Scaling Up in Agriculture, Rural Development, and Nutrition

Lessons on Scaling Up: Opportunities and Challenges for the Future

Johannes F. Linn

2020 Vision for Food, Agriculture, and the Environment

Focus 19 • Brief 20 • June 2012

Agriculture and rural development are essential components of economic growth and the battle against poverty, hunger, and malnutrition worldwide. In the developing world, investment in agriculture was much neglected in recent decades by governments and donors alike, as outlined in Brief 2. Following global spikes in food prices over the past several years, world attention has once again focused on the critical need to support this key sector. But it is not just a question of more investment and more aid; it is a question of how governments and donors ensure value for money. In the past, attention has focused on innovations in agricultural technology and rural development interventions, with little thought given to how one takes successful interventions to scale. Common political and administrative incentives have reinforced this pattern, as has an increasingly fragmented international aid architecture, in which small and disconnected donor-funded projects predominate.

It is now becoming clear that both innovation and scaling up "what works" are critical, and the policy briefs in this series provide many outstanding examples for effectively scaling up successful interventions in developing countries. They show not only that scaling up is possible but that there is an increasing commitment to it among concerned actors. It is not enough to merely replicate interventions; what matters is to scale up impact sustainably. Scaling up is not an end in itself but an instrument to achieve the goal of improved lives for the greatest number of people.

The previous briefs further demonstrate that it helps to have a common analytical framework and a common language as stakeholders consider scaling-up opportunities and challenges. The analytical framework used in this set considers pathways, drivers, and spaces (Brief 1). This is only one possible framework, but the authors found it helpful in exploring the experience of scaling up and considering suitable approaches for the future.

This brief summarizes the main conclusions from this wide-ranging series. It looks at the actors, dimensions, processes, and pathways of scaling up while summarizing what we have learned about the drivers of the process and how to create the spaces that allow scaling up to take place. Finally, it comments on cross-cutting issues that are relevant to the scaling-up process and that must be addressed as interventions are brought to scale.

Actors

Virtually all effective scaling-up experiences in agriculture, rural development, and nutrition have involved a multiplicity of actors: national, state, and local governments; civil society organizations; private businesses; public and private external donors; and, most importantly, farmers and rural communities. In the case of community-driven programs, Hans P. Binswanger-Mkhize and Jacomina de Regt said in Brief 3 that "bottom up meets top down." And, perhaps most obviously in the development of value chains, many actors must engage throughout the change process. For effective scaling up, the development of multistakeholder alliances is a key ingredient.

Dimensions

Effective scaling up of agricultural and rural development interventions usually takes place across multiple dimensions. The development program in the Peruvian Highlands (Brief 4) provides a case in point: projects gradually spread across different areas through "horizontal" scaling up, expanding thematically to cover broader aspects of the rural economy with "functional" scaling up. Over time, they scaled up "vertically" with adoption by the national government. One lesson drawn from the case studies in this series is that horizontal and vertical scaling up usually have to be combined to achieve success. This is true for area development programs in Peru and China, new rice production methods in Vietnam, value chain development, and community development programs.

Scaling-up process and pathways

There is no unique scaling-up process. It may be carefully planned from the beginning, as in the case of the value-chain development supported by PepsiCo, or it can be opportunistic, as in the Peru case. It may follow a broadly predictable sequence to disseminating technical innovation, as in the case of Vietnamese rice production improvements, or it may go against the better judgment of professional peers and be seen to involve considerable risk, like the China Loess Watershed Rehabilitation Project. It may involve a linear three-step sequence: (1) piloting an innovation, (2) piloting the scaling-up process, and (3) rolling out at-scale, as envisaged for community development programs in Brief 3. It can follow a more iterative pattern combining scaling up with innovation, as in the Peruvian Highlands projects and programs of the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN). Or it may involve the mainstreaming of innovations in the context of existing development programs, as documented for the case of some of the initiatives supported under the Alive & Thrive program in Bangladesh.

In no case, however, was the process purely technocratic. It always involved a long-term engagement—more than 10 to 15 years in many cases—and adherence to a combination of key principles: a vision that scale was ultimately critical, a readiness to plan for scaling up in sensible steps, effective management of the process, learning by doing and adapting the approach as needed, building on opportunities for action as they arose, working with partners, and ensuring motivation among the stakeholders in the process. While some of the successes were serendipitous, there is little doubt that a systematic and deliberate approach in defining the scaling-up pathway is more likely to result in the effort being pursued and achieved successfully. AKDN, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Oxfam, PepsiCo, and the Global Fund have worked this way for some time, and now the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) and the Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) initiative are also pursuing a systematic approach. It helps to consider explicitly who or what are the drivers of the scaling-up process and how obstacles can be removed or spaces created so the initiatives can grow.

Drivers

Successful scaling up almost always involves champions who push the process forward relentlessly. It can be an individual leader, as in the cases of AKDN and the Gates Foundation, groups of individuals as in the Peru case, or institutions that have scaling up in their DNA, such as PepsiCo and the Global Fund. Scaling up can be driven by crisis or memories of a crisis, as in the Peruvian case, where a history of violence in the region was a powerful driver for the area-based rural development programs.

Incentives are also critical drivers, especially as they help generate private demand for the innovations in farming practices to be scaled up. Ownership rights are essential for farmers