

- Governance
- Sustainability
- Inclusion
- African-led

### HOW THIS PLAYS OUT ACROSS THE ISSUE

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## SPOTLIGHT ON IMPACT

### DESIGN BEFORE COMPLIANCE

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# THE LOOM, NOT THE THREAD

#### EDITOR'S NOTE

Volume 4 explored relationships – the trust, empathy, and relational intelligence that hold societies together. Leadership, we argued, is not an individual act of will, but a social architecture.

But relationships alone cannot carry the weight of a nation. They require containers.

Volume 5 shifts Rooted's focus from the relational to the institutional: from how we relate to what we build to protect those relationships when pressure arrives.

In the African context, we have long mastered the appearance of institutions without their substance. Organisations can look modern on paper – audit committees, procurement rules, governance charters – yet function as extractive hierarchies in practice. When pressure comes, values evaporate.

**This volume advances a simple but demanding proposition:**

Integrity is not a personality trait. It is a design outcome. If institutions only function when leaders are brave, ethical, or present, they are already fragile. Resilient institutions hard-code values into systems – so the right outcome is the default, not the exception.

**Volume 5 is about building that loom deliberately:**

- strong enough to hold values in place
- transparent enough to expose deviation
- fair enough to survive bad captains



## ROOTED VOLUME 5



Enjoy Volume 5

*Katlego Majola*

FOUNDER: KM NALA ADVISORY



# EMPILWENI TRADING

## CASE STUDY: EMPILWENI TRADING

### Systems, Culture, and Community Accountability

#### Translating Non-Negotiables into Hard Systems

The engineering and construction sectors in South Africa often operate under political pressure, informal deals, and opaque practices. Empilweni Trading begins from a different premise: personal integrity is not enough – it must be embedded in structure.

Empilweni’s founder identified clear non-negotiables: no bribes, no exploitation, no shortcuts.

#### These values were translated into formal systems:

- Procurement controls: Clear scoring matrices, thresholds, and audit triggers ensure merit-based decisions.
- Decision protocols: Delegation-of-authority frameworks allow teams to act autonomously while preserving checks and balances.
- Audit trails and oversight: SOPs, management reviews, and reporting dashboards maintain traceability and transparency.

Even under political or financial pressure, these systems make integrity the default outcome – not a function of individual courage.

#### Decentralising Decision-Making Without Losing Control

#### Empilweni deliberately distributes authority across its divisions:

- Operational autonomy: Site managers and farm leads handle labour planning, procurement within limits, risk



mitigation, and day-to-day problem-solving.

- Governance safety nets: Decisions above defined thresholds trigger automatic escalation and cross-functional peer review across technical, financial, and ethical dimensions.
- Distributed responsibility: Employees are trained to support multiple divisions and co-create solutions, preventing bottlenecks at executive level.

Autonomy and oversight coexist – not through heroic intervention, but through designed thresholds.



# EMPILWENI TRADING



### Transparency as Infrastructure

At Empilweni, transparency is not optional communication. It is infrastructure:

- Teams have visibility into project financial health, cost pressures, operational risks, and performance targets.
- Subcontractors and community partners are integrated into monitoring and evaluation processes.
- Information flows automatically through dashboards and reporting systems, not selectively through individuals.

*Accountability shifts from the founder to the collective, making integrity enforceable at scale.*

### Cross-Divisional Co-Creation and Adaptability

When the Construction Division transitioned into farmland mapping and preparation, the shift was designed as co-creation, not redeployment:

- Engineers applied technical expertise to agricultural planning and operations.
- Hierarchies flattened; managers became facilitators rather than commanders.
- A Business Forum ensured cross-divisional input into design and decision-making.

Shared ownership, adaptability, and institutional resilience followed.

### Community as Accountability Partners In food-system initiatives, communities are embedded structurally – not treated as beneficiaries:

- Community representatives shape crop selection, distribution strategies, and school-feeding menus.
- Monitoring and evaluation incorporate local feedback to measure impact meaningfully.
- Decisions balance internal expertise with lived local knowledge.

This creates two-way accountability and reinforces legitimacy beyond the organisation itself.

### Trade-Offs and Constraints

**Embedding integrity structurally comes with operational trade-offs:**

- Decentralised decision-making requires coordination and planning.
- Local sourcing can limit variety and slow

processes.

