



Understanding Our Electricity Challenge

WHY PATTERNS KEEP REPEATING IN MATHARE

The Pattern We All Recognize

Have you ever wondered why, after so many programs and promises, most of us still rely on informal electricity connections? Why does the situation seem to get worse, not better? Why do solutions that sound good on paper fail in Mathare?

Think about what happens when Kenya Power removes a transformer:

- People lose electricity
- Businesses close
- People lack access to other utilities like water.
- Children can't study at night
- Everyone gets angry and loses trust
- More people turn to informal connections
- Kenya Power gets more frustrated
- Kenya Power removes another transformer

And the cycle continues. This is what we discovered together: these aren't random problems; they are patterns that keep repeating. And once we understand the patterns, we can start to change them.

KEY POINT: This brief helps us understand the PATTERNS behind our electricity challenges. When we understand these patterns, we gain power to push for solutions that actually work for our community.

What We Mean by Systems

Mathare Is a System

Mathare is made up of many connected parts that all affect each other:

- 13 villages, each with their own leadership and history (and even ethnic backgrounds).
- Over 500,000 people, all trying to survive and thrive
- Utilities e.g. electricity, water, garbage management, that are controlled by community members.
- Formal electricity (Kenya Power) and informal electricity (local suppliers)
- Hundreds of small businesses that need power to operate
- CBOs working to support the community
- Youth looking for opportunities and ways to earn a living
- Government programs that come and go
- Landlords, tenants, families and neighbours

All these parts are connected. When one thing changes, it creates a ripple effect through the whole system.

A Simple Example: The Punishment Cycle

Here is how the parts connect:

1. Kenya Power removes a transformer
2. Electricity access gap increases
3. More people need informal connections
4. Trust in Kenya Power decreases
5. Support for informal suppliers increases
6. Demand for informal connections rises
7. Kenya Power gets more frustrated and removes another transformer

THE CYCLE CONTINUES. This is a SYSTEM at work.

“We have sought dialogue to address this, but your silence drives us to alternatives.” Community leader to Kenya Power

Why Understanding Systems Gives Us Power

When we understand these patterns, several powerful things happen:

- First, we can tell our story more clearly to Kenya Power, County and National Governments and other development partners willing to do something about our situation.
- We can see that we are not the problem, the system is the problem.
- We can identify where to push for real change and not surface fixes that fail.
- We can unite as a community with shared understanding.
- We can stop blaming and fighting each other and work together toward solutions.

Three Key Ideas About Systems

1. Everyone Sees Things Differently (Mental Models)

Imagine five people looking at informal electricity connections. Each person sees something different based on their experiences:

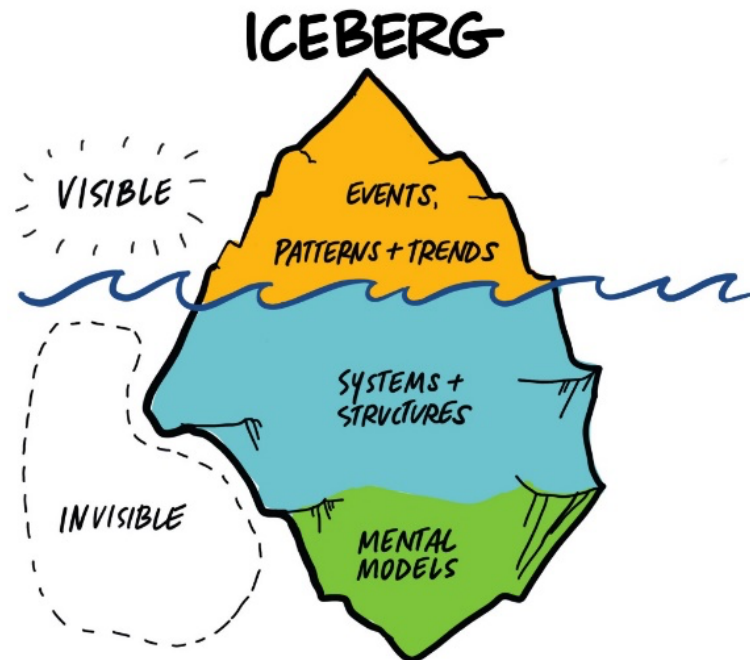
- Kenya Power official thinks: This is theft, this is illegal and we must stop it.
- A household thinks: We need to light our homes but we can't afford a formal connection.
- An informal supplier thinks I am providing a service the community needs. I am helping people.
- A young man thinks: This is my only way to earn money. There are no other jobs for me.
- A government official thinks: These settlements are not in our official plans. I am not even sure what to do with them.

