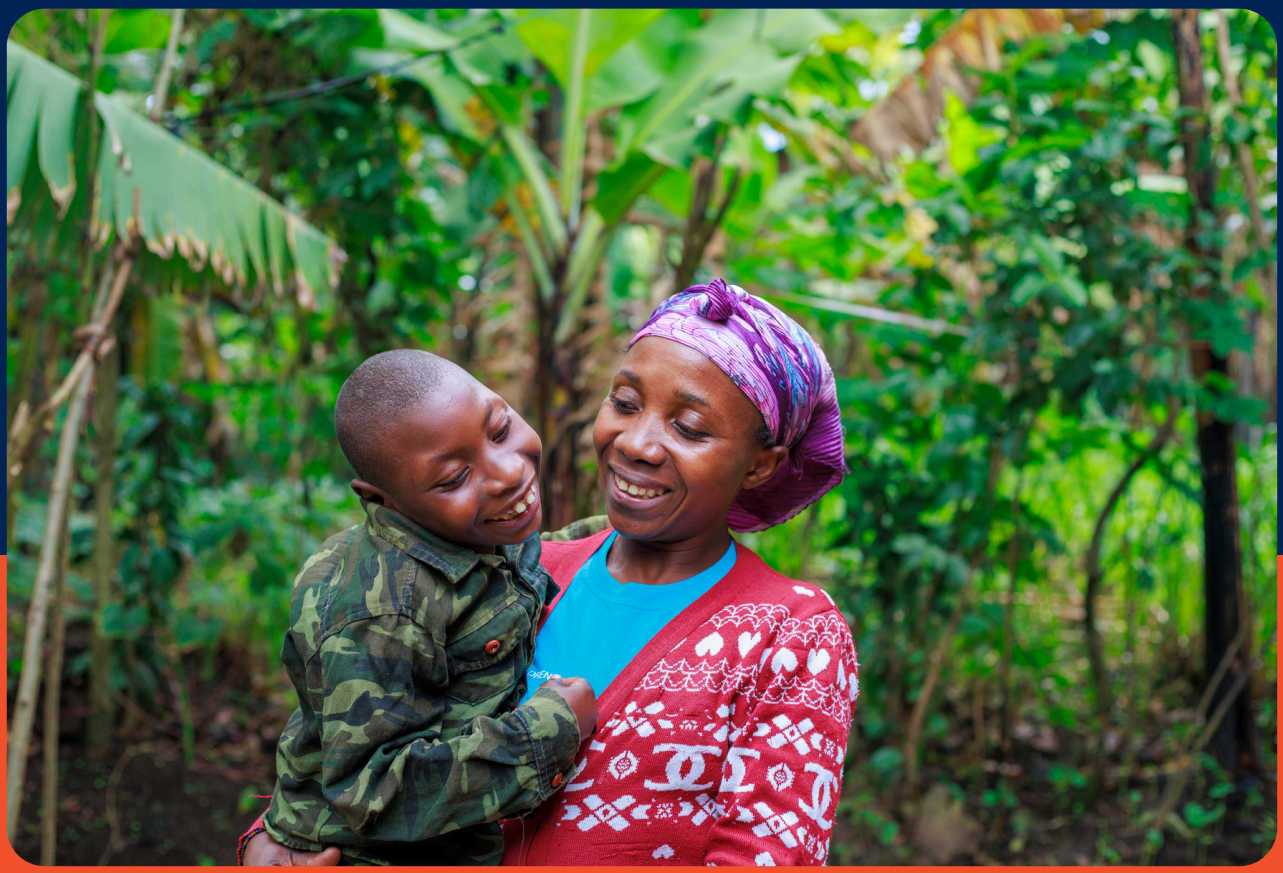
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# SHIFTING CARE SYSTEMS IN EAST AND SOUTHERN AFRICA

## Early Lessons From A Collective Impact Approach

*Rooted Futures Learning Brief, September 2026*

## WHO WE ARE

Rooted Futures brings together six organisations working across four countries in East and Southern Africa, with one shared vision - ensuring every child grows up in a safe, nurturing and stable family. Rather than working separately, the six organisations pool evidence, coordinate advocacy, and support each other's efforts to influence government policy and funding. The Collective is funded by the UBS Optimus Foundation.

