THE AFRICAN CAPACITY BUILDING FOUNDATION

Think Tanks for Africa's Transformation: From Policy Ideas to Implementation Impact

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Key Messages

This Policy Brief draws on discussions from the Africa Think Tank Spotlight Series webinar, *From Policy Ideas to Implementation: Insights from the Africa Think Tank Summit 2025*, held on 11 June 2026, and reflects on commitments and lessons from the Africa Think Tank Summit 2025 and its follow-up. The Summit highlighted that Africa's challenge is not a lack of policies, strategies, or commitments, but translating them into sustained results. Participating think tanks and stakeholders committed to follow up on agreed actions, strengthen partnerships, and support implementation through evidence, monitoring, learning, and stakeholder engagement.

The subsequent follow-up survey found that:

72%

of respondents took action after the Summit

92%

developed or pursued partnerships

98%

were implementing or planning follow-up initiatives.

However, progress in translating commitments into sustained reforms remains uneven, particularly in public financial management (PFM) and domestic resource mobilisation (DRM). These experiences point to the need for stronger mechanisms linking policy commitments with responsibilities, financing, implementation, monitoring, accountability, and learning. Drawing on these outcomes and reflections, this Policy Brief proposes **National Implementation Compacts (NICs)** as a practical mechanism to strengthen the link between policy design and implementation. NICs would bring governments, think tanks, development partners, and other stakeholders together around shared priorities, with agreed responsibilities, financing, performance targets, monitoring, and learning mechanisms. Within this framework, think tanks can maintain their independence while contributing to monitoring, evidence generation, stakeholder engagement, policy learning, and evidence-based adaptation to help translate policy commitments into measurable results.

Introduction

Africa's development challenge is no longer one of generating policy ideas but of implementing them effectively. Over the past three decades, African countries have adopted increasingly ambitious national development strategies, sectoral reforms, and regional commitments to accelerate economic transformation and improve citizens' well-being. Yet the translation of these policies into tangible development outcomes remains uneven. Weak implementation continues to constrain progress towards Agenda 2063, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and regional and national development priorities. Recent continental assessments confirm that Africa is not on track to achieve the SDGs by 2030 due to persistent financing, governance, and implementation constraints (ECA et al., 2025)[1]. At a time of rising public debt, increasing pressure for domestic resource mobilisation, growing climate adaptation needs, and declining development assistance, strengthening implementation has become an urgent strategic imperative for sustainable and inclusive development across the continent.

This Policy Brief draws on discussions from the Africa Think Tank Spotlight Series webinar, *From Policy Ideas to Implementation: Insights from the Africa Think Tank Summit 2025*, held on 11 June 2026. The webinar brought together policymakers, think tank leaders, researchers, and development practitioners to reflect on lessons emerging from the 2025 Africa Think Tank Summit and identify priorities for the 2026 Summit in Cotonou, Republic of Benin. Despite representing diverse institutions and perspectives, participants converged on a common message: improving implementation requires more than better policy design. It demands stronger implementation planning, sustained collaboration between governments and think tanks, realistic financing arrangements, continuous monitoring and learning, and broader stakeholder engagement throughout the policy cycle.

Evidence from the post-Summit survey reinforces this diagnosis. While 72 per cent of respondents reported taking concrete follow-up action after the Summit, 92 per cent established or pursued new partnerships, and almost all respondents indicated that they were implementing or planning follow-up initiatives. Moreover, respondents reported that some Public Financial Management (PFM) and domestic resource mobilisation (DRM) reforms had progressed to implementation at the country level. These findings suggest that awareness, commitment, and collaboration are growing, but that converting these into sustained institutional reform remains a significant challenge.

Building on these insights, this Policy Brief proposes National Implementation Compacts (NICs) as a practical governance mechanism for strengthening the transition from policy design to implementation. Existing implementation arrangements are often fragmented, project-specific, and dependent on informal collaboration, limiting continuity, accountability, institutional learning, and long-term impact. NICs seek to address these shortcomings by establishing structured partnerships between governments and think tanks, with clearly defined implementation responsibilities, financing commitments, performance benchmarks, joint monitoring and learning mechanisms, and shared accountability throughout the policy cycle. Rather than replacing existing national systems, the NIC framework integrates complementary recommendations emerging from the webinar into a coherent governance model that can be adapted to different country contexts.

