

Imagine scaling up an agricultural project whose goal is to improve rural incomes by increasing rice yields. It has three components. The first is the introduction of a new high-yield strain of rice developed and delivered by the national Ministry of Agriculture (MOA). The second consists of organizing rice farmer associations to buy inputs and sell outputs as part of a value chain approach. This component is outsourced to local NGOs. The third component is the training of agricultural extension workers (AEWs) in value chains and cultivation of the new variety of rice to support the farmers associations. The AEWs are employed by local government units (LGUs) as part of a recent decentralization. Many LGUs in the project area have chosen to hire an insufficient number of AEWs—their salaries come out of the LGUs' budgets—and those that have been hired have not received even basic agricultural training. Because of this, prior to training in high-yield rice and value chains, the project sponsors had to pressure LGUs to hire AEWs as a condition of participation and had to provide generic training in agriculture. Assume for this example that the intervention itself has been rigorously evaluated as successful at small scale and merits scaling up to a number of provinces with concentrations of poor rice farmers.

### Looking for institutional partners that fit the project

The first challenge is whether there exists an institution that has the capabilities and capacities to implement the intervention successfully at scale. Capacity here means having the reach to deliver the model at the desired scale. Capability means the ability to implement the intervention with the required quality and fidelity to the original design and adapt it to local conditions as necessary. The project model in the example is comprehensive and complex, with diverse components. Unfortunately, because of this, it is often unlikely that all of its components will be aligned with either the culture/incentives of a single institution or with its capabilities, let alone both.

A potential candidate is the national-level MOA, but in most countries the staff is largely composed of technical agricultural experts, and in these cases the staff's capabilities are neither in value chains nor in grassroots institution building. Implementing these approaches is incompatible with the ministry's technical competence and usually the associated organizational culture, which has more of an "engineering" than market or social mobilization orientation. Also, in countries that have decentralized or devolved agricultural and rural development services to the local level, having a single executing institution may simply be impossible as centralized, national-level agencies no longer have the means to reach end users or beneficiaries.

In many countries, NGOs working in rural areas have strong capabilities in social mobilization and a successful track record that has earned the trust of the local community. Unfortunately, it often turns out that in more remote provinces where scaling up is

desired, no NGOs exist with the necessary community mobilization capabilities, and the original NGOs do not have the capacity to work outside of their province.

A possible solution is to invest in organizational strengthening and expand the reach of the original delivery institution. This assumes that the NGO is willing, which might not be the case. Another is to try to transform the culture and capabilities of the MOA, but this requires that the MOA—from management down through the staff—be receptive and willing to change. Trying to change organizational culture cannot be undertaken lightly and is a multiyear effort that requires steadfast champions and leadership.

A third solution is to scale up the multiple components through several organizations, mirroring the small-scale implementation structure. However, this presents two additional obstacles: finding the necessary number of implementers with the right capability and culture in the desired location(s) and then coordinating them. The pilot project succeeded by creating its own provincial project steering committee, co-chaired by the provincial governor and national minister of agriculture. It was made up of all the necessary agencies plus the NGOs and was created specifically for the project. It was able to effect coordination because of its structure and the political power of the chairmen. With several implementers, scaling up would require the creation of new coordination institutions in every province and the willingness of governors to use political capital to enforce cooperation, no small effort if numerous provinces are envisaged.

### Aligning the project vertically and horizontally

Achieving horizontal alignment through coordination mechanisms is essential, yet vertical alignment of institutional incentives and cultures from national to local actors is also necessary. Vertical alignment across relevant government agencies, especially in decentralized or federal governance systems, presents numerous challenges. Donor projects or even national domestic projects may be aligned with national strategy and policy, but regional, provincial, district, and local governments often have substantially different priorities and incentives. The misalignment of institutional incentives becomes particularly important when scaling up is expected to use domestic funds and where multiple levels of government are involved in funding, approval, monitoring, and supplying in-kind (infrastructure and human) resources.

Whether scaling up is implemented through a single or through multiple organizations, another challenge is that generic capabilities and human resources may be weak or missing and have to be strengthened or even created from scratch. To address this challenge, one strategy would be to replicate at scale the same strategy used in the pilot—supplementing existing staff with direct hires and providing for one-off training of all AEWs. This is often a mistake for several reasons. First, training and retraining of AEWs will be an ongoing need, and therefore direct hires will not create sustainable, institutionalized training capacity. Second, training

often focuses on model-specific skills when what is needed is a much more comprehensive training effort. Finally, the common emphasis on training as the only type of capability or institution building needed is in most cases too narrow and insufficient. Training often needs to be combined with other organization- and even system-strengthening activities such as introducing rules, norms, and procedures for service providers; creating a system and norms for hiring, training, and promotion of AEWs; and improving supervision, accountability, and incentives.

## Conclusions

There are various ways to address many of these challenges, all of which imply compromises and trade-offs. The first and less desirable option is to reduce the targeted scale. For example, in the presented scenario accept that the only implementer will be the MOA, or work only in those provinces where effective LGU and NGO capacity exists. The second alternative is to simplify the model, which will have a negative effect on impact, but will facilitate achieving large scale. Moreover, it reinforces a common tendency among large-scale implementing agencies, especially those with a technical bias or culture, to drop or dilute the delivery of social components of innovations, which are often key to their effectiveness. The third alternative is to make a substantial investment in capacity and capability building. While allowing for both scale and impact, this is easier said than done and contrary to common practice in development assistance. The extent of

investment needed will almost always entail more than the simple one-off training or investment in infrastructure and equipment so favored by donor agencies and foundations; it will require true organizational change. This is expensive and time consuming and requires the agreement of the implementing institution(s), which is not always forthcoming.

The fourth and most desirable alternative is to specify in the design phase what the potential scale is, and keep iterating and learning during the pilot implementation until the components in the ultimate design are aligned with existing capabilities and capacities and have significant impact. The advantage is that it will avoid investment in an unscalable model or project and avoid disappointing implementation at scale in terms of both reach and impact. The disadvantage is that this may constrain the initial design, and can be rightly criticized for potentially limiting innovations to those that involve only changes at the margins, depending on preexisting capabilities, incentives, and culture. The bottom line here is that if effective large-scale implementation of new innovations implies greater capabilities than exist, then there is no way around investing in systems and organizations.

**For further reading:** L. Cooley and R. Kohl, *Scaling Up—From Vision to Large-Scale Change: A Management Framework for Practitioners*, [www.msiworldwide.com/files/scalingup-framework.pdf](http://www.msiworldwide.com/files/scalingup-framework.pdf).

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