV Think-Tank commits to pushing the validation of its near-complete data dashboard within the current year. None of these are transformational on their own. Each is chosen because the CSTT judged it to be a genuine leverage point — a small, well-placed intervention that unlocks a larger, previously stuck system.



Small, well-placed actions → unlock larger system change

A **three-year commitment, honestly framed**

It would be easy and dishonest to present the formation of fourteen County Systems Think-Tanks as itself the achievement. It is not. It is the precondition for one. What this first flagship activity of the 2026–2028 project has produced is something more modest and, we would argue, more durable: a shared map, held jointly by government, civil society and citizens, of where each county's system actually breaks down — and a first, testable hypothesis about where to press.

The chapters that follow tell each county's version of that story in its own voice, using its own evidence, in its own words wherever the reports allow. Read together, they are not fourteen separate campaigns.

They are fourteen instances of the same underlying discipline: don't treat symptoms. Fix the system.

BUDGET FACILITATOR SPOTLIGHT

Before Advocacy and the Budget Work



Rahab Kiranga, President Kiambu County Disability Network (KCDN), Budget Facilitator/PWD Inclusion Lead NEC HUB.

My name is Rahab Kiranga, a woman with physical disability as result of polio infection at an early age of 1 1/2 years. I hail from Kiambu County.

After acquiring Polio, my mother faced a lot of opposition from my dad who felt a child with disability ought to be killed. My mother stood her ground, protected me form the planned atrocity. Dad chased her from home. She tells me we spent a long period of time in the streets of Nairobi, as she sought help from physiotherapists until finally the hospital offered her a place to stay with me until I could at least function.

Later on, after going through intense therapy, I got a chance to be admitted at Joy Town Special School for the Physically Disabled where I acquired a second home, from age of 41/2 years until I finished secondary school at the same institution. Incidentally, my admission to Joy Town was an impromptu fundraiser, which a passenger in public transport vehicle, after snatching my admission letter from my crying mother. She was crying because she could not afford to raise funds to purchase the required items for admission. My stay at Joy Town was through the hard work of my mother who used to visit me and assist with the little she would get out of her manual labor in coffee plantations around Juja.

After form four, I got a scholarship to study electronics at the Industrial Rehabilitation Center and came out with a Diploma in electronics. My experience when growing up inspired me to think of the struggle that children with disabilities and the vulnerable in society go through due to inhumane treatment and denial of their rights. I realized if my mother did not fight for my right to live, I would have been killed and forgotte
n.
It is out of my lived experience that has made me work hard to ensure the rights of Persons with Disabilities are protected. I not only fight for human rights, but carry out advocacy to educate on PWDs rights to ensure they are respected by all.

Persons with Disabilities during my study years were taken as objects of charity. They had no rights apart from societal pity and well wishers assistance. But, when I finished school I got involved in Non governmental Organisations (NGOs) such as URAIA Trust, UDPK, UNWomen, AmkeniWakenya, UNDP and others who brought me to the realization of human rights issues. I came to learn disability rights are not charity, personal or medical issues but human rights issues.

In Kiambu

I started the work of disability issues in the year 2000. This was a time Kenyans were busy engaging with the Moi regime on change of governance structure through the change the constitution drive. This was also the time that PWDs were ever harassed in their work places in Nairobi by Municipal Council officials as majority of PWDs were hawkers. It was this time that PWDs realized the need to come together, form groups so that they can speak with one voice against the mistreatment. By the help of UDPK, we formed the then Disabled Persons Organizations(DPOs) which later have been transformed to Organizations of Persons with Disability(OPDs).

In 2001, I was trained as a facilitator by URAIA Trust, to train citizens on the National Civic Education Program 1. We were then tasked to go back to our Districts to train. As a result of my engagement with PWDs during the Civic Education workshops, we realized the dire need to bring together PWDs so that they can have a platform to voice their issues. Accordingly, we registered groups of persons with disabilities with the then Ministry of Gender, Culture and Social Services.

Policy Campaigns

One of my greatest struggle in Kiambu County was to have a framework on implementation of the National Disability Act (2003). The struggle has been on domesticating the Act to PWDs issues in Kiambu County. My involvement in this struggle taught me a lot on how change happens at the county level

Misconceptions

Disability is treated as a charity and medical issue other than a rights based issue.

The Leap

As we progressed in fight for PWDs rights, it has dawned to me that budget issues are disability rights. As I talk of the implementation of the Kiambu County PWD Act 2024, budgetary issues are the main concern for officials in the County Government.

Becoming a Budget Facilitator

My joining International Budget Partnerships Kenya was a response to a call for expression of interest which was posted in the social media, for people interested in training on budgets. I made the application. Fortunately, after undergoing a series of interviews, I was enrolled as a trainee in 2018. after successful training, I graduated as a Budget Facilitator. Its from the training that I got the skills to analyse budget documents, having understood that budget is not an event but a process of decisions that feed into each other . Similarly, through my continuous interaction with other budget facilitators I honed my budget skills. Our first assignment was to train budget champions which was very successful. Similarly, I have been engaged as Lecturer in County Budgets at the Bunge Mashinani School of Governance.

Specific Budget Line

I am proud of the waiver on assessment fees for PWDs from the Kiambu County Finance Act 2022/2023. Previously, PWDs would pay Kshs 1000, for assessment. But, since 2022, when a circular was sent to all health facilities on non payment of assessment fees, PWDs in Kiambu have not paid.
However, the Department of Education, Gender, Culture and Social Services has been hesitant to allocate PWDs specific budget as stipulated in the Kiambu County PWDs Act, which is quite frustrating after all the efforts.

Advocacy Challenges

The struggle to have the Kiambu PWDs Act implemented has involved lots of travel to the County Headquarters. Sometimes, I can call to meet a specific officer, we arrange date and venue, yet on the material day, when am already in the venue with my team, the officer sends his/her junior citing a busy schedule. It has also been frustrating seeing even the budget lines allocated for PWDs specifically for their UN Day Celebrations are diverted to other activities not specific for PWDs.

As a person with disability, I have also encountered resistance from some quarters especially on my special needs, specifically the need to be accompanied by an Aide and the use of my personal means. Sometimes, even when there is facilitation for an activity, I find myself fighting for enough fuel allocation and for my Aide to be facilitated, which is demoralizing.

There are moments of frustration especially when a report is dismissed and used as a reason to deny facilitation. Similarly, in the past, I have used my resources to organize, mobilize, and facilitate an activity. But, after successfully implementing the need, and aware there is a budget to this, I am denied my dues. I have also been discriminated against especially on my special needs when I am accompanied by an Aide then am rudely told he is a stranger to the organizers. Until these issues are addressed they remain edged in my consciousness





My Support System

I have always found strength and solace in my fellow budget and human rights advocates. I have mentored and trained younger persons with disabilities who I believe will keep on the struggle after my exit.

Vision and legacy

I envision an empowered team of PWDs who will stand up to ensure the rights of all PWDs are respected and granted. Ten years from now, Kiambu County will have woking PWDs Policies and consequent budget lines in the Finance Acts. I want to be remembered for the crafting, drafting and actualization of Kiambu County PWDs Act 2024.

Message to Young PWDs

They should remain resilient. They should know Human Rights Defenders with disabilities will go through much struggle but they should never give up.



2026

COUNTY STORIES

The Widening Circle — Systems Thinking Comes to Fourteen Counties

MAPPING A CITY'S HEALTH SYSTEM, LINE BY LINE

NAIROBI COUNTY

In Kenya's capital, the Systems Think-Tank chose credibility before campaigning.

In a county where health advocacy campaigns compete for attention with dozens of other urgent causes, Nairobi's County Systems Think-Tank made an unusual opening move: before pushing for anything, it decided to spend its first sessions building an honest map of who is actually in the room — and who is missing from county health decisions altogether.

Nairobi is Kenya's most populous county and its economic capital, with a health system serving both dense urban settlements and better-resourced neighbourhoods within the same jurisdiction — a scale and diversity that makes systemic mapping unusually complex. The CSTT, facilitated by Andengah DanPaul and Juliet Kisilu, chose health as its sector of focus, with a mandate to analyse systemic challenges spanning service delivery, public participation, budget allocation, revenue collection and accountability.

The Challenge

County officials, healthcare workers, civil society organisations and community representatives converged on a shared diagnosis: technical budget information is too complex for ordinary citizens to engage with, public attitudes toward participation are often negative, and existing engagement platforms are underused even where they exist. Meanwhile, delayed equitable share disbursements, delayed reimbursements, high county debt obligations and limited transparency around donor funding squeeze the health budget from the financing side.

Looking Beneath the Surface

What the Think-Tank's five working sessions revealed was not a single point of failure but a chain of disconnections: between technical information and citizen comprehension; between existing participation platforms and actual attendance; between data that exists somewhere in county systems and the public's ability to access it. Elderly persons, youth, persons with disabilities and women were named specifically as groups disproportionately affected by these gaps — not as an afterthought, but as a dedicated session (Session 5) in the CSTT's own agenda.

The Systems Mapping Journey

Across five sessions, the Think-Tank moved methodically: first mapping existing collaborations and stakeholders across the health sector; then interrogating why public participation forums draw low attendance; then following the money through revenue collection, equitable share and donor financing bottlenecks; then examining who controls information and data; and finally naming, explicitly, which populations the system leaves behind.

> **Public participation improves when information is simplified and accessible. — Nairobi CSTT, Session 2 findings**

Voices from the Room

Participants — drawn from healthcare workers, community-based organisations, policymakers, civil society, and women, youth and PWD representatives — repeatedly returned to one theme: that public participation "improves when information is simplified and accessible," and that creative, arts-based communication could reach youth and marginalised groups that formal forums do not.

The Future System

The Think-Tank envisions a health system in which a publicly accessible County Statistical Abstract exists; where Public Investment Management dashboards make spending visible; where information reaches citizens through churches, surveys and community gatherings rather than only formal notices; and where SHA enrolment reduces the waiver burden currently borne by uninsured patients.

INNOVATION SPOTLIGHT

Nairobi's willingness to name power dynamics and data access as health-system issues — not just clinical or budgetary ones — sets it apart. Session 4 treated "who controls information" as a governance question in its own right, deserving the same systemic attention as financing.