This brief argues that National Implementation Compacts (NICs) offer a practical mechanism for closing the implementation gap through formalised partnerships, shared accountability, financing commitments, monitoring systems, and policy learning arrangements.

1. AfDB, AUC, UNECA and UNDP (2025) *Africa Sustainable Development Report 2025*. Addis Ababa: United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA). https://www.uneca.org/2025-africa-sustainable-development-report

1. The Policy Challenge: Implementation Gap

1.1 Problem Framing: From Policy to Execution Deficit

A clear consensus from the discussion is that Africa's binding constraint is no longer policy scarcity but implementation capacity[1].

The implementation gap is the persistent distance between policy intent, institutional capacity[2], and execution incentives that prevents policies from translating into sustained development outcomes. Effective implementation depends on policy capacity across analytical, operational, and political dimensions operating at individual, organisational, and systemic levels [3].

The gap is structural rather than episodic. It reflects how policies are designed, financed, coordinated, and incentivised across public systems.

Implementation systems remain fragmented, under-resourced, and weakly accountable. Together, these factors generate a governance paradox in which policy ambition consistently exceeds execution capacity, widening the gap between policy design and impact.

1.2 Evidence of the Implementation Gap

Evidence shows that African countries have designed reasonably good policies and programs and have signed on to broader development strategies, including the national and regional strategies as well as the AU Agenda 2063 and the Sustainable Development Goals. However, implementation has been weak.[4] The Sustainable Development Report 2026 confirms this diagnosis, showing that Sub-Saharan Africa scores just 53.7 out of 100 on the SDG Index, meaning it has achieved only 54% of its 2030 targets. This is well below the global average of 69.0. In contrast, East and South Asia have progressed much faster (70.5), while OECD countries lead with 78.2. As the report concludes, 'Sub-Saharan African and low-income countries... have progressed more slowly than their income levels would have predicted, revealing a slow pace of convergence[5].

This evidence reveals a consistent pattern:

- High activation at the level of intent and networking
- Low conversion into institutionalised reform and execution

The critical insight is not that actors fail to engage, but that systems are weak at converting engagement into durable reform outcomes.

This indicates that the binding constraint is no longer awareness, but capacity for implementation.

1. ACBF, KIPPRA, AfDB, Afreximbank, Hewlett Foundation, and Islamic Development Bank. 2019. "Tackling Implementation Challenges for Africa's Sustainable Development". Report of the 2019 Africa Think Tank Summit. Harare: The African Capacity Building Foundation. Available at: https://elibrary.acbfpact.org/acbf/collect/acbf/index/assoc/HASH49df/386c71a8/d9fcd431/a2.dir/African%20Think%20Tank%20Summit%20Report%20web.pdf
2.Giest, S.N., 2023. *Policy capacity mechanisms for addressing complex, place-based sustainability challenges*. Background paper for the OECD–EC High-Level Workshop Series on *Place-Based Policies for the Future*, Workshop 5, 15 September 2023. Paris: OECD. Available at: https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/about/projects/cfe/place-based-policies-for-the-future/policy-capacity-mechanisms-for-addressing-complex-place-based-sustainability-challenges.pdf
3.Wu, X., Ramesh, M., & Howlett, M. 2015. Policy capacity: A conceptual framework for understanding policy competences and capabilities. Policy and Society, 34(3-4), 165-171. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polsoc.2015.09.001
4.African Capacity Building Foundation (ACBF). 2019. Africa Capacity Report 2019. Fostering Transformative Leadership for Africa's Development. The African Capacity Building Foundation (ACBF).
5.Sachs, J.D., Lafortune, G., Fuller, G. and Iablonovski, G. (2026) *Sustainable Development Report 2026: Implementing Sustainable Development: 2030 and Beyond*. Paris: SDSN, Dublin: Dublin University Press, pp. 16, 494. Available at: https://s3.amazonaws.com/sustainabledevelopment.report/2026/sustainable-development-report-2026.pdf (Accessed: 20 August 2026).

1.3 Why Implementation Fails

The webinar discussions suggest that implementation failure in Africa stems from three mutually reinforcing layers of constraints: systemic, institutional, and political economy factors.

A

Systemic Constraints: Weak Design-to-Execution Architecture

Weak research–policy–implementation linkages: Evidence is rarely embedded into implementation systems continuously.

Inadequate financing plans: Many policies lack credible financing plans, making them aspirational rather than executable.