- Shared governance may delay execution – while strengthening ownership.

These are not design failures, but conscious institutional choices.

### The Absence Test – Founder-Independent Systems

**True institutional resilience is measured by independence from any single individual:**

- Standardised workflows, SOPs, and cross-training ensure continuity during leadership absence.
  - Automatic escalation and backup approvers prevent bottlenecks and ethical drift.
  - Decisions continue collectively; projects deliver; new initiatives proceed.
- Looking 15–20 years ahead, Empilweni’s non-negotiables are clear: shared ownership, collective accountability, and community-centred governance – systems designed to endure beyond any founder’s tenure.

### Key Takeaways for Modern Institutions

1. Non-negotiables must become system rules, not heroic expectations.
2. Distributed authority thrives with thresholds and oversight.
3. Transparency is an infrastructural principle, not a discretionary practice.
4. Communities can hold institutions accountable when structurally embedded.
5. Resilience is measured by operational independence, not founder presence.

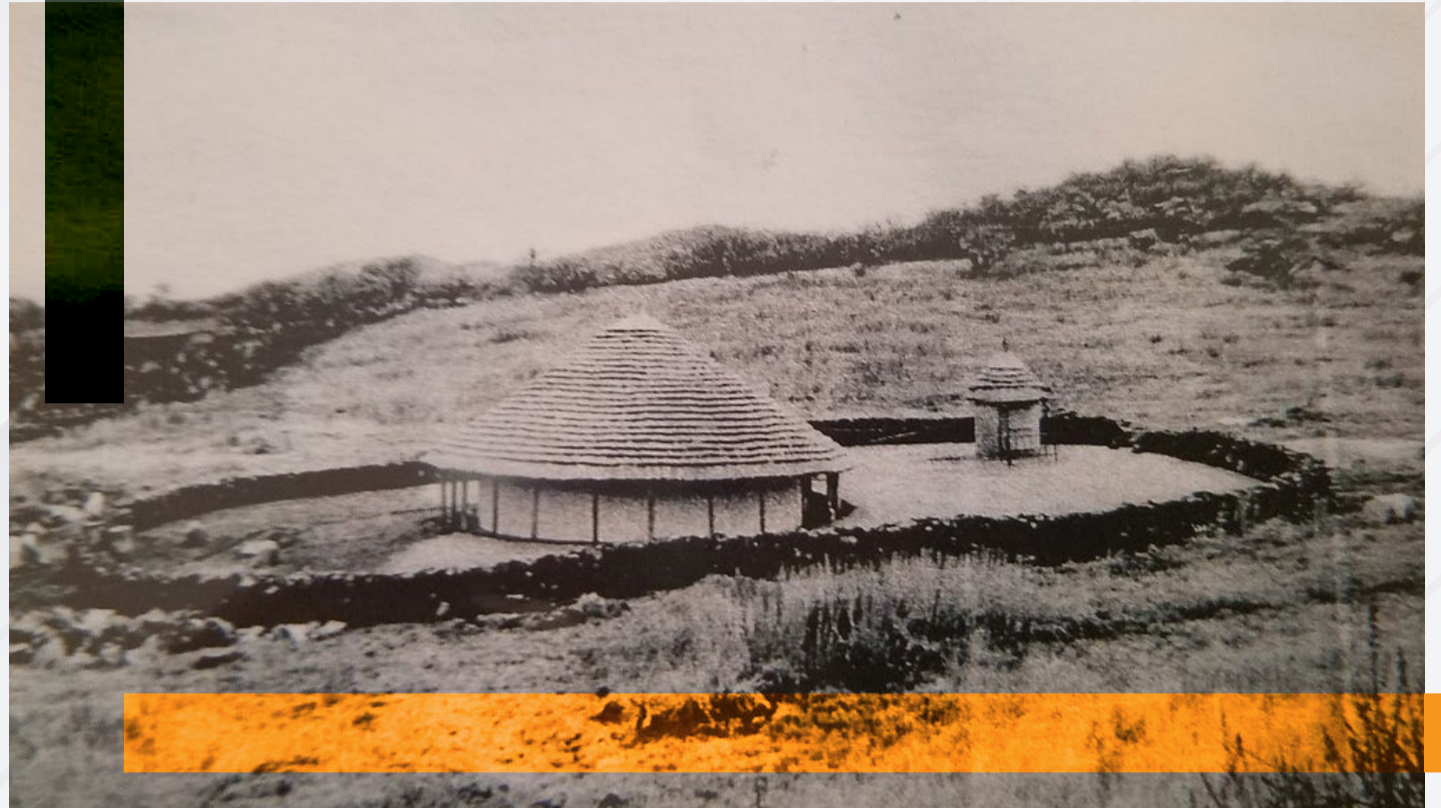
**At Empilweni, integrity is not a personality trait – it is a system outcome.**