From Ideas to Action

Quick wins: simplifying budget communication and expanding participation platforms to informal community spaces.

Medium-term: developing the County Statistical Abstract and strengthening digital, paperless systems.

Long-term wins: institutionalising transparency in donor-funded health programmes and closing the equitable-share and reimbursement financing gap.

Lessons for Other Counties

Effective service delivery requires multi-sectoral collaboration; simplification of technical information is not a communications afterthought but a precondition for meaningful participation; and inclusion strategies must name specific vulnerable groups rather than assuming general processes reach everyone equally.



KIAMBU COUNTY



THE COST OF A MISSING LINE ITEM

When a health facility is built without a shilling for accessibility, exclusion is not an oversight — it is a budget decision.

A newly constructed health facility in Kiambu County can meet every clinical standard and still fail a patient who cannot see the signage, hear the announcements, or navigate the entrance because nowhere in its budget was a line item for sign language interpretation, tactile paths, or adjustable medical equipment.

Kiambu, bordering Nairobi and home to a large, growing population, launched its CSTT under Budget Facilitator Rahab Kiranga with a focus on health, specifically the operationalisation of the amended Kiambu County PWDs Act 2024 alongside Primary Health Care concerns.

> *The health sector is not inclusive — even in the CHP program. — Kiambu CSTT, lessons learnt*

The Challenge

The Think-Tank identified two intertwined priority issues: PHC facilities that lack accessibility and inclusion, and a county budget that fails to adequately capture disability-related needs because of an inactive PWD policy framework guiding programme-based budgeting in the Department of Education, Gender and Social Services — the very department under which disability affairs fall.

Looking Beneath the Surface

The deeper pattern is structural rather than attitudinal: Kiambu's health budget simply lacks dedicated lines for "reasonable accommodation." A facility can be fully funded for construction and still be built inaccessible, because accessibility was never coded into the budgeting process as a distinct, protected category. This is compounded by a second gap — the near-total absence of data on how many persons with disabilities seek care and how many are turned away.

The Systems Mapping Journey

The formation meeting at Thika Town Hall brought together ten CSTT members, including three PWD representatives holding formal roles — a Deputy Director of Health, a Director of Social and Gender Services, the County Director of the National Council for Persons with Disabilities, and the President of the Kiambu County Disability Network (KCDN) serving as facilitator. This composition itself reflects a systems choice: disability representation was built into leadership, not added as a guest seat.

Voices from the Room

Participants noted plainly that "not everyone in the CSTT is conversant with the County Budget processes" — an honest admission that inclusion in the room does not automatically translate into technical parity, and that capacity-building is itself a systemic prerequisite for effective advocacy.



The Future System

The Think-Tank envisions a Kiambu where the amended PWDs Act 2024 and the national PWD Act 2025 are both operational; where health facility budgets carry explicit accommodation line items; and where disability-disaggregated data on health access is routinely collected and used.

Lessons for Other Counties

Physical infrastructure investment without an accompanying accommodation budget line reproduces exclusion regardless of good intent; and technical capacity-building for CSTT members should be budgeted from the outset, not treated as a later add-on.

From Ideas to Action

Quick wins: engaging health facilities across the county to identify specific accessibility gaps.

Medium-term: an MOU between NEC Hub and the Kiambu Department of Health formalising the CSTT's terms of engagement.

Long-term: embedding reasonable-accommodation budget lines into PBB processes and formally introducing the CSTT to the County Executive.

Innovation Spotlight

Kiambu's CSTT membership — anchored by PWD leadership rather than treating disability inclusion as an external ask — is a structural innovation in itself, modelling the kind of representation other counties' Think-Tanks are still working to build.

THREE OFFICES, ONE BROKEN CHAIN

Public participation in Murang'a doesn't fail from neglect — it fails from fragmentation

Ask three different Murang'a County offices who is responsible for public participation, and — before the CSTT's formation meeting — you might have received three different, equally defensible answers. That, precisely, was the problem.

Murang'a's CSTT, facilitated by Regina Mwangi, focused on public participation, examining both the "System of the Present" and the "System of the Future" through structured discussion of citizen engagement, accountability and inclusive governance.

The Challenge

The county has no enacted Public Participation Act or Civic Education Policy, leaving budgeting and implementation of citizen engagement without a legal or policy anchor. Where budget allocations for participation do exist, they are inconsistent and lack transparent, dedicated lines for civic education, feedback mechanisms and the inclusion of women, youth and persons with disabilities.



Looking Beneath the Surface

The CSTT's most consequential finding was structural: public participation functions are fragmented across three separate departments — Devolution, Planning, and Coordination — with no single office holding end-to-end accountability. This fragmentation, the Think-Tank concluded, is precisely why public participation has never accumulated the institutional weight or budget clarity that a single, clearly mandated office could command.

The Systems Mapping Journey

Sessions assessed existing mechanisms and traced how citizen engagement is meant to flow from ward to village level, examining the potential of tools like the My Murang'a App to decentralise participation. The County Executive and County Assembly both engaged directly, each making explicit commitments captured in the report — a rare instance of both arms of county government publicly committing to the same reform agenda in the same document.

Voices from the Room

The County Executive committed to "decentralizing public participation to ward and village levels and supporting the use of digital platforms such as the My Murang'a App," while the County Assembly committed to "improving coordination between the County Executive and the Assembly on public participation forums."

The Future System

Murang'a's Think-Tank envisions an enacted, comprehensive Public Participation Act; harmonised forums between the executive and legislative arms rather than parallel, uncoordinated processes; and a My Murang'a App enhanced with accessibility features for visually and hearing-impaired citizens.

> "Successful governance frameworks from other sectors can be adapted to strengthen public participation systems." — Murang'a CSTT, lessons learnt

From Ideas to Action

Quick wins: harmonising forums currently run separately by the Executive and Assembly.

Medium-term: a baseline survey establishing current participation benchmarks, and drafting of the Public Participation Act by 2027.

Long-term: full enactment and institutionalisation of the Act alongside a functioning digital feedback channel.

Innovation Spotlight

The explicit use of a digital civic platform — the My Murang'a App — as a systems lever for decentralisation, rather than treating technology as a separate, siloed initiative, distinguishes Murang'a's approach.

Lessons for Other Counties

A public participation mandate split across multiple departments without a single accountable owner will underperform regardless of how many forums are held; and securing simultaneous, documented commitments from both the Executive and the Assembly creates leverage neither arm can easily walk back alone.

NAMING WHAT THE BUDGET WOULD NOT NAME

Mental health had no line item in Nyeri's health budget — until a CSTT session made the silence impossible to ignore.

A recent County Health Week screening in Nyeri surfaced a striking number of depression indicators among county staff themselves — linked, participants noted, to alcoholism and absenteeism among both men and women. The finding did not stay confined to a report; it reshaped the county's own sectoral planning conversation in real time.

Nyeri's CSTT, led by Budget Facilitator Nelson Maina, convened in July 2026 with a sector focus on Primary Health Care financing, specifically the transition from user-fee and Health Sector Fund (HSF) financing to the national Social Health Authority (SHA) — with a particular lens on mental health.

The Challenge

The HSF-to-SHA transition has left Nyeri's health financing in an uneven state: rural facilities holding relatively large, under-utilised cash balances from a recent large HSF disbursement, while SHA registration sits at 74 percent against a December 2026 target of 80 percent, and reimbursement for indigent and vulnerable patients falls well short of actual costs incurred.

Looking Beneath the Surface

Beneath the financing puzzle sits a governance gap: no single actor currently addresses the root causes of mental illness in the county. The Department of Health's mandate, as currently structured, centres on rehabilitation — leaving prevention, community-level stressors, and caregiver burden for persons with disabilities largely unaddressed by any institution. Of 2,510 Community Health Promoters countywide, only 30 have been trained on depression screening (PM+) by one partner, against 400 trained separately, using different criteria, by another — two parallel efforts that cannot yet be reconciled into a single county picture.

The Systems Mapping Journey

Across eight structured sessions, the CSTT moved from financing mechanics, to caregiver stress among persons with disabilities, to facility and county-level systems, to sub-county realities, to data and screening trends — culminating in a session that shifted focus from Mathira Sub-County (where 24 high-risk individuals had already been identified and supported) to Othaya, recognising that systemic gaps do not stay contained to one geography.

> ***"Don't treat symptoms. Fix the system."— framing that resonated strongly across Nyeri's CSTT sessions***

Voices from the Room

Participants proposed that "mental health programming should borrow structures and lessons from existing HIV programme structures" — recognising that Nyeri need not invent new coordination mechanisms from scratch when a proven model already exists within the same health system

The Future System

The Think-Tank envisions a lean, functioning Mental Health Technical Working Group feeding into a fully constituted County Mental Health Council by December 2026; ring-fenced HSF/SHA funding reaching PHC facilities directly; and a county-level indigent scheme, modelled on counties like Makueni and Mwea, closing the reimbursement gap for vulnerable patients.

From Ideas to Action

Quick wins: constituting the Mental Health TWG by end of July 2026 — deliberately ahead of, and simpler than, standing up the full statutory Council.

Medium-term: a deep-dive assessment of HSF utilisation at selected facilities, including Kirimara, which supports children with cerebral palsy.

Long-term: an operational County Mental Health Council and a functioning indigent health-financing scheme.

Innovation Spotlight

Nyeri's decision to sequence a lightweight Technical Working Group ahead of a heavier statutory Council — rather than waiting for full institutionalisation before acting — reflects a systems-thinking principle in practice: momentum over perfection.

Lessons for Other Counties

Facility-level "think tanks" often already exist informally and can be strengthened rather than replaced; and a functioning coordination structure does not require a large budget to begin operating.



WRITING THE RULES OF THE ROOM

Before Kirinyaga can fix public participation, it must first decide what public participation legally is.

Launched on 29 May 2026, Kirinyaga's County Systems Think-Tank set itself an unusually foundational mandate: not to advocate within the existing rules of public participation, but to rewrite the rules themselves.