Weak learning systems: Governments focus on activity tracking rather than outcome-based learning.

B

Institutional Constraints: Fragmentation and Limited Execution Capacity

Even well-designed policies fail due to institutional weaknesses in execution systems.

Over-centralisation of policymaking: Implementation is treated as a government-only function, excluding non-state actors with execution capacity.

Capacity and data deficits: Institutions often lack the human resources, systems, and baseline data needed for results-based management.

Coordination failures across government: Fragmented mandates and siloed institutions undermine policy coherence and fiscal discipline.

C

Political Economy Constraints: Incentives Against Implementation

Implementation is ultimately shaped by political incentives and power relations.

Key constraints include:

Distributional resistance to reform: PFM and DRM reforms alter resource flows and therefore generate political resistance.

Short-term electoral incentives: Political cycles prioritise short-term visible gains over long-term structural reform.

Externalisation of technical solutions: Imported policy models often lack domestic legitimacy and implementation ownership.

Fragmented accountability structures: Weak alignment between decision-making authority and implementation responsibility diffuses accountability.

COUNTRY ILLUSTRATION

BOTSWANA



Botswana was highlighted during the webinar as an illustrative example of how strong fiscal institutions can face implementation pressures over time. Participants noted that, despite Botswana's long-standing reputation for prudent fiscal management, effective public financial management systems, and long-term development planning, changing economic and political conditions may create new challenges for sustaining implementation performance. These pressures may include dependence on diamond revenues, rising public expenditure demands, increasing citizen expectations, and a more competitive political environment. The discussion underscored the importance of maintaining policy prioritisation, fiscal discipline, and coordination across government institutions, even where institutional foundations are relatively strong.

1.4 The Evolving Role of Think Tanks

In this constrained governance system, think tanks are shifting from peripheral knowledge producers to more central actors within the policy ecosystem. They are increasingly expected to move beyond advisory roles to support implementation, broker evidence, strengthen accountability, and facilitate institutional learning. At the same time, they are being called upon to enable learning systems that support adaptive governance and continuous course correction. This evolution is not an optional shift in mandate but a structural response to the persistent implementation gap that defines the current policy environment.

2. From Diagnosis to Solution: Why National Implementation Compacts Are Inevitable

The constraints outlined above are not isolated problems; they are structural features of current implementation systems.

This indicates that the implementation gap cannot be solved through additional coordination mechanisms alone. It requires a structural reconfiguration of how implementation is governed.

2.1 Why Existing Arrangements Are Insufficient

Current implementation frameworks suffer from four limitations:

- Fragmentation across projects and ministries
- Weak accountability for outcomes
- Ad hoc engagement between government and knowledge actors
- Absence of integrated financing, execution, and learning systems

As a result, implementation remains projectised rather than systematised. However, some sectors have begun to develop more structured implementation systems. For example, Kenya's GCM National Implementation Plan (2023–2027)[1]. This provides a more coordinated approach by setting out institutional responsibilities, priority actions, and mechanisms for monitoring implementation. This illustrates how national implementation frameworks can provide greater structure and accountability for translating commitments into action.

2.2 Emergence of the NIC Logic (Not Design, but Convergence)

The National Implementation Compact (NIC) is not introduced as a new idea, but as a convergence of existing but fragmented recommendations emerging from the webinar:

- Embedding implementation at the design stage
- Formalising government–think tank collaboration
- Integrating financing into policy commitments
- Establishing structured follow-up mechanisms
- Strengthening continuous learning systems
- Enhancing public accountability and citizen engagement

Individually, these are partial solutions. Together, they point to a single institutional requirement:

A formalised implementation agreement that binds actors across the policy cycle.

This is the NIC.

1. Government of Kenya, Ministry of Interior and National Administration (2023) *National Implementation Plan of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration in Kenya 2023–2027*. Nairobi: State Department for Immigration and Citizen Services. Available at: https://migrationnetwork.un.org/system/files/resources_files/National%20Implementation%20Plan_11%20Oct%202023.pdf (Accessed: 1 July 2026).

2.3 What NICs Are

A National Implementation Compact (NIC) is a formal governance arrangement between government and implementation partners, including think tanks, development partners, and relevant stakeholders, that defines:

- Agreed implementation objectives
- Shared implementation responsibilities
- Financing commitments
- Performance benchmarks
- Joint monitoring and learning mechanisms
- Accountability and reporting structures

NICs transform implementation from a loosely coordinated process into a managed institutional system.