Who is right? Actually, all of them are seeing part of the truth. But because they see things so differently, their decisions clash with each other. Understanding these different viewpoints is what we call mental models and this is the first step to finding common ground.

THINK ABOUT IT: What is your viewpoint on informal electricity? What experiences shaped how you see it? How might your neighbour see it differently?

2. The Iceberg: Surface Problems versus Root Causes

What we can see of an iceberg already looks very imposing, and yet most of its structure is hidden under the water.



In our case, what see (the tip of the iceberg) is:

- Informal electricity connections
- Transformers being removed
- Fires and electrocution accidents
- Conflicts between Kenya Power and community

What we can't see (the deep structure):

- Decades of marginalization and exclusion from planning
- Broken trust between stakeholders
- Poverty and lack of affordable options
- Youth with no economic opportunities
- Policies designed without understanding our reality
- Cultural beliefs about who deserves to be heard

Quick fixes only work on the surface, like removing transformers or offering one-time subsidies. But unless we address the root causes hidden below, the same problems will keep coming back.

REAL CHANGE HAPPENS DEEP: The deepest leverage points in our system are INCLUSION, TRUST and MARGINALIZATION. When we work to bring everyone together, avail economic opportunities for everyone, build trust between stakeholders and reduce marginalization through real inclusion in planning, we attack the root causes and not just the symptoms.

3. Patterns That Keep Repeating (Systems Traps)

Some patterns show up over and over in different situations. When we recognize them, we can avoid falling into the same traps. Here are two patterns we identified in Mathare:

Pattern 1: Fixes That Fail (The Punishment Cycle)

What happens:

- A problem appears (informal connections)
- A quick fix is applied (remove transformers)
- It seems to work at first.
- But after some time, side effects appear
- The original problem gets worse.

This happens because the quick fix doesn't address the root causes. It is like putting a bandage on a wound that needs stitches; it might stop the bleeding temporarily, but the wound will get infected and become more serious.

Pattern 2: Shifting the Burden

What happens:

- A problem exists (electricity affordability issue)
- The government and external players step in to help with grants and subsidies.
- The community start depending on the helper
- The community's own capacity to solve the problem weakens
- When the help is gone, the problem is worse than before.

This doesn't mean that the subsidies and grants are not helpful, definitely they are. But when programs come and go without building lasting community capacity, we get trapped in a cycle of dependence.

What We Learned Together

In September 2025, 25 of us came together; community members from Mathare, representatives from CBOs like Ghetto Foundation and Mathare Social Justice Centre, researchers and even Kenya Power officials. We spent a full day mapping out these patterns together.

We identified six major challenges:

- Punitive top-down interventions that backfire and increase the demand of informal electricity connections
- Exclusion from planning that reduces understanding of our needs/unwillingness to engage with community stakeholders in solution building.
- Social capital of informal suppliers that maintains their dominance
- Economic deprivation and youth marginalization that drives community members into informal electricity use.
- Adaptive strategies that normalize safety risks
- Disaster vulnerability made worse by informal housing and lack of infrastructure

We asked the participants what words were most important, the overwhelming choice was COLLABORATION, followed by TRUST. This tells us something powerful that we all know working together is the answer and solution to our electricity challenge.

How We Can Use This Understanding

Now that we understand these patterns, we have tools to push for real change:

1. In Community Meetings

- Use these patterns to explain why quick fixes don't work
- Show the cycles that keep us trapped
- Build shared understanding across different groups

2. When talking to Kenya Power and Government

- Show how punishment creates more problems, not fewer
- Explain why we need to be included in planning from the start
- Push for solutions that address root causes (trust, affordability, marginalization)

3. Building Alliances

- Understand different viewpoints (mental models)
- Find common ground despite different perspectives
- Work toward shared goals like collaboration and trust

Moving Forward Together

You already understand systems; you live in one every day. You see how things connect. You know that when one thing changes, other things change too. This brief just gives us words and tools to explain what we already know.

The patterns are real. The cycles exist. But now we can see them clearly. And when we can see the pattern, we can start to change it.