Kirinyaga's CSTT, facilitated by Ruth Muthoni Karimi, comprises men, women, youth and persons with disabilities drawn from the county's existing leadership organs, with a mandate to review public participation laws, regulations and practice and draft a dedicated Kirinyaga County Public Participation Act.

The Challenge

Kirinyaga currently lacks a standalone public participation law tailored to the county's own context, relying instead on a patchwork of constitutional requirements and general practice. This has produced inconsistent, sometimes contradictory approaches to citizen engagement across different departments and processes.

Looking Beneath the Surface

The CSTT's review mandate itself surfaced a foundational ambiguity that the group could not fully resolve in its first session: whether the review should focus on a specific existing law or the entire public participation framework — a question raised by the Director of Budget but left "hanging" due to time constraints. This is itself a systems finding: even the scope of reform is not yet settled, which is precisely the kind of ambiguity that stalls advocacy before it begins.

> " Early planning of the CSTT activity is key in achieving 100% attendance and the desired outcomes."
> — Kirinyaga CSTT, lessons learnt

The Systems Mapping Journey

Nine defined roles were deliberately built into the Think-Tank's composition — citizen representative, duty bearer, policy maker, CSO, SWG/TWG representative, PWD representative, women's group representative, budget champion and youth representative under 35 — a structure explicitly designed, in the county's own words, so that "all the above categories will own the process, thus reducing vulnerability to individual drop-out or victimization."

Voices from the Room

The Assistant Director of Budget "emphasized on the need to strengthen/adopt Civic Education programs in Kirinyaga county" — connecting the legal-reform agenda directly to the practical question of whether citizens will be equipped to use whatever new framework emerges.

The Future System

Kirinyaga envisions a dedicated department or sub-department for Public Participation and Civic Education; a clear budgetary allocation — proposed at KES 5 million for the current financial year — feeding into the 2028–2032 CIDP; and harmonised public participation provisions across the county's various laws and institutions.

From Ideas to Action

Quick wins: a meeting with the County Executive scheduled for end of June 2026 to advance the review's scope and resourcing.

Medium-term: recommendations for legal and policy reform tabled at the County Assembly.

Long-term: an enacted, harmonised Kirinyaga Public Participation Act with a dedicated implementing department.



Innovation Spotlight

The deliberate nine-role membership structure — designed explicitly to prevent any single representative's withdrawal from derailing the process — is a governance innovation worth other counties studying directly.

Lessons for Other Counties

Legal reform processes benefit from resolving scope questions early, rather than deferring them under time pressure; and building redundancy into a Think-Tank's membership structure protects institutional memory against individual turnover.



Embu's Think-Tank named, in writing, what many suspected but few had said aloud.

WHEN PARTICIPATION BECOMES A RUBBER STAMP

"Public participation has been done as a 'rubber stamp' activity" — not a citizen's complaint, but a finding recorded by Embu's own County Systems Think-Tank, drawing on participants from the County Government, County Assembly and civil society sitting in the same room.

Embu's CSTT, facilitated by Sospeter Gitonga, brought together the County Secretary, senior devolution and legal officials, County Assembly representatives, CSOs, an ASAL area representative, and the Embu County Residents Association — eleven participants in total, with a mandate to enhance effective public participation.



The Challenge

Embu's Public Participation Act 2023, which repealed the 2015 Act, requires ward-level engagement — but this "rarely happens due to factors like timeliness effect, inadequate public participation funding and lack of community goodwill." The Act's own oversight committee has never been operationalised, and citizens themselves were excluded from committee membership under the law as written.

Looking Beneath the Surface

The CSTT's findings went further than process failure into questions of political capture: public participation mobilisation, the report states plainly, is used "as a reward mechanism for politicians' loyalists," coordinated through the Governor's Delivery Unit on the executive side and MCA offices on the Assembly side. Entire communities and groups — Mbeere North and South, persons with disabilities, children, youth, professional bodies, religious leaders and the labour movement — are "continuously left out," while forums are attended, in the report's own words, by "uninformed citizens, sometimes drunkards who don't know anything about governance and budget processes."

The Systems Mapping Journey

The Think-Tank's situation analysis session methodically worked through the 2023 Act's implementation gaps — the non-operational oversight committee, the excluded citizen role, the discriminative forum patterns, the politicisation of mobilisation, low civic education, and a public participation department that is both underfunded and uncoordinated. Embu's Community-Based Tracking System (CBTS) 2025 performance score for public participation — just 11 points — was cited directly as evidence justifying the priority.

Voices from the Room

The meeting "expressed willingness to steer the localization of Public Participation guidelines through multi-sectorial approach bringing county executive, county assembly and citizens as collaborators" — a direct response to the politicisation pattern the group had just named.

The Future System

Embu's Think-Tank envisions a public participation system where the 2023 Act's oversight committee is actually operationalised; where excluded groups — ASAL communities, PWDs, youth, professional and faith bodies — have guaranteed representation; and where the World Bank-funded KDSP II programme's requirement for objective Project Management Committee selection becomes a model for wider reform.

From Ideas to Action

Quick wins: a feedback meeting on CSTT establishment with the County Secretary by 2 July 2026.

Medium-term: a collaborative roadmap for localising public participation guidelines, including Act review and policy formulation, within one month.

Long-term: MOUs with all relevant stakeholders to roll out the multi-sectoral concept county-wide.

Lessons for Other Counties

A public participation law that exists on paper does not guarantee an operational oversight structure; and external donor conditions (such as KDSP II's PMC selection requirements) can be leveraged as internal precedent for broader participation reform.

Innovation Spotlight

Embu's willingness to document political capture of public participation rather than softening the finding for a donor-facing report is itself a marker of the CSTT model's credibility; the Think-Tank chose accuracy over comfort.

MERU COUNTY

CREATING SPACE FOR COLLECTIVE PHC ACTION

Connecting health actors to strengthen PHC planning and action.

For years, Primary Health Care advocacy in Meru has involved individuals and institutions contributing in different ways.

The formation of the County Systems Think Tank (CSTT) created an opportunity to bring these efforts into a more connected space, encouraging collaboration, shared learning and collective action around PHC priorities.

Facilitated by Kendi Muthomi, the Meru CSTT brought together stakeholders from the County Government, County Assembly, civil society and community structures, with a focus on Health, Social Protection and Gender as a cross-cutting lens.

The Challenge

One of the key challenges identified during the CSTT was the need for stakeholders to develop a shared understanding of PHC priorities and consistently use evidence when advocating for resources and service improvements.

Looking Beneath the Surface

The CSTT's gap analysis, conducted across an eight-session process, helped connect these observations to underlying structural factors: limited feedback loops between actors, meaning lessons from one budget cycle were not always carried forward into the next; and the opportunities to strengthen the inclusion of women, youth and PWDs within existing structures.

The Systems Mapping Journey

The Think-Tank moved deliberately from introducing the NEC Hub's Systems Thinking approach, through mapping existing actors and their connections, to envisioning a 2028 future system, reviewing the realities of the 2026 system, and finally undertaking a structured gap analysis and roadmap.

This sequence helped the group test its aspirations against available evidence and identify practical areas for collective action.



"Data is central to advocacy: evidence-based advocacy is more persuasive and impactful." — Meru CSTT, lessons learnt

Voices from the Room

Participants noted that the CSTT model "was well received as a solution to fragmented advocacy," while community representatives — women, youth and PWDs — "shared lived experiences and highlighted service delivery gaps" directly alongside County Health Department and County Assembly technical staff.

The Future System

Meru's Think-Tank envisions functional, regular SWG meetings aligned with budget timelines; data-driven planning and budgeting; inclusive participation with women, youth and PWDs fully represented; and clear legal and policy frameworks supporting SWG operations.

From Ideas to Action

Quick wins: conducting a baseline survey to establish reliable PHC indicators.
Medium-term: re-establishing regular CSTT and SWG meetings aligned with the budget cycle.
Long-term: institutionalised, data-driven PHC planning embedded in the CIDP 2028–2032 process.

Innovation Spotlight

Meru's explicit plan for cross-county learning — naming Meru-Kitui exchange as a specific next step — treats peer learning between CSTTs as a deliberate systems-strengthening tool, not an incidental benefit.

Lessons for Other Counties

Sustainable change requires strengthening systems, not isolated interventions; and aligning advocacy timing with the budget cycle significantly increases influence — a lesson Meru's report names explicitly as a takeaway.

MACHAKOS COUNTY

REIMAGINING MATERNAL HEALTH THROUGH SYSTEMS THINKING IN MACHAKOS COUNTY

FROM BUDGET ADVOCACY TO BETTER HEALTH OUTCOMES

What if every county budget decision could save a mother's life?

Primary Health Care, particularly maternal and newborn health, remains a high priority in Machakos County. Despite continued investment and advocacy, maternal and newborn mortality remains a concern, with a maternal mortality ratio of 220/100,000 live births in public health facilities and a facility-based perinatal mortality rate of 16 per 1,000 live births between July and September 2025.

These outcomes reflect persistent gaps in access to quality care, financing, staffing, emergency referral systems, and equitable access in rural and underserved communities. Recognizing that these challenges cannot be addressed by one institution alone, the county has adopted the County Systems Think-Tank model to strengthen collaboration, accountability, and responsiveness of public budgets to community health needs.

The Challenge

For years, efforts largely focused on increasing health budgets, but stakeholders recognized that additional funding alone would not guarantee better maternal health outcomes. Persistent challenges included delayed release of allocated funds, inadequate health workforce capacity, weak accountability and oversight, limited use of evidence in planning and budgeting, competing county priorities, and insufficient community participation in budget decision-making.

Looking Beneath the Surface

Through systems thinking, stakeholders shifted from addressing the visible symptoms of poor maternal and newborn health to examining the underlying causes. Instead of focusing only on how much money is allocated, they began asking why challenges persist despite continued investment. This helped participants understand how governance, financing, policies, institutional relationships, and community engagement interact to influence health outcomes and provided a stronger foundation for sustainable reform.

"Early, continuous, and evidence based engagement with decision makers and communities is critical for successful budget advocacy."