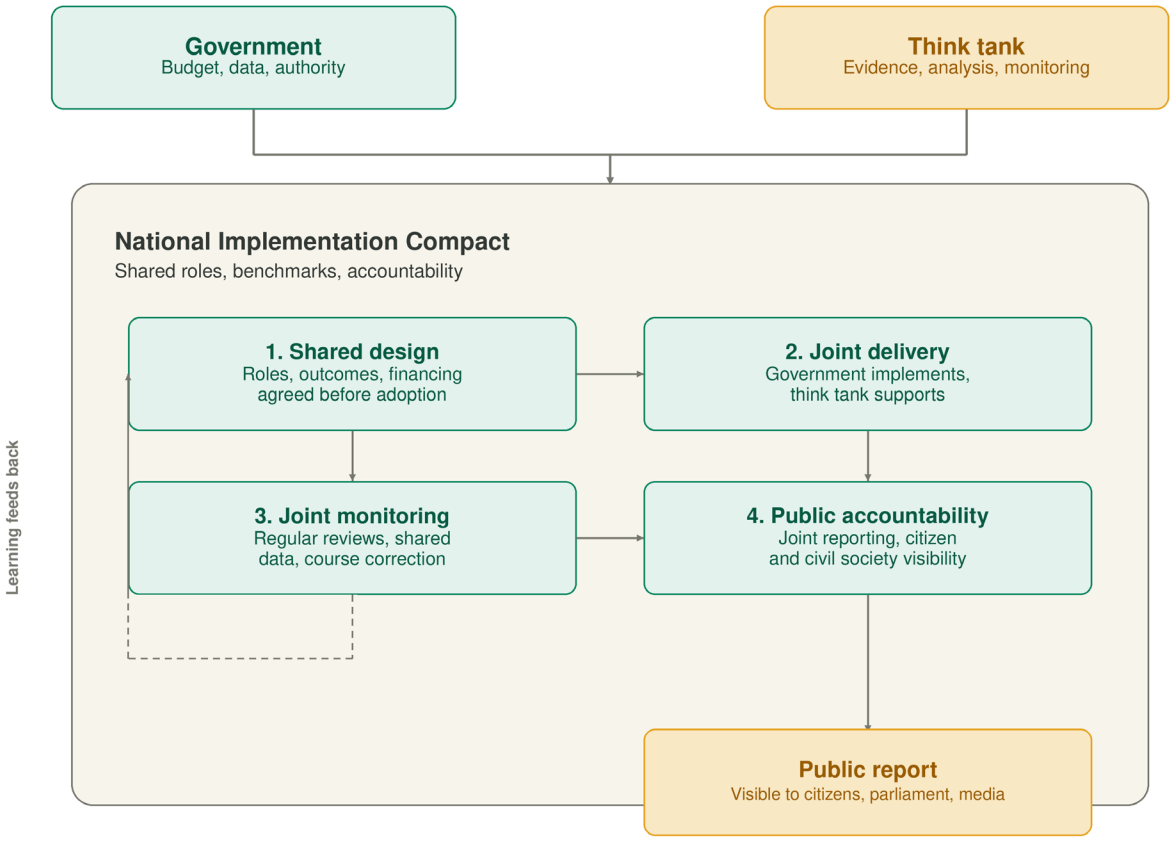


Figure 1. Structure of a National Implementation Compact

Figure 1 illustrates the institutional architecture of a National Implementation Compact, showing how governments, think tanks, development partners and accountability mechanisms are integrated across the implementation cycle.

2.4 Why NICs Are an Inevitable Institutional Response

NICs are not optional innovations. They are a logical response to the constraints identified (see Figure 2 for the theory of change):

- Fragmentation across institutions and programmes requires integrated implementation systems.
- Weak accountability requires shared performance frameworks.
- Financing gaps require upfront fiscal commitments.
- Weak learning requires embedded feedback mechanisms.
- Political economy resistance requires transparent implementation compacts.

In this sense, NICs represent not a new instrument, but the minimum viable governance structure required for implementation effectiveness.