## THE PROBLEM

General Comment No. 10 of the African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child affirms that children should grow up in a family environment, and calls on States to prevent unnecessary family separation, strengthen families, and ensure appropriate family-based care where children cannot remain with their parents. Yet across Africa, too many children continue to be separated from their families because the systems around those families are not strong enough to support them.

The dominant response to child welfare has been to remove the child, rather than support the family and prevent separation. Evidence on what actually keeps families together, particularly for children with disabilities, street-connected children, and other marginalised groups, remains fragmented and underused.

Where good policy exists, implementation often lags behind. And the people with the deepest knowledge of what families need, including communities, care-experienced people, and civil society, are routinely excluded from the funding and policy decisions that shape the system they live inside.

This is the landscape Rooted Futures works in. And it's a landscape where working alone doesn't get you very far. A single organisation can generate evidence, but governments can ignore it. It can advocate for change, but on its own it's easy to sideline. It carries the political and emotional weight of reform work without anyone else carrying it too.

There is real momentum right now – politically, in some countries, and regionally and globally as well. But momentum doesn't shift a system by itself.

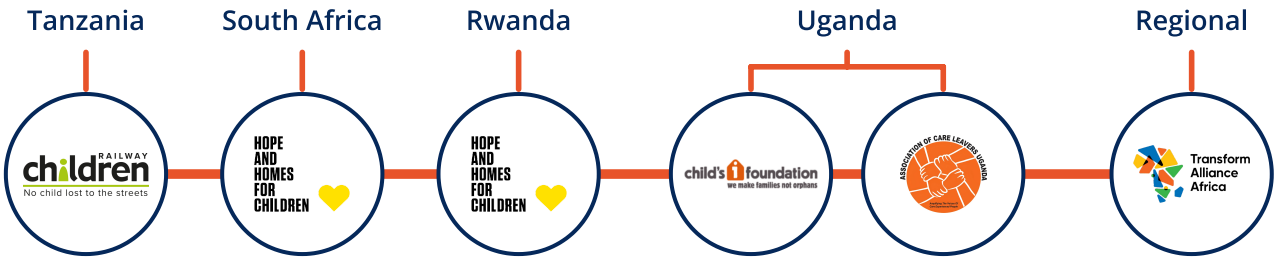
In places where civil society and government are starting to partner well, those gains tend to stay small and local unless they connect to something wider – shared learning across the sector, not just within one organisation or one country. In a space like this, sometimes contested and chronically underfunded, working alone is still a structural disadvantage, even with things moving in the right direction.

## THE ROLE OF ROOTED FUTURES

A collective impact initiative like Rooted Futures changes this equation. Rather than organisations pursuing the same goal in parallel, they align around a shared agenda, share what they learn, and are supported by a common function (in this case, a backbone coordination role) to hold the collaboration together. It's a model built for problems too complex for any one organisation to shift alone.

When six organisations across four countries work together – sharing evidence, amplifying a common message, learning from each other's contexts, and strengthening each other's legitimacy – they become harder to sideline and more likely to be engaged by governments. Funding the Collective, rather than a single anchor partner, sustains this connected work that no single grant to an individual organisation would produce on its own.

Rooted Futures consists of **Railway Children Africa (Tanzania)**, **Hope and Homes for Children (South Africa and Rwanda)**, **Child's i Foundation (Uganda)**, **Association of Care Leavers Uganda (Uganda),** and **Transform Alliance Africa**, which leads the Collective's regional-level advocacy and policy work across all four countries. Spring Impact currently provides the backbone function.




The Collective is organised around **four strategic priorities**:

**Building Evidence:**
Conducting research on what works for vulnerable groups, including children with disabilities, street-connected children, care leavers and families at risk of separation.