— Machakos CSTT, lessons learnt



The Systems Mapping Journey

The County Systems Think-Tank brings together representatives from the County Government, County Assembly, Department of Health and Primary Health Care leadership, civil society organizations, women's organizations, youth, persons with disabilities, and budget champions. Together, they map the relationships, policies, institutions, and behaviours influencing maternal and newborn health while identifying practical solutions to strengthen governance, financing, and service delivery. The shared vision is to build a health financing system that is responsive, inclusive, transparent, and sustainable.

Voices from the Room

The systems-thinking process created a shared understanding that improving maternal health requires collective responsibility. Participants emphasized stronger partnerships, evidence-informed planning, inclusive participation, and continuous accountability as essential to lasting change. The dialogue reinforced a common commitment to ensuring county budgets translate into better health services for mothers and newborns across Machakos.

The Future System

Participants envisioned a system where health budgets are informed by reliable evidence, resources are released on time and used effectively, and Technical Working Groups support inclusive planning and oversight. They also envisioned communities actively participating in budgeting, government institutions working together to improve service delivery, and every mother and newborn having equitable access to quality healthcare.

Budgets and Commitments in Real Time

A key CSTT innovation is monitoring not only budget allocations but also whether resources reach their intended beneficiaries. This includes tracking maternal and newborn health allocations, timeliness of fund disbursements, budget absorption, emergency referral and ambulance services, the functionality of Technical Working Groups, and the participation of women, youth, and persons with disabilities in health budgeting. Tracking these commitments in real time strengthens transparency, accountability, and service delivery by linking budget promises to measurable improvements for communities.

From Ideas to Action

Machakos County is prioritizing stronger Primary Health Care Networks, assessment of Level 2 and 3 facilities, inclusive Technical Working Groups, stronger engagement among communities and county institutions, and evidence generation to inform budgets and policy. These actions aim to strengthen accountability and improve the quality and accessibility of maternal healthcare.

Innovation Spotlight

Machakos County demonstrates that effective budget advocacy goes beyond requesting additional resources. Through systems thinking, the county is connecting evidence, governance, community participation, and accountability within an integrated process that addresses the underlying causes of poor maternal and newborn health outcomes. This collaborative model provides an example of how counties can strengthen health financing while improving the effectiveness and sustainability of public services.

Lessons for Other Counties

Machakos County's experience highlights the importance of strong partnerships, evidence-informed planning and budgeting, and inclusive participation in developing responsive policies. It also demonstrates that sustainable reform requires systems change rather than isolated interventions, and that accountability must continue beyond budget approval to implementation and service delivery.

Financing Hope Through Stronger GBV Response Systems

A rescue centre stalled for four years shows what happens when protection has no line item.

The Ikutha Rescue Centre has, in the words of Kitui's GBV Think-Tank, been "receiving fragmented allocations for the past 4 years"
a half-built promise to survivors, standing as a physical monument to what happens when a protection mandate is real on paper but never fully funded.

Kitui's County Systems Think-Tank on Gender-Based Violence, facilitated by Faith Kiema, brings together government departments, civil society, women-led networks, community representatives, technical experts and development partners around GBV as both a human rights and public finance issue.

The Challenge

GBV response in Kitui spans police, health, legal and social welfare systems that do not yet share data, coordinate case management, or draw on a common budget line — leaving survivors, particularly women, girls, persons with disabilities and other at-risk groups, navigating a fragmented system at their most vulnerable moment.

Looking Beneath the Surface

The Think-Tank's own reflection is unusually direct: "with only one female elected MCA the committee of gender is easily compromised as gender issues



remain trivialized at the county assembly." This names a structural power imbalance — not merely a service gap — as a root cause of GBV response, alongside cultural norms that normalise violence and discourage reporting.

The Think-Tank's membership deliberately spans the Ministry of Gender, the Ministry of Health, the National Police Service (through the OCPD), the Kitui County Disability Network, faith-based institutions (NCCK), legal practitioners and development partners — a coalition assembled specifically to trace a survivor's path across every institution she might encounter.

Voices from the Room

The OCPD Kitui Central spoke, the report notes, with visible emotion "on how survivors get compromised or hoodwinked to withdraw cases only to later discover they were fooled" — a frontline account that grounded the Think-Tank's institutional analysis in lived consequence.

"Sustainable results are more likely when existing county structures are strengthened rather than creating parallel mechanisms." — Kitui GBV CSTT, lessons learnt

The Future System

Kitui's Think-Tank envisions an enacted county SGBV policy; an operational, multi-sectoral SGBV data dashboard already at an advanced stage of development; a completed and functioning Ikutha Rescue Centre with a toll-free line and rescue vehicle; and dedicated, ring-fenced GBV budget lines.

Innovation Spotlight

Naming a specific, already-elected official's budget allocation (the Women's Representative's) as a potential funding bridge for a stalled capital project is a precise, actionable leverage point rarely found in general advocacy asks.

From Ideas to Action

Quick wins: validating the near-complete SGBV data dashboard and formally linking police data systems to it by the close of the 2025/26 financial year.

Medium-term: pushing the draft SGBV bill, currently at cabinet level, toward enactment, and approaching the Women's Representative who holds a legally anchored budget allocation to help complete the rescue centre.

Long-term: institutionalising the CSTT within the existing Kitui County Gender Sector Working Group.

Lessons for Other Counties

Systems change requires addressing root causes — financing gaps, social norms and institutional weaknesses together — rather than any one in isolation; and strengthening existing county structures (the Gender Sector Working Group) is more sustainable than creating parallel mechanisms.

Treating the System, Not Just the Symptom

Kitui's NCD Think-Tank asked why the county keeps paying to treat illness it could have prevented.



The Health workers in Kitui are seeing rising numbers of patients with hypertension, diabetes, cancers and mental health conditions — many diagnosed late, when treatment is most expensive and least likely to succeed. The county's NCD Systems Think-Tank opened its formation session with a single, uncomfortable question: how does Kitui shift from treating disease to preventing it?

Kitui's second CSTT, on non-communicable diseases, is facilitated by Faith Kiema alongside Dr. Diana Rose, the County's NCD Coordinator, and convenes county and national government departments, civil society, and community structures around NCD governance, financing and prevention.

The Challenge

PHC facilities intended to offer free care face knowledge gaps among health workers and NCD commodity stock-outs at lower-level facilities, forcing patients into costly, long-distance travel for care they should be able to access locally — with those not registered on the Social Health Authority (SHA) frequently paying out of pocket.

Looking Beneath the Surface

The Think-Tank traced the NCD burden to determinants far upstream of any clinic: poverty, poor nutrition, physical inactivity, tobacco and alcohol use, and delayed health-seeking behaviour. Critically, participants noted continuing uncertainty around the SHA indigent fund — the system assumes registration will automatically grant vulnerable patients a waiver, "but there is currently no established fund to effectively cushion vulnerable individuals," exposing a gap between policy design and financing reality.

The Systems Mapping Journey

The session opened with a technical presentation on Kitui's NCD burden from the county's own NCD coordinator, before widening into structured discussion spanning financing, community health promoter capacity, digital health infrastructure, disability inclusion within NCD programming, and public participation as a pillar of NCD prevention itself.

Voices from the Room

Participants observed that NCDs are "now the leading cause of disabilities such as blindness and amputations, making prevention of NCDs a priority for the government" — directly linking the county's NCD and disability-inclusion agendas within a single systemic framing.

The Future System

Kitui's NCD Think-Tank envisions institutionalised governance for NCDs beyond the current project period; increased, sustained budget allocation for preventive and promotive healthcare within the ADP, CFSP and annual budgets; and Community Health Promoters equipped with smartphones and digital tools for real-time reporting and case follow-up.

From Ideas to Action

Quick wins: facility-level assessments to identify operational bottlenecks in referral pathways, targeted for September 2026.
Medium-term: establishing a county NCD data repository and documenting best practices by October 2026.
Long-term: full institutionalisation of the CSTT within county governance structures with a dedicated sustainability and resource mobilisation plan.

"The county continues to spend significant resources treating illnesses that could have been prevented or detected much earlier." — Kitui NCDs CSTT

Lessons for Other Counties

Early stakeholder ownership, clear governance structures and joint action planning establish a strong foundation for effective advocacy; and prevention-focused investment is, in the Think-Tank's own framing, a cost-effective long-term investment compared with the compounding cost of late-stage treatment.

Innovation Spotlight

Treating public participation itself as an NCD prevention strategy — proposing community dialogue forums be integrated into the county's planning and budgeting cycle specifically to surface local NCD priorities — is a distinctively systemic reframing of what is usually treated as a purely clinical issue.

PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

Kitui doesn't lack a public participation law. It has two drafts of one — and neither has crossed the finish line.

Two Bills, One Missing Signature

Kitui County is, in a sense, over-prepared for public participation reform: not one but two separate legislative drafts already exist — a Private Member's Bill currently before the County Assembly, and a draft Bill that has sat pending within the Executive and Cabinet process. Neither has been enacted. The county's third County Systems Think-Tank, convened specifically on Public Participation, opened its inaugural session by asking why.



Kitui's third CSTT — alongside its existing Think-Tanks on Gender-Based Violence and Non-Communicable Diseases — is facilitated by Faith Kiema and focused squarely on Public Participation, convened on 17 June 2026 with collaboration of the Directorate of Public Participation's leadership aimed at strengthening institutionalisation, coordination, accountability and effectiveness of meaningful citizen engagement in county governance, planning, budgeting and service delivery.

The Challenge

Kitui's priority issue is the weak institutionalisation and inconsistent implementation of meaningful public participation, despite clear constitutional

and statutory obligations under Articles 10, 174(c), 196 and 201 of the Constitution, the Public Finance Management Act 2012, the County Governments Act 2012, and the Access to Information Act 2016. The gap is not one of legal ambiguity — the obligations are well established — but of follow-through.

Looking Beneath the Surface

The Think-Tank's sharpest finding concerned the two competing legislative drafts themselves: rather than accelerating reform, their coexistence has become a source of duplication and risk of inconsistency, with members attributing the stalled progress to "inadequate political goodwill and insufficient prioritization of public participation reforms by senior county leadership." Beneath the legislative question sit familiar structural gaps — inadequate civic awareness and access to public participation information, and inadequate inclusion of women, youth, persons with disabilities and marginalised communities in existing participation processes.