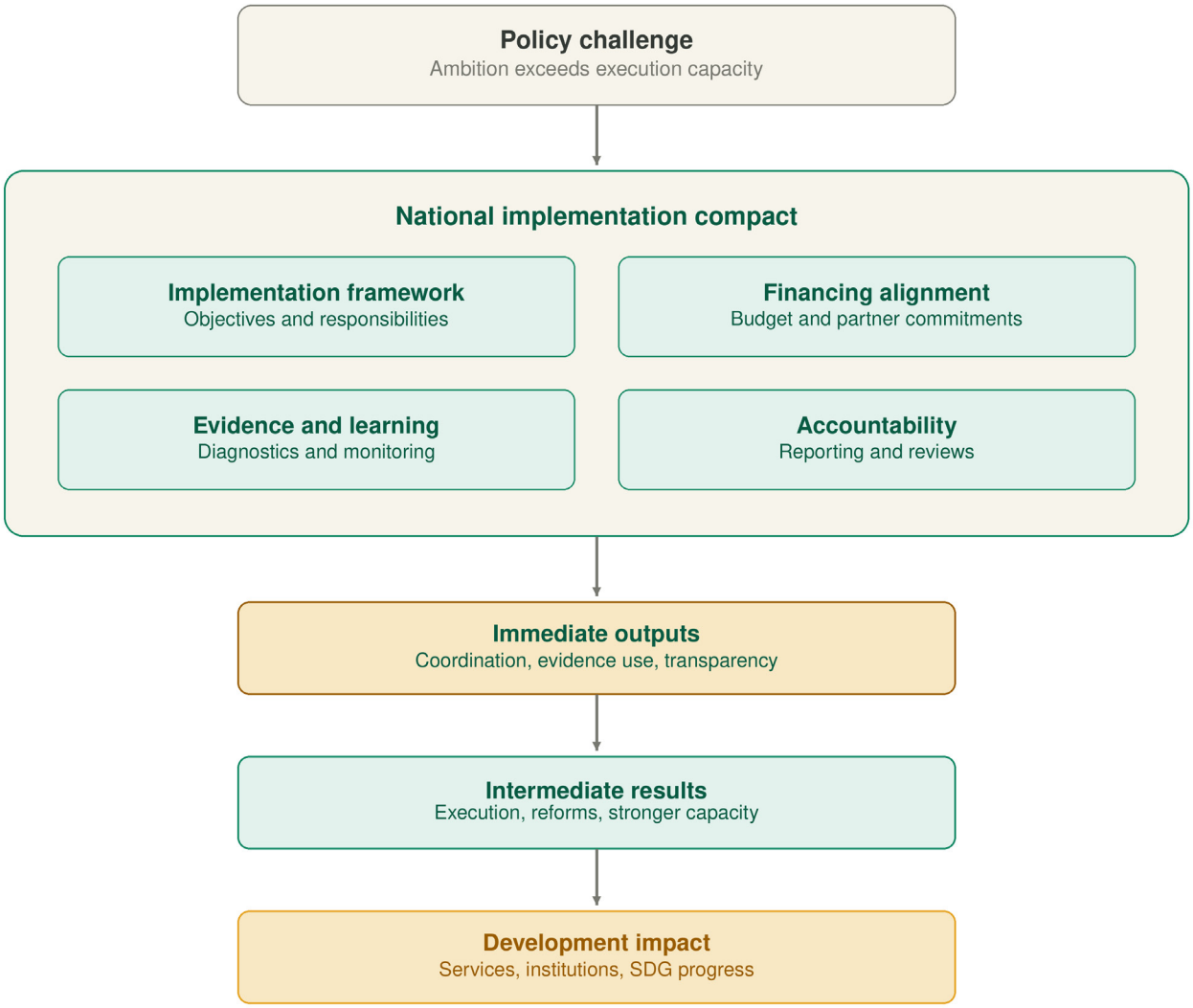


Figure 2. National Implementation Compact theory of change

Figure 2 shows that the NIC integrates four mutually reinforcing mechanisms (a shared implementation framework, financing alignment, evidence and learning systems, and accountability arrangements) that together convert policy commitments into coordinated execution, institutional strengthening, and accelerated progress towards Agenda 2063 and the SDGs.

3. Piloting the National Implementation Compact Model

National Implementation Compacts (NICs) can initially be piloted in selected sectors to test institutional arrangements, demonstrate feasibility, and generate evidence for wider adoption. This approach aligns with the policy lab concept discussed during the webinar.