SPOTLIGHT

**SPOTLIGHT  
ON IMPACT**

**DESIGN BEFORE  
COMPLIANCE**



## Design Before Compliance

Long before governance became procedural, Setswana society developed ways of holding power that were remarkably durable – not through compliance, but through design.

At the centre of communal life stood the Kgotla: a circular public space where decisions were spoken aloud, challenged openly, and carried by collective memory. Authority could not hide. Leaders convened; they did not command. Legitimacy came from reasoning, not title.

### Key architectural insights:

- Circular, transparent spaces make deviation difficult
- Collective memory preserves decisions beyond individual leaders
- Constraints on power are embedded in spatial and procedural design

Empilweni's procurement gates, audit triggers, and escalation thresholds echo this logic. Design, not heroism, sustains integrity.



# WHAT'S ON OUR RADAR

## THINK



## LISTEN



## ACT



As we move toward Volumes 5 and 6, we shift from relationships to systems, asking how institutions, policies, and structures embody—or undermine—the values explored here.



## THINK

Institutional integrity begins where heroic leadership ends.

- **Read Humble Leadership:** The Power of Relationships, Openness, and Trust (Schein & Schein) or Mission Economy: A Moonshot Guide to Changing Capitalism (Mazzucato)
- **Ask:** Which decisions rely on individual courage rather than system design?



## LISTEN

- The Systems Innovation Network (governance & complexity)
- How I Built This (founder transitions)



## ACT

1. Map institutional dependencies – systematise one process this quarter.
2. Audit a procurement workflow for thresholds and overrides.
3. Practice radical transparency around trade-offs and constraints.
4. Test absence: step away for one week and document what breaks.
5. Convene a “design for integrity” workshop to hard-code non-negotiables.

## UPCOMING EVENTS & ANNOUNCEMENTS



### JULY 2026

**Launch:**

KM Nala 2026 Governance Outlook

**Register at [www.kmnala.co.za](http://www.kmnala.co.za)**



### VOLUME 6 PREVIEW: SYSTEMIC STEWARDSHIP The Architecture of the Long Term

How do we govern for 2050 when political cycles reward 2027?  
How do we redesign economic systems to regenerate rather than extract?  
How do we hold global institutions accountable when national sovereignty fails?

*Volume 6 explores the largest container of all: the systems that govern nations, markets, and our shared planetary future.*



# CALL FOR CONTRIBUTORS



## Got something to say? CALL FOR CONTRIBUTORS

### CONTRIBUTION CALL — VOLUME 6

We invite essays, case studies, and practitioner reflections on:

- Regenerative economic systems
- Climate accountability beyond charity
- Governance structures that survive political cycles
- Global institutional reform from African perspectives

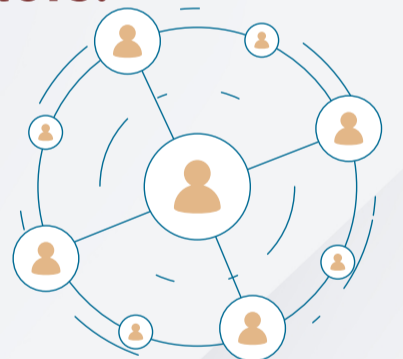
**Submission deadline: 20 February 2026**

info@kmnala.co.za

**Length: 600–800 words | Include a 2-sentence bio**

**We prioritise practitioners, continental voices, and builders over commentators.**

**FINAL NOTES +  
STAY CONNECTED**



**“Leadership begins when we choose to act with purpose, not just power.” – KM Nala**

### How to connect

Let’s keep the conversation going:

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