The Systems Mapping Journey

The inaugural session moved from opening remarks by the Director of Public Participation, through a Systems Thinking orientation explicitly framing public participation as a systemic rather than isolated challenge, to review and validation of an existing Public Participation Action Plan originally developed with Budget Champions during a regional learning forum held in Embu County by Bajeti Hub — and finally to a dedicated discussion of the legislative bottleneck itself. Rather than starting from a blank page, Kitui's CSTT deliberately built on cross-county work already done in Embu, adapting it to Kitui's own realities.

Voices from the Room

Members noted that "the willingness expressed by the sponsoring Member of County Assembly to engage stakeholders was recognized as a strategic entry point for advancing the process" — turning a single legislator's openness into a named, trackable point of leverage for the whole Think-Tank.

The Future System

Kitui's Public Participation Think-Tank envisions a single, harmonised Public Participation Act or Policy — merging the Assembly-sponsored Bill and the Executive's draft into one comprehensive legal framework; a dedicated, properly resourced Public Participation directorate with clear institutional arrangements across county departments; and public participation commitments embedded directly into the upcoming CIDP process.

From Ideas to Action

Quick wins: convening a joint engagement between the sponsoring MCA, the Office of the County Attorney, the Directorate of Public Participation and the CSTT to review, compare and harmonise the two draft Bills, targeted within three weeks of the formation session, alongside forming a CSTT WhatsApp platform for ongoing coordination by 22 June 2026.
Medium-term: capacity-strengthening the CSTT on CBTS 2025 findings, and launching data-driven advocacy using the CBTS 2025 results and the county's forthcoming baseline survey through June and July 2026.
Long-term: enactment of the harmonised Public Participation Act and its embedding within county structures ahead of the CIDP process.

Lessons for Other Counties

Cross-county learning can accelerate formation: by building directly on an action plan developed in Embu rather than starting from scratch, Kitui's Public Participation CSTT reached a validated, locally-owned action plan within a single inaugural session; and where multiple legislative drafts exist in parallel, naming a harmonisation process explicitly — rather than backing one draft over another — can convert a coordination risk into a shared advocacy opportunity.

Innovation Spotlight

Rather than treating two competing draft bills as an obstacle, Kitui's CSTT reframed the situation as a structural opportunity — proposing a formal harmonisation dialogue between the Bill's sponsor and the County Attorney's office, turning legislative duplication into a chance to build a stronger, more inclusive single framework than either draft achieves alone.

"Public participation challenges are systemic and require multi-sectoral solutions." — Kitui Public Participation CSTT, Session 2

Closing Laikipia's Systemic Gaps in PHC Implementation

Laikipia County Systems Think-Tank traces every PHC gap back to one root cause ,and one fix: the budget.

Innovation Spotlight

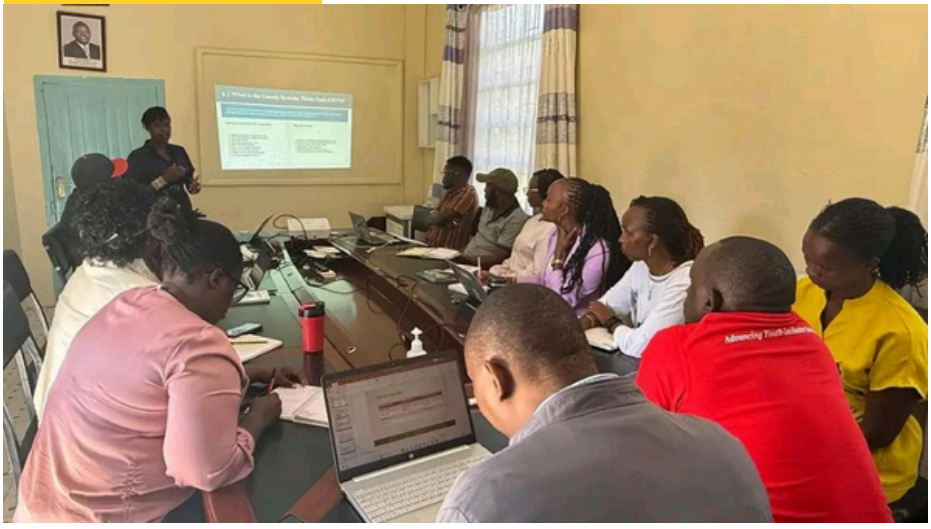
Laikipia's CSTT distinguished itself by grounding every subsequent discussion in a single, data-rich technical presentation before any advocacy planning began — ensuring the Think-Tank's roadmap was built on evidence rather than assumption from its very first session.

Three Primary Health Care Networks, anchored by nine designated hub facilities across Laikipia West, East and North, have been fully operational since 2023 and 2024. None of them has ever been formally gazetted — a single missing administrative act that the county's Systems Think-Tank flagged as one of its most urgent advocacy priorities.

Laikipia's CSTT, led by Budget Facilitator Mary Mureithi and guided by NEC Hub Coordinator Nelson Maina, convened a nine-member multi-stakeholder Think-Tank in June 2026, focused on PHC financing, describing the county's positioning as "widening" — expanding its coalition on Primary Health Care from individual advocacy to structured, multi-stakeholder engagement.

The Challenge

Laikipia's PHC system already reaches 162,209 households across 141 sub-locations and 988 villages, through 152 functional community units and 1,156 active Community Health Volunteers. Its three Primary Care Networks remain ungazetted, without the formal legal standing that designation would confer.



They also have no dedicated budget lines of their own. Its PHC Technical Working Group, meanwhile, has not met in over a year for lack of funding.

Looking Beneath the Surface

The county's PHC Coordinator's presentation grounded the entire Think-Tank discussion in hard data: no dedicated funding for TWG meetings since the suspension of USAID funding in early 2025; Multi-Disciplinary Teams not fully rolled out across all nine hubs, weakening referral pathways; Community Health Committees entirely absent, removing a grassroots accountability layer; and facilities relying heavily on Facility Improvement Fund (FIF) revenue with no budgetary surplus to draw on.

The Systems Mapping Journey

The formation meeting moved from an overview of the NEC Hub's regional mandate, through a detailed landscape presentation by the county's PHC Coordinator, to structured flipchart exercises envisioning the 2028 future system against the 2026 current reality — with the systems-thinking framing "don't treat symptoms, fix the system" resonating strongly enough with the PHC Coordinator and CSO representatives that it became the session's defining phrase.

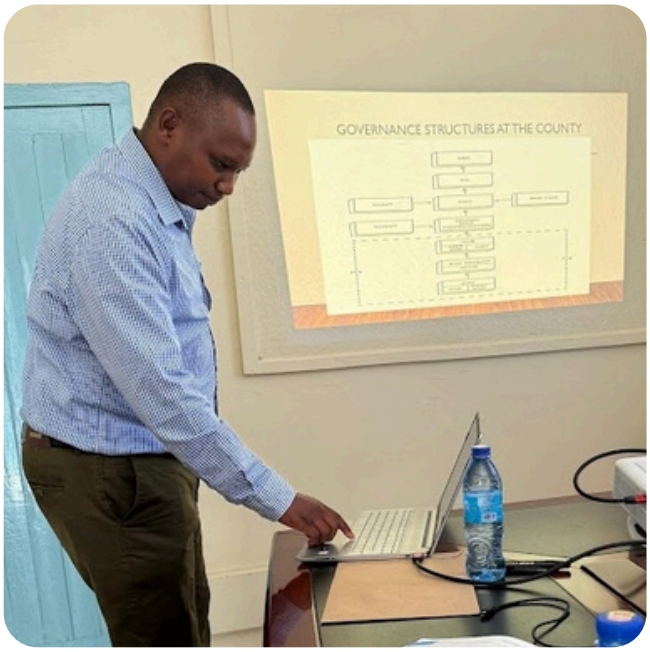


The Future System

Laikipia's Think-Tank envisions gazetted, legally recognised Primary Care Networks with dedicated budget lines; a funded, regularly meeting PHC Technical Working Group with County Assembly representation; and PHC financing commitments embedded directly into the CIDP 2028–2032 process.

From Ideas to Action

Quick wins: adapting national Technical Working Group guidelines to the county context. **Medium-term**: co-opting a County Assembly member and other missing stakeholders onto the existing but dormant PHC TWG. **Long-term:** gazettement of all three Primary Care Networks and full institutionalisation of PHC financing within CIDP planning.



Voices from the Room

Participants noted that "each identified gap (no TWG funding, ungazetted PCNs, absent CHCs) is simultaneously a barrier and a precise advocacy entry point for the CSTT roadmap" — a framing that treats every documented weakness as, in the same breath, a specific opportunity.

Lessons for other Counties

Data anchors systems thinking: a detailed technical presentation at the outset can ground an entire Think-Tank's subsequent analysis in evidence rather than anecdote; and named structural gaps are, simultaneously, precise advocacy entry points — a reframe worth adopting explicitly in other counties' roadmaps.

Nyandarua County

One Budget Line, Two Mandates

When two distinct government functions are folded into a single budget line, the arithmetic of underfunding becomes almost inevitable. Nyandarua's Systems Think-Tank named this precisely: Public Participation and Civic Education "are merged into one budget line, limiting visibility and adequate financing to cater for ward level engagements."

Nyandarua's CSTT, facilitated by Christopher Kuria Murathe, focused on Public Participation and Civic Education, aiming to shift engagement from what the report calls “box-ticking” compliance toward meaningful citizen participation.

Public Participation and Civic Education share a single budget line in Nyandarua. Neither gets what it needs.

The Challenge

Beyond the merged budget line, Nyandarua has no formally staffed Public Participation directorate — a Director exists, but the position is political, entirely unstaffed, and the office holder "works alone." The county's Public Participation & Civic Education Act 2016 remains weakly implemented, with members agreeing on the need to advocate for both the County Public Guidelines 2025's inclusion and a review of the 2016 Act itself.

Looking Beneath the Surface

The Think-Tank's ten documented emerging issues reveal a system where visibility, staffing, budget disaggregation and accessibility all compound one another: limited inclusion of marginalised groups; lack of accessibility measures such as sign language interpretation; civic education activities that exist only as an adjunct to public participation rather than as a standalone function; and delays by the Economic Planning Department in submitting budget documents to ICT for public website upload — a seemingly minor administrative bottleneck that quietly undermines the county's own transparency commitments.