3.1 Illustrative Pilot: PFM Reform Compact

A Public Financial Management (PFM) reform compact provides a practical entry point for testing the NIC model, given its centrality to fiscal discipline, accountability, and service delivery outcomes. The compact would define clear roles, shared mechanisms, and measurable outcomes across participating actors:



Scope
Budget execution and accountability within PFM reform



Government role
Allocate resources, establish a dedicated reform unit, ensure data access, and provide regular implementation reporting



Think tank role
Conduct baseline diagnostics, provide technical support, and support monitoring and evaluation functions



Joint mechanisms
Structured review processes and public reporting at agreed intervals



Duration
Multi-year implementation cycle with a defined mid-term review



Success indicators
Jointly agreed benchmarks, including budget execution rates and selected service delivery performance measures

3.2 Pilot Country Entry Points

Initial pilots may be considered in countries with ongoing or advanced reform trajectories and demonstrated institutional readiness.

These contexts provide variation in governance systems while offering sufficient institutional capacity to test implementation compacts under real conditions.

3.3 Political Economy and Leadership Requirements

Successful NIC adoption depends on sustained political commitment from key actors positioned to enable or block reform implementation. Likely champions include:

- Ministers of Finance, driven by fiscal consolidation and reform pressure
- Heads of State, motivated by development legacy and national performance outcomes
- Parliamentary oversight committees, focused on accountability and budget integrity
- Think tank leaders, expanding their role from advisory functions to implementation support

3.4 Implementation Pathway

NICs should be introduced through a phased approach that manages political and institutional risk while building credibility over time:

- **Phase 1: Demonstration** – establish pilot compacts in selected sectors
- **Phase 2: Learning** – refine mechanisms based on implementation experience
- **Phase 3: Expansion** – extend to additional sectors and institutions
- **Phase 4: Institutionalisation** – embed NICs within national planning and budgeting systems

This sequencing allows governments and partners to build trust, demonstrate early results, and progressively institutionalise implementation reforms.

4. Suggested Actions

The following actions, informed by the webinar discussions, are organised by stakeholder group to support the operationalisation of National Implementation Compacts (NICs). Priority ratings indicate the actions expected to generate the greatest implementation gains in the short to medium term.

4.1 Governments

Action	Expected Contribution
Establish NIC implementation units within Ministries of Finance	Creates institutional ownership and coordination
Integrate implementation planning into policy design processes	Ensures policies are realistic and executable
Link budgets to measurable outcomes through results-based budgeting	Improves resource effectiveness
Adopt results-based budgeting linked to measurable outcomes	Strengthens accountability and learning
Conduct quarterly joint implementation reviews with independent oversight	Enables evidence-based decision-making

4.2 Think Tanks

Action	Expected Contribution
Formalise NIC-based implementation partnerships with government	Moves think tanks from advisory roles to implementation support
Develop real-time policy feedback and monitoring systems	Enables adaptive governance
Facilitate structured multi-stakeholder policy dialogue	Strengthens collaboration
Produce actionable implementation guidance notes	Converts research into usable tools

4.3 Development Partners

Action	Expected Contribution
Finance NIC pilot implementation and scaling	Enables testing and expansion
Support long-term institutional capacity strengthening	Avoids short-term project dependency
Fund monitoring, learning, and evaluation systems	Strengthens evidence-based reform
Align support with national implementation systems	Reduces fragmentation

4.4 Regional Organisations

Action	Expected Contribution
Facilitate peer learning on implementation reforms	Enables cross-country learning
Track cross-country implementation performance	Strengthens accountability
Support continental knowledge and learning platforms	Expands evidence exchange

5. Illustrative Sequencing of NIC Implementation

The NIC model can be introduced through a phased approach to manage risk and build institutional buy-in.

Phase	Focus	Actors	Outcome
Phase 1: Design	NIC framework and M&E systems	Governments, think tanks	Improved coordination architecture
Phase 2: Pilot	Budget reforms and NIC rollout	Finance ministries, think tanks	Stronger link between budgets and performance
Phase 3: Scale	Institutionalisation and expansion	All actors	Embedded implementation system

Conclusion

Africa's development challenge is increasingly an implementation challenge rather than a policy challenge. The National Implementation Compact offers a practical mechanism for aligning incentives, financing, accountability, and learning around shared development outcomes. If successfully piloted and institutionalised, NICs could help bridge the persistent gap between policy ambition and implementation results that continues to constrain progress towards Agenda 2063 and the SDGs.

Acknowledgements

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Suggested Reference

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