**Cultivating Public Support:**
Raising awareness of family care solutions through campaigns and storytelling that centre lived experience voices.

**Amplifying Lived Experience Voices:**
Supporting people with lived experience to shape advocacy efforts, inform research, and lead decision-making processes.

**Driving Regional Change:**
Influencing policy and investment through joint advocacy, evidence-based policy briefs, and a regional conference.

## WHAT THIS BRIEF IS

Rooted Futures launched in January 2025, and this learning brief reflects insights from its first 18 months of implementation. It was developed by Spring Impact.

The brief sets out to:

- Explore how collective, multi-country approaches shift a system compared with standalone national or organisational programmes
- Understand how people with lived experience are contributing to shifts in policy and funding decisions
- Identify early signals of systems change toward family care, including government policy, public attitudes and resource flows
- Document promising practices and emerging tensions to inform adaptation for the next phase of work

This is a learning-oriented document, not an evaluation. It does not assess individual or organisational performance, instead focussing on what is working, what is being tested, and where adaptations are being made within a complex, multi-country systems-change effort.

It was developed using a mixed-methods approach, including a desk review of programme documents and monitoring data, a synthesis of insights from working group discussions and ten interviews with members of the Collective's Leadership Council, programme staff and people with lived experience of family separation.

Given the Collective's early stage, findings here should be read as emerging signals rather than definitive evidence of impact. Systems change rarely moves in a straight line: progress shows up first in relationships, practices and momentum, before it shows up in outcomes. These are the kind of early indications that shapes where the Collective will invest its attention next.

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# WHERE THE SYSTEM HAS STARTED TO SHIFT



## 1 Across the region, governments that once sidelined care reform are now writing it into policy, and asking the Collective's anchor partners to help shape it.

During the first phase, anchor partners have secured real policy advances in their own countries, as well as regionally, guided by what they are learning from each other.

These are not easy wins. Reforming children's care systems is often politically contested, underfunded, and slow-moving by nature. Each represents years of relationship-building, evidence generation, and advocacy; work the Collective has supported through funding, technical assistance, and shared learning.

Six national policy frameworks on care reform in Uganda were approved in September 2025, all having been stalled since 2012. Child's i Foundation played a key role with the review, validation and drafting of the guidelines of these frameworks.

South Africa's government has committed to a five-year transition towards family care. That commitment came out of the National Care Reform Summit, convened by Hope and Homes South Africa in Johannesburg in November 2025, which brought national and provincial government officials, civil society organisations and care-experienced young people together to build consensus around South Africa's transition from institutional care to family-based care.

Transform Alliance Africa contributed directly to the African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child General Comment no. 10 on children without parental care, with the Special Rapporteur welcoming the Collective's regional perspective.



**"We now have all the ingredients to push the government to adopt a national care reform strategy in Uganda. That's where the Collective has taken us"**

**David Adoke**
Executive Director
Child's i Foundation

## 2 The Collective has invested in approaches that put care-experienced people at the centre of the work. In some countries, the results are already showing up in policy.

Placing people with lived experience of family separation at the centre of children's care reform is one of the Collective's four strategic priorities. Across the programme, four approaches have been adopted to action this commitment: establishing youth advisory boards, supporting care leavers associations, developing a youth advocacy toolkit, and finding lesser known lived experienced voices.

Together, these represent a deliberate shift from treating lived experience as testimony towards treating it as expertise. In some countries, that investment is already translating into impact at the policy level.

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HOPE AND HOMES FOR CHILDREN

Hope and Homes South Africa's Youth Advisory Board shaped the National Care Reform Summit and its outcomes document. The perspectives of care-experienced young people informed discussions and recommendations throughout the Summit, reinforcing the principle that care reform should be shaped by those with lived experience.

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ASSOCIATION OF CARE LEAVERS UGANDA

The Association of Care Leavers Uganda grew from an informal network to a registered organisation. Once dismissed by officials, they are now co-developing the country's Supported Independent Living guidelines with the government.