The Systems Mapping Journey

The Nyandarua Health, Public Participation and Civic Education Departments — alongside Gender & Social Protection, Climate Change and ICT — worked through ten key issues in plenary, with the County Assembly contributing legislative and governance perspectives and Nyandarua's non-state actors amplifying the voices of youth, women and persons with disabilities.

Voices from the Room

The Think-Tank identified a specific evidence gap as foundational: "the lack of key data to be used as baseline to effectively influence county budgeting and policy decisions" — naming data collection itself as a prerequisite for any subsequent advocacy.

The Future System

Nyandarua's Think-Tank envisions disaggregated, separate budget lines for Public Participation and Civic Education; a staffed, functional Public Participation directorate; and public participation that has genuinely shifted from compliance to meaningful engagement, with accessibility built in from the outset for persons with disabilities.

From Ideas to Action

Quick wins: finalising and formalising the CSTT's coordination structure and action plan by June 2026. **Medium-term**: gathering baseline data on participation, inclusion and budget allocation indicators, and developing an evidence-based advocacy brief on public participation and civic education budget gaps by July 2026. **Long-term:** engaging the County Treasury and Assembly's Budget and Legal Committees to secure disaggregated budget lines and drive review of the 2016 Act.

"Systems Thinking provides a more effective approach for understanding root causes of budget and public participation challenges." — Nyandarua CSTT, lessons learnt

Innovation Spotlight

Nyandarua's explicit plan to integrate the CSTT's agenda directly into CIDP 2028–2032 planning — rather than treating the CSTT as a parallel advocacy track — positions the Think-Tank's findings to shape the county's core planning document from within.

Lessons for Other Counties

Multi-stakeholder engagement strengthens ownership, coordination and sustainability, but only if paired with genuine baseline evidence — a lesson Nyandarua's Think-Tank places ahead of any specific policy ask in its own recommendations.

A Policy Waiting for Political Will

Kajiado's youth policy has stakeholder goodwill, technical clarity, and an estimated ten percent political will to move it forward.

Kajiado's Systems Think-Tank did something few advocacy processes are willing to do: it put a number on the thing everyone privately suspects but rarely states. Political goodwill for the county's draft Youth Policy, the CSTT estimated, currently sits at roughly ten percent.

Kajiado's CSTT, led by Budget Facilitator Sosthen Eugine Simiyu, convened a consultative meeting with County Directors in June 2026 to address the trajectory of the long-stalled Kajiado Youth Policy, still at draft stage despite notable goodwill from civil society, faith-based and commity-based organisations.

The Challenge

The Youth Policy's stagnation reflects Kajiado's underlying demographic complexity: a "demographic dualism" between peri-urban youth in Kajiado North and East, and ASAL (arid and semi-arid land) youth in Kajiado South, West and Central — two populations with distinct needs that a single, generic policy risks serving poorly, while limited youth participation and unstructured resource mobilisation frameworks compound the delay.

Looking Beneath the Surface

Beneath the drafting delay sits an institutional fragmentation familiar from other counties in this edition: youth affairs currently sit without a standalone Ministry, without a dedicated Youth CECM, and without a functioning, tiered Youth Council reaching from village clusters to the county level — meaning no single accountable structure exists to champion the policy through to enactment.

Explicitly quantifying political will — rather than describing it only in qualitative terms — gives Kajiado's Think-Tank and its partners a measurable baseline against which future advocacy progress can be tracked.



The Systems Mapping Journey

The Think-Tank's consultative session drew directly on County Directors across Youth, Sports, Social Services, Disability Mainstreaming, and Climate Change and Environment departments — deliberately cross-sectoral, reflecting an early recognition that youth policy cannot be resolved within a single department's mandate.

Voices from the Room

The Think-Tank's own executive summary is direct about the path forward: strategizing "on the formation of a Sector Working Group (SWG) to bridge systemic gaps between the current draft policy and a robust, fully funded implementation framework."

The Future System

Kajiado's Think-Tank envisions a standalone Youth Ministry with two specialised directorates — Youth & Sports, and Creative Economy; a Youth CECM under the age of 35 ensuring authentic generational leadership; and a functional, tiered Youth Council structured from village clusters up to the county level.

From Ideas to Action

Quick wins: constituting a seven-member Sector Working Group to lead policy review and resource mapping, targeted for completion by 20 July 2026.

Medium-term: immediate engagement with the County Legal Office and County Assembly to confirm legislative alignment, with a roundtable meeting scheduled for 15 July 2026.

Long-term: transitioning to the standalone Youth Ministry structure and establishing the tiered Youth Council.

"It can only be done by collaborative effort." — Kajiado CSTT, lessons learnt

Lessons for Other Counties

Institutional reform of this scale "can only be done by collaborative effort," in the Think-Tank's own words; and naming the distinct needs of demographically different sub-regions within a single county prevents a well-intentioned policy from being designed around only one part of the population.

THARAKA NITHI COUNTY



Tharaka Nithi turned its lowest budget transparency score into the starting point for one of its most focused reform efforts yet.

A single missing budget annex turned out to be the whole story behind Tharaka Nithi's lowest score

In 2024, Tharaka Nithi County scored 0 out of 100 on the Public Participation component of the County Budget Transparency Survey. A year later, that number had climbed to 28 early movement, and a signal the county is willing to act on. When the county's newly formed Systems Think-Tank met for the first time in June 2026, they used that momentum to map out exactly how to keep it going. .

The Think-Tank, facilitated by Anita Nkirote, brought together nine people: the Director of Budget, the Deputy County Secretary and Budget Officer from the County Executive; the County Attorney and civil society and public participation actors a genuinely cross-cutting group, assembled specifically to apply Systems Thinking to public participation and the county's CBTS performance.

The Challenge

The group identified three clear, fixable gaps: no documented feedback loop showing how public input feeds into budget decisions, no routinely collected disaggregated data, and budget documents that don't yet meet statutory publication deadlines consistently. Naming these precisely is itself progress , it turns a vague transparency problem into a short, actionable list.

Looking Beneath the Surface

Here's the encouraging part: public participation forums are already happening in Tharaka Nithi. People are showing up. What's missing is the link between those conversations and the final budget document. Once the Think-Tank saw that clearly, the fix became obvious , a required annex showing how public input shaped the budget would connect work that's already being done to the score that's supposed to reflect it.

The Systems Mapping Journey

The session ran a single, well-structured day. It opened with introductions and a shared framing of the Public Participation score as a challenge worth solving together, moved into root-cause analysis and actor mapping on a flip chart, and built toward a shared vision of a "System of the Future" for 2028. The group also checked whether a Sector Working Group already exists; formally, but informal CSO and Public Participation Officer networks are already laying the groundwork for one. They closed by agreeing on indicators and data custodians for a coming baseline survey.

Voices from the Room

The Director of Budget engaged directly with the CBTS findings, questioning the thematic scores and prompting the group to schedule a follow-up session for a closer look, a sign of real engagement from county leadership. The Public Participation Officer confirmed the feedback-loop gap by building a mechanism for incorporating public views into budget documents.

The Future System

What the Think-Tank is building toward by 2028: an enacted, enforced Public Participation Policy; budget documents published on time and in citizen-friendly formats; a mandatory annex showing how public input shapes each budget; a functioning, inclusive Sector Working Group; and a Public Participation score well above 60 building on the rise from 0 in 2024 to 28 in 2025.

From Ideas to Action

The Think-Tank left the room with a working timeline, not just a wish list. First on the list: a CSTT WhatsApp group to keep momentum going, followed by a CBTS dissemination session within two weeks. Next up, over the following couple of months, is the formal launch of the Sector Working Group by July 2026 led by the Deputy County Secretary , alongside a dedicated CBTS awareness and capacity-building session. Looking further ahead, the group has committed to enacting the Public Participation Policy within two months and getting the County Executive to formally adopt a feedback-loop template. .

Innovation Spotlight

Rather than push a broad, hard-to-measure call for "more participation," the CSTT landed on one sharp, achievable ask: the missing budget-document annex. It's concrete enough to build quickly and specific enough that both the executive and the assembly can be held to deliver it , this is the kind of leverage point that turns good intentions into results.

Lessons for Other Counties

Put the right people in one room and you get something siloed advocacy rarely achieves: duty bearers hearing directly from communities, and communities hearing directly from duty bearers. Treating CBTS performance and public participation as one connected problem, rather than two separate ones, opened up options the CSTT wouldn't have found otherwise. The group is now looking to compare notes with Kirinyaga, Nyandarua and Embu all at a similar stage on public participation to trade ideas on the feedback-loop approach.

"Systems Thinking surfaces connections that sector-specific advocacy misses." — Tharaka Nithi CSTT, lessons learnt

From policy on paper to budgets that include everyone.

Makueni Builds a Think Tank to Put Youth, Women and PWDs at the Centre of Climate Action.

A Climate Change Fund Board exists. A Climate Change Policy exists, dated 2021. A Climate Change Fund Act exists, dated 2022. A County Climate Action Plan exists, in two overlapping versions. And yet, in the words of Makueni's own Systems Think-Tank, key coordinating structures for climate action "exist on paper but are dormant."

Makueni's CSTT, facilitated by Naomi Kimanthi, convened its formation session in June 2026 with a focus on Climate Financing and the inclusion of youth, women and persons with disabilities — reflecting NEC Hub's cross-cutting mandate as a 14-county budget advocacy network extending beyond health and public participation into climate and social protection.



"SWG frameworks need departmental anchoring." — Makueni CSTT, gap analysis

The Challenge

Despite a genuinely strong policy foundation — the Makueni Climate Change Fund Act 2022, the Climate Change Policy 2021, the Water Act 2018, and a revised Public Participation Act 2026 — the county's County Climate Action Plan (spanning both a 2023–27 and a 2024–2033 version) remains under amendment, and the institutional machinery meant to translate policy into action is, in several places, not functioning.

Looking Beneath the Surface

The Think-Tank's flipchart-based current-system mapping, organised across four actor groups, produced an unusually granular diagnosis. Among civil society structures, both the Sector Working Group on Climate Action and the FLLoCA-linked CSO Climate Action network were flagged as inactive. Among government structures, Ward Development Committees were noted as purely governmental with weak connection to community structures — and, more pointedly, explicitly marked "not community-owned."

Data exists and has a named custodian, the Climate Change Directorate, but is not accessible to the wider CSTT or public. Reports are produced but never published on the county website, closing off a transparency channel that already has the raw material to fill it.

The Systems Mapping Journey

The formation session moved through NEC Hub's regional mandate, the 2026–2028 project's three outcomes, the composition and mandate of Makueni's nine-member CSTT (spanning a citizen representative, the Climate/Youth Director, the Finance CECM, a CSO chair, an SWG representative, a PWD representative, a women's representative, a budget champion and a youth representative), a Systems Thinking framing session, and finally structured flipchart exercises mapping the current 2026 system against a 2028 future vision — surfacing the largest volume of emerging issues in the current-system exercise specifically.

Voices from the Room

The session's gap analysis, captured directly from the flipchart's numbered list, named seven specific structural gaps — from the need for Sector Working Group frameworks to be formally anchored within a county department, to the absence of any current mechanism to measure whether existing climate resources are producing measurable outcomes at all.

The Future System

Makueni's Think-Tank envisions Sector Working Group structures formally anchored within county departments rather than operating informally; MOUs with partner organisations formalised rather than assumed; climate-related reports routinely published on the county website; the existing County Statistical Abstract 2025 actively used as a resource; and clear linkage between climate financing commitments and the CIDP.

From Ideas to Action

Quick wins: a baseline survey with community members, targeted for completion by end of August 2026. ***Medium-term:*** finalising all nine CSTT member slots — the county has requested two additional representative seats — and scheduling periodic, PWD-accessible meetings. ***Long-term:*** formal departmental anchoring of the SWG, published climate reporting, and CIDP-linked climate financing commitments with measurable outcome indicators.

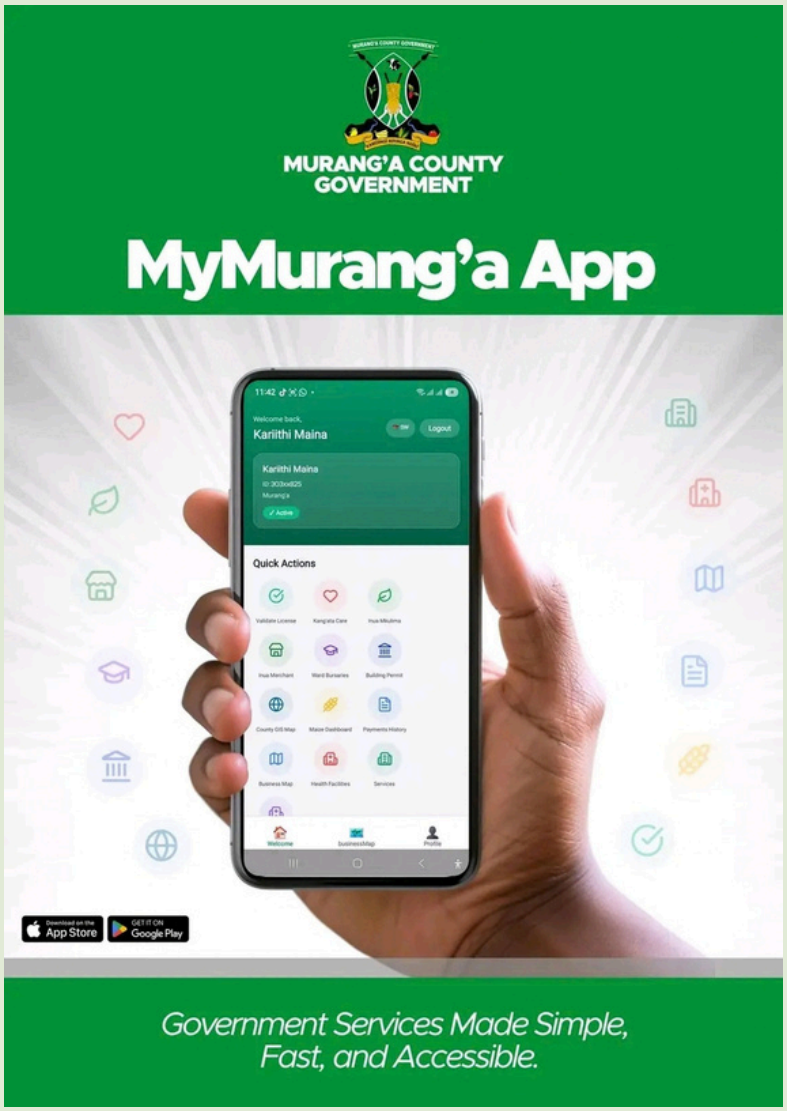
Innovation Spotlight

The four-way actor mapping exercise — separating CSO, Government, Community and Policy dimensions of the same system — allowed the Think-Tank to identify that Makueni's core problem is not a policy gap (the policy base is comparatively strong) but a connective one: existing structures, data and reports are not reaching the community actors and public accountability channels they were designed to serve.

Lessons for Other Counties

A strong policy foundation does not guarantee a functioning system if the coordinating structures beneath it are dormant; and explicitly separating "what exists on paper" from "what is actually community-owned" — as Makueni's Think-Tank did with its Ward Development Committees finding — surfaces gaps that a simple stakeholder list would miss.

FEATURE STORY:
DIGITIZATION AT THE SUB-NATIONAL LEVEL



The County That Went Cashless

How Murang'a turned a leaking revenue system into a national model, and what the My Murang'a App reveals about the next frontier of devolved governance.

For years, the fastest way to lose money in Murang'a County was to collect it. A parking attendant in Murang'a town, a market fee collector in Maragua, a quarry levy officer in Kandundu, each handled cash directly, wrote receipts by hand, and walked the proceeds back to an office where no one could easily verify how much had actually changed hands that day. In the 2021/2022 financial year, the county's own-source revenue collection totalled just KSh 520 million, against a monthly average of roughly KSh 50 million, a figure county officials attributed less to a small economy than to a leaking one: poor monitoring, revenue leakages and weak accountability at every point cash touched a human hand.

Three years later, that same county is being cited in national forums as a model for what devolved digital governance can look like, and its flagship citizen-facing product, the My Murang'a App, has become a live test case for a question every county in this magazine is, in some form, also asking: can a smartphone genuinely close the distance between a government and the people it serves, or does digitization simply move the same old exclusions onto a new platform?

A County Rewires Itself

The transformation began narrowly. In September 2022, Murang'a piloted a digital revenue-collection system in a handful of high-traffic sites, parking bays in Murang'a town, the county referral hospital, the Mukuyu and Maragua markets, and the Kandundu quarry, moving payments from cash-in-hand to mobile money transfers that landed directly in the county's bank account. By January 2023, the system had gone countywide, with residents dialling a short code to register and pay for services ranging from parking to veterinary fees. Governor Irungu Kang'ata framed the move plainly at the time: digitization was not primarily about convenience, but about sealing the loopholes that had let public resources disappear at the point of collection.

The early results were dramatic enough to reshape the county's own budget conversation. Daily parking revenue in Murang'a town rose from roughly KSh 37,000 to KSh 50,000. Quarry levies at Kandundu climbed from KSh 20,000 to KSh 50,000 a day. Collections at the county's Level Five Hospital rose from KSh 70,000 to KSh 150,000 daily. By the 2022/2023 financial year, annual own-source revenue had climbed to KSh 682 million; a year later it had doubled again, past the KSh 1 billion mark, a trajectory the Controller of Budget's own reporting recognised as the sharpest revenue increase in Kenya's central region, achieved, notably, without a single increase to the county's tax and levy rates since 2018.

Encouraged by the revenue side's success, the county turned the same logic inward. Human resource management, staff attendance, fleet tracking, financial dashboards and even meeting attendance were progressively digitized, closing off smaller, subtler leakages: unauthorised vehicle use, unrecorded absenteeism, budget lines no single dashboard had ever shown in one place. Officials have since described being able to remotely disable a county vehicle found idling at a bar during working hours and to generate speeding reports automatically, a level of operational visibility that simply did not exist under the county's pre-2022 systems.

From Back Office to Citizen's Pocket

If the revenue and internal-systems work was largely invisible to ordinary residents, the My Murang'a App was designed to be the opposite: a single, visible front door to county government. Positioned as a one-stop platform, the app lets residents renew business permits, pay market and parking fees, track land records and, in its most closely watched feature, report emergencies and civic issues directly to county government. At its public launch, county leadership framed the app explicitly around reducing bureaucracy and shortening the distance between a citizen's problem and a government response, with emergency response singled out as one of the platform's central promises.

That promise has already been tested in public. **Ambulex,** a private emergency-response operator active in the county, has positioned itself alongside the app as a delivery partner for faster ambulance dispatch, and local media covering the launch pressed exactly the question this magazine's own contributors would recognise: does a well-designed app change outcomes on the ground, in a county where long distances, patchy connectivity and thin healthcare infrastructure have historically been the real bottleneck, not the absence of a reporting channel? The honest answer, reported alongside the launch itself, is that the platform is promising but unproven, genuinely useful only if awareness, infrastructure and access catch up with the technology built to sit on top of them.

Beyond emergencies, the app has quietly become infrastructure for sectors well outside its original revenue-focused mandate. A recent academic study of digital agricultural extension in the county found that the **My Murang'a App**, alongside vernacular radio programming, has become one of the dominant channels through which smallholder farmers now access county agricultural services and advisories, evidence that a platform built to close a revenue gap has organically grown into something closer to general-purpose civic infrastructure.

The Regional Pattern Behind One County's Story

Murang'a's experience is a sharp, well-documented instance of a wider shift now underway across devolved Kenya. Telecommunications operator Safaricom has been rolling out a shared **"myCounty" platform**, explicitly modelled on the national eCitizen system, designed to let any of Kenya's 47 counties plug in digital services on common infrastructure rather than building bespoke systems from scratch.