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Transform Alliance Africa

The 'From Experience to Change advocacy toolkit', led by Transform Alliance Africa and co-designed with care-experienced young people across all four countries, is empowering young people to become self-directed advocates. This practical toolkit is designed to amplify lived experience in policy making and to strengthen young people's agency within advocacy spaces.

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Railway Children Africa's support has strengthened the Tanzania Care Leavers Network's capacity and visibility, helping secure seed funding and a regional learning exchange with the Kenya Society of Care Leavers. Care leavers have engaged directly with funders, contributed to a national family-based care campaign, and shared their perspectives at the launch of the FCDO Global Charter.

HHC Rwanda is mapping those working on care reform across eight countries in East and Southern Africa, deliberately looking for the organisations less visible in the sector, including locally-led lived experience groups and networks. The result will be a shared regional resource for strategic advocacy, partnership development, and cross-country learning.



**"I feel confident when I'm seated in a room with CEOs and other leaders. It doesn't stop me from raising my hand and contributing. I feel empowered by the Collective to say what I think."**

**Sumaeya Nassuna**
Programmes Coordinator
Association of Care Leavers Uganda

## 3 Across the Collective, research is turning what communities know into evidence governments can act on.

A persistent gap exists between government policy and what happens in communities. The Collective is closing it through research co-designed with governments and universities from the outset. Each study tackles part of the same question: what works to keep children in family care, across countries and different groups of children.

Individually, they build national cases for reform. Together, they form a regional evidence base that's harder to dismiss as one organisation's opinion.

HOPE AND HOMES FOR CHILDREN

HHC Rwanda is conducting the first longitudinal study of its kind in the region on outcomes for children with disabilities in community-based care, co-designed with the Rwandan Government's National Child Development Agency, the National Council for People with Disabilities, and researchers from the University of Rwanda.

RAILWAY children
No child lost to the streets

Railway Children Africa is researching whether family reintegration in Tanzania actually improves children's wellbeing, not just whether placements last. That research runs alongside its work with the government's National Technical Working Group on Alternative Care to strengthen the National Alternative Care Assessment Framework. UNICEF has committed to supporting its final recommendations.

HOPE AND HOMES FOR CHILDREN

Hope and Homes South Africa's AFS-Khusela longitudinal study is tracking 130 children across eight wellbeing domains in eight communities in Gauteng and the Western Cape. South Africa currently has no deinstitutionalisation policy; the study is designed to give government the evidence it needs to write one.

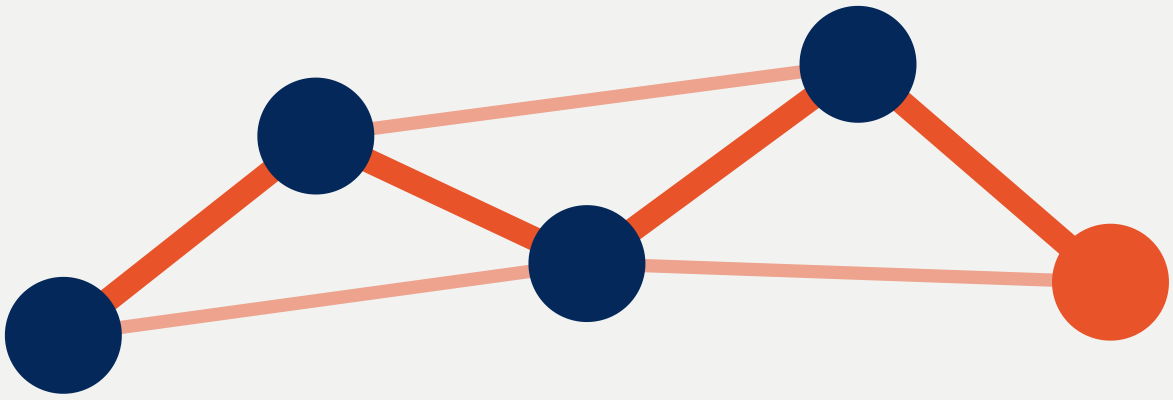


**"In policies and in the field are two different things. This research is bringing what is in the field to the policymakers."**

**Zamokuhle Mkhatshwa**
Care Reform Technical Specialist
Hope and Homes for Children South Africa

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# HOW THE COLLECTIVE MADE THIS POSSIBLE



## 1 Collective action has given partners credibility and confidence they would have found difficult to build alone.

Individual organisations working alone on care reform are easily marginalised. Working as a collective changes that. Governments and regional bodies that might dismiss a single organisation find it more difficult to ignore a coordinated movement speaking with one voice across four countries.



**"Being part of the Collective and pushing forward a joint message of care reform gave us credibility for decision makers to see that this is a regional challenge, and not just an isolated organisational concern."**

**Rose Kagoro**
Programme and Advocacy Manager
Railway Children Africa

The anchor partners also describe something harder to quantify but equally important – the Collective reduces the isolation that comes with pushing for contested reform, and gives organisations the confidence to sustain it.



**"The Collective means we feel supported by each other, and that gives us the courage to push for care reform."**

**Vidivi Karangwa**
Country Director
Hope and Homes for Children Rwanda

**2** **The Collective has accelerated learning by letting partners draw on each other's experience across four countries.**

No single country has all the answers on care reform. The Collective has created structured space for partners to learn from each other's contexts, approaches and mistakes – compressing what would otherwise take years of trial and error. This space depends on a culture of trust to share each other's failures, which is far more difficult to achieve in more public learning exchanges.

For instance, Railway Children Africa drew on CiF and HHC Rwanda's experience to accelerate their own care reform work. HHC Rwanda learned from CiF how to work alongside people with lived experience to better engage government through advocacy, rather than bringing them in only to give testimony. HHC South Africa visited Rwanda early in the programme and returned with a changed perspective on what was possible for children with disabilities.



This learning extends beyond the Collective. Transform Alliance Africa also organises regular webinars to share lessons from the anchor partners to their wider network of 18 organisations across 12 countries in Africa and beyond.

An established shared measurement and learning working group gives this exchange structure, encouraging partners to experiment and adapt their approaches as part of a deliberate learning culture across the Collective.



**"Being part of the Collective is a learning opportunity, as well as a relationship building opportunity. It is an opportunity where we are at the same level to share our experiences across the sector."**

**Ashley Theron**
Country Director
Hope and Homes for Children South Africa

## 3 Facilitation that keeps partners working effectively together.

Spring Impact has played a coordinating role that allows the Collective to function as a shared space for thinking, as opposed to simply managing the process.



**"Having Spring Impact being able to sit us down, think, reflect, and guide us on how we need to be moving forward, has been incredibly useful for the Collective."**

**Mary Gatama**
Executive Director
Railway Children Africa

This distinction is important for maintaining the work of an initiative like Rooted Futures. Effective facilitation means building trust between partners, working transparently, and holding the group to the principles it agreed together. It allows anchor partners to disagree honestly, adapt when necessary, and continue choosing to work together.

Often, this type of role is easy to lose, especially when attention drifts towards management and compliance, or when staff change and new people join without background knowledge of the initiative. Holding it in place takes repeated effort from a backbone organisation: regular space to revisit decisions, check partners are still bought in, and bring new people into the way the Collective works together.

Eighteen months in, the lesson is that relationships carry this type of work. How partners work together and build a shared understanding of the problem matters just as much as what they produce.

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# WHAT THE NEXT PHASE NEEDS



## 1 Embedding a sustainable collaborative infrastructure

The most consistent challenge raised across the Collective is sustainability, but not in the way funders usually hear it. The gap isn't programme delivery, but rather backbone infrastructure. Coordination, shared learning, communications and governance are what hold a four-country collective together, yet these functions are the hardest to fund because they don't sit neatly inside any one organisation's budget line.

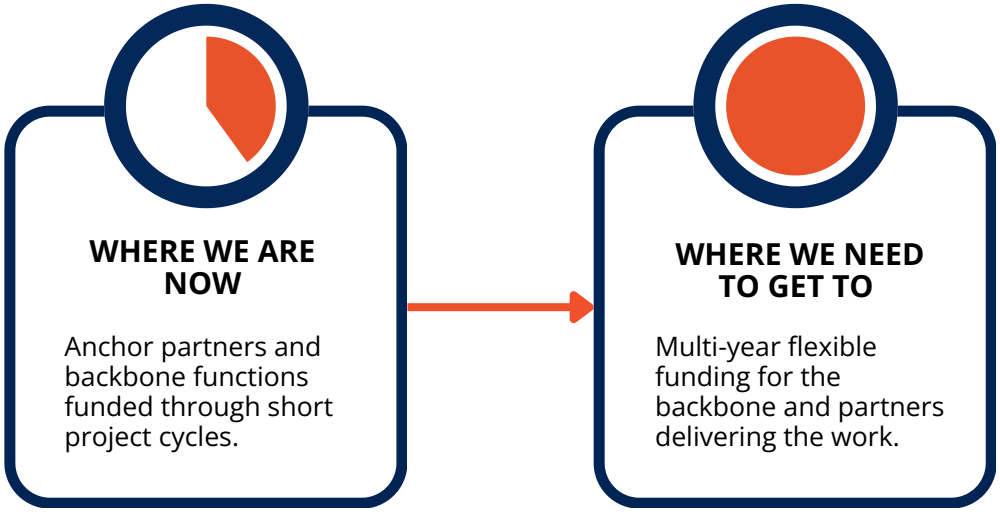


**"There is a risk that the Collective's work stays dependent on short-term project funding rather than being treated as long-term movement infrastructure."**

**Christopher Muwanguzi**
Strategic Liaison Lead
Transform Alliance Africa

Rooted Futures is at the point where that has to change, and we have a clear plan. In this next phase we are investing in Transform Alliance Africa (TAA) to take on more of the backbone role. It is regionally rooted, with strong relationships at both community and government level, and a continental remit that lets learning flow in and out of the Collective across its network. Alongside this we are building a co-funding strategy that positions TAA to secure multi-year sustained finance for both the backbone function and the anchor partners delivering the work.

We are also designing the backbone itself more deliberately as it transfers to TAA. As raised earlier in the brief, in collective impact initiatives, the backbone can often accumulate power and drift towards management. In this next phase of Rooted Futures, we will continue to resist that, keeping the role facilitative and accountable to partners.



## 2 Funding and leadership development for people with lived experience to help lead care reform

Involving people with lived experience and sharing real influence with them are not the same thing. For lived experience to count in care reform, it has to shape decisions, not just inform them.

The Collective has made progress here. Care-experienced young people are now co-designing advocacy approaches, contributing to national policy commitments, and in Uganda engaging the government directly on developing the country's Supported Independent Living guidelines.