Makueni became the platform's first county integration in 2023, with services spanning revenue payments, citizen reporting and sector-specific tools for agriculture, health and utilities; Nairobi followed with its own "My Nairobi" application built on the same architecture. The pattern across these rollouts is consistent: county governments are converging, largely independently, on the same conclusion Murang'a reached first, that a smartphone-based, mobile-money-integrated front door can do simultaneously what years of paper-based public participation forums and manual audit trails struggled to do separately: increase revenue, increase transparency and increase the legibility of government to the citizens funding it.

What the Numbers Don't Show

None of this is a story of an unblemished digital rollout, and the county's own internal presentation on the transformation is candid about what remains unresolved. Digital literacy gaps persist, particularly among older residents and in areas where smartphone penetration lags.

Rural connectivity remains inconsistent enough to undercut an app's usefulness precisely in the areas furthest from existing services, the same populations, notably, that budget advocacy Think-Tanks across this magazine have repeatedly flagged as underserved by conventional public participation channels too.

Some county staff have resisted the shift, understandably, given that digitization directly closed off informal income streams built into the old manual system. And a fully cashless, fully networked county government is, by definition, a larger cybersecurity target than the paper-based system it replaced.

These are not footnotes to the Murang'a story; they are its unfinished chapters. A revenue system that has more than tripled in three years is a genuine institutional achievement. Whether that same digital infrastructure can be extended, deliberately and with the same rigour applied to closing financial leakages, to close participation gaps for residents without smartphones, reliable data bundles or basic digital literacy, is the test this magazine's broader Systems Thinking lens would insist on asking next.

Murang'a's own County Systems Think-Tank, profiled elsewhere in this edition, has already flagged this directly: the My Murang'a App's next frontier, in the CSTT's own words, is accessibility, sign language integration, features usable by visually impaired residents and a deliberate push to reach citizens the current rollout has not yet touched.

Why This Belongs in a Magazine About Systems, Not Just Success

It would be easy to tell Murang'a's digitization story as a straightforward technology-solves-governance narrative, an app replaces a leaking cash system, revenue triples, everyone wins. The more useful version and the one consistent with everything else in this edition, treats the App and its underlying platform as exactly what Systems Thinking asks readers to look for: a genuine leverage point, activated at real cost and real institutional friction, that has demonstrably shifted one part of a complex system, while leaving open, honestly, whether the same shift will reach the residents least equipped to benefit from it without deliberate, continued investment.

Murang'a did not treat a symptom. It rebuilt the plumbing beneath a system that had been leaking for years. The question this magazine leaves with its readers is the same one Murang'a's own CSTT is now asking of itself: now that the pipes carry more, who still isn't connected to them?

CROSS COUNTY ANALYSIS

Common Threads: What Fourteen Counties Taught Us

Read side by side, these fourteen county reports — spanning health financing, public participation reform, gender-based violence, non-communicable diseases, climate financing and youth policy — converge on patterns no single county's story fully reveals on its own.

Recurring governance challenges

Fragmented institutional ownership appears in some form in nearly every report: Murang'a's three-department split on public participation, Nyandarua's merged budget line covering two distinct mandates, Nyeri's absent single owner of mental health root causes, Kajiado's missing standalone youth governance structure. The pattern is consistent enough to name as a regional finding: county governments frequently create a function public participation, civic education, youth affairs, mental health without creating a correspondingly clear, singular institutional home for it.

Shared leverage points

Every county's Think-Tank identified activation over invention as its primary lever — reviving a dormant Technical or Sector Working Group (Meru, Laikipia, Nyeri), formalising an already-drafted policy or bill (Murang'a, Kirinyaga, Kitui GBV), or gazetting infrastructure that already operates informally (Laikipia's Primary Care Networks). Very few counties identified "build something new" as their leading action; nearly all identified "connect, fund or formalise something that already exists."

Common opportunities

The CIDP 2028–2032 planning cycle recurs across the majority of counties as the single most-cited structural opportunity — a genuinely region-wide entry point for embedding CSTT findings into binding county planning documents, rather than leaving them as standalone advocacy outputs.

Leadership patterns

Where County Executive and County Assembly both engaged directly and made documented commitments in the same report — as in Murang'a — advocacy momentum appears strongest. Where one arm of government was largely absent from the room, as in several counties' early sessions, Think-Tanks flagged the gap explicitly as a next-step priority rather than glossing over it.

Community innovations

The "adopt-a-facility" model in Nyeri, the My Murang'a App's potential for decentralised participation, and Kitui's near-complete SGBV data dashboard all represent locally generated innovations that predate NEC Hub's involvement — reinforcing that the Hub's primary value-add is frequently connective and analytical rather than inventive.

Emerging networks

Cross-county learning is already being planned deliberately, not left to chance — Meru's explicit commitment to a Meru-Kitui exchange, and Tharaka Nithi's proposed exchange with Kirinyaga, Nyandarua and Embu on the feedback-loop approach, are clear examples, suggesting the fourteen CSTTs documented here need not operate as fourteen isolated processes going forward.

Institutional lessons

Redundancy in Think-Tank membership (Kirinyaga's nine-role structure, explicitly designed to survive individual drop-out) and sequencing lighter coordination structures ahead of heavier statutory ones (Nyeri's TWG-before-Council approach) both emerged independently in different counties — suggesting they may be transferable design principles worth NEC Hub codifying formally for future CSTT formation processes.

What Suprised Us

Several findings across this reporting period were not fully anticipated at the outset of the 2026–2028 project.

The willingness of Think-Tanks to document politically uncomfortable findings Embu's account of participation forums as patronage tools, Kajiado's quantified estimate of political goodwill, Kitui's frank account of gender trivialization at the county assembly — exceeded expectations for a first formation-stage report. This candour suggests the CSTT model, even at this early stage, is producing genuine diagnostic honesty rather than diplomatically softened findings.

The degree to which counties, working independently on entirely different sectors, converged on the same structural diagnosis mandate fragmentation without singular ownership was unexpected. It suggests this is less a sector-specific problem than a general feature of how devolved county government functions have been organisationally designed across the region.

Finally, the frequency with which "the system already exists, just needs activating" emerged as the dominant finding, rather than "we need something entirely new," was notable. It reframes the coming three years less as an infrastructure-building exercise and more as an institutional-activation one.

FIVE LESSONS FOR BUDGET ADVOCACY

1. Diagnose before you campaign. Every county that produced a specific, evidence-grounded systems map (Laikipia's data-anchored PHC landscape presentation; Nyandarua's naming of its merged budget line) generated more precise, actionable "way forward" commitments than sessions that moved to advocacy planning before completing the mapping stage.

2. Name fragmentation explicitly. Advocacy aimed at "more funding" without first identifying which office should be accountable for spending it risks reproducing the very fragmentation that caused underfunding in the first place.

3. Look for what already exists before proposing something new. Dormant Technical Working Groups, unenacted draft bills, informal facility-level committees and near-complete data tools appeared across nearly every county — systems change is frequently a matter of resourcing and connecting existing structures, not inventing new ones.

4. Build genuine, structural inclusion into the Think-Tank itself. Kiambu's PWD-led CSTT leadership and Kirinyaga's nine-role membership design produced sharper systemic diagnoses than a general commitment to "consult marginalised groups" would likely have achieved.

5. Sequence for momentum, not perfection. Nyeri's decision to form a lean Technical Working Group ahead of a full statutory Council — rather than waiting for the heavier structure to be ready — reflects a broader principle: early, imperfect coordination beats delayed, comprehensive coordination.

Looking Ahead: 2026–2028

The period immediately ahead will test whether these fourteen CSTTs — the full complement of the Hub's 2026–2028 focal counties documented in this edition — can move from diagnosis to durable change. Priority activities across the Hub's roadmap for the coming quarters include: baseline surveys to establish the disaggregated data every county's Think-Tank identified as currently missing; capacity building for CSTT members on budget literacy, systems thinking and advocacy — flagged explicitly as a need in Kirinyaga, Nairobi and elsewhere; and deliberate integration of CSTT findings into the CIDP 2028–2032 planning cycle, the single most-cited structural opportunity across this edition.

NEC Hub's own commitment, made explicit in this publication, is to document not only successes but stalled or contested progress as the project unfolds — because a learning organisation's credibility depends on publishing the harder findings alongside the encouraging ones.

THE JOURNEY HAS JUST BEGUN

Fourteen county reports, submitted across three months in the middle of 2026, do not yet constitute systems change. They constitute something that has to come first: an honest, jointly-owned, evidence-grounded map of where each county's public finance and governance systems actually break down — drawn not by outside consultants, but by the officials, civil society actors, budget champions, persons with disabilities, youth leaders and community representatives who live inside those systems every day.

That distinction matters. A map drawn by outsiders can be technically accurate and still fail to generate the local ownership that sustains action once external funding cycles end. A map drawn collectively — as these fourteen were, session by session, disagreement by disagreement, admission by admission — becomes something closer to a shared commitment. When Embu's Think-Tank names political capture of public participation, or Kajiado's estimates political goodwill at ten percent, or Nyeri names the absence of anyone addressing mental health's root causes, these are not external critiques handed down. They are self-diagnoses, made by the very institutions responsible for the fix, in front of the partners who will hold them to it.

Over the coming three years, the County Systems Think-Tanks documented in this edition — and those still forming across the rest of NEC Hub's focal counties — will be tested against a simple question: does naming the system change it? The honest answer, offered without either false modesty or overclaiming, is: not by itself, but it is the only foundation on which change reliably rests. Every "quick win" recorded in this edition's way-forward tables — a baseline survey, a co-opted committee member, a validated dashboard, a scheduled meeting with a County Secretary — is a small test of that foundation. Some will hold. Some will need revising, publicly and without embarrassment, as adaptive management requires.

What NEC Hub commits to, publicly, in this first flagship publication of the 2026–2028 project cycle, is to keep publishing that record honestly — the stalled alongside the succeeding, the ten-percent political will alongside the enacted policy, the merged budget line alongside the one finally disaggregated. Systems Thinking asked fourteen counties to stop treating symptoms and start tracing structure. This magazine is our own attempt to hold ourselves to the same standard.

The journey has just begun.

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