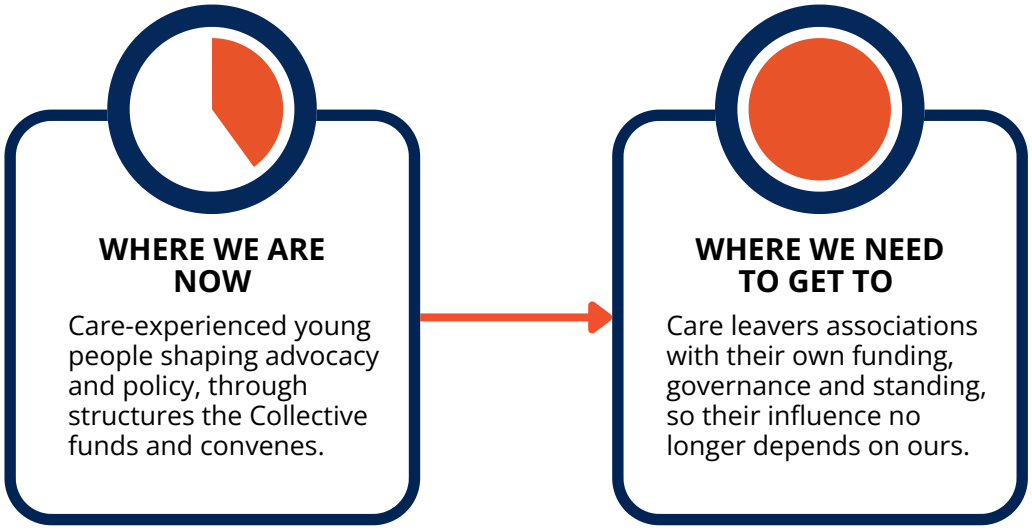


The next step is to back that with sustained investment.
In phase two, we want to fund and strengthen care leavers associations in the anchor countries and build the organisational leadership of these grassroots groups, so that the shift from participation to leadership lasts.



**"People with lived experience should be leading the conversation. Nothing about us, without us - that should be the driving force behind everything we do in the sector."**

**David Adoke**
Executive Director
Child's i Foundation

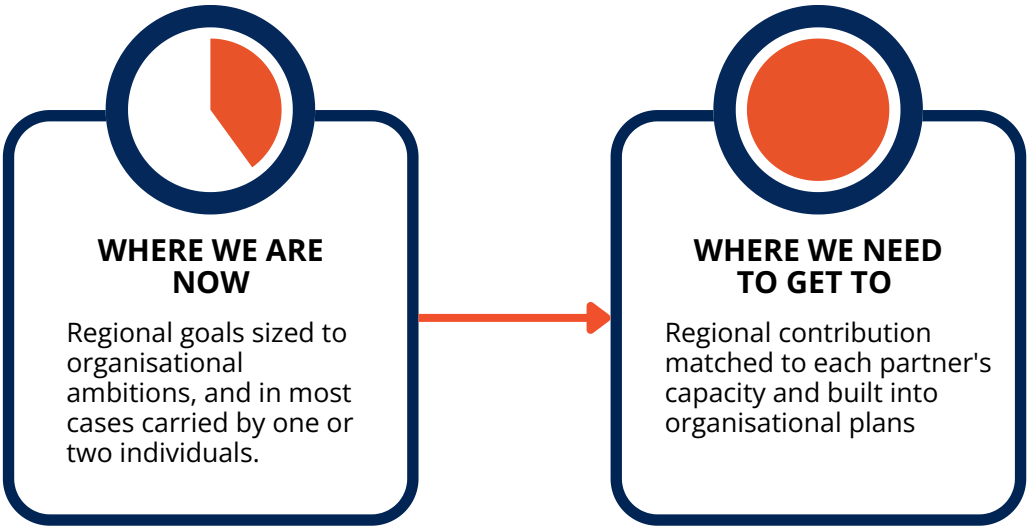


## 3 Balancing national commitments and the regional agenda

Anchor partners carry two sets of responsibilities simultaneously: delivering on the ground in their own countries, and contributing to a regional movement. Getting that balance wrong in either direction has a cost. Too much focus on national delivery and the Collective loses coherence; too much on regional coordination and partners are stretched beyond what is sustainable.

This tension has been one of the main challenges of phase one. In response, the Collective is rightsizing its governance structure and streamlining the shared measurement framework, so that the regional contribution asked of each partner is proportionate to their capacity, and does not come at the expense of their national work.

The goal is a Collective where regional and national efforts reinforce each other, rather than compete for the same bandwidth.






**"We have to carefully balance delivering our own strategy, but being in the Collective has supported us to deliver some of the more ambitious care reform work that wouldn't have been funded nationally."**

**Mary Gatama**
Executive Director
Railway Children Africa

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# THANK YOU FOR READING

If you would like to discuss this work or the next phase, please contact Niamh Browne at niamh@springimpact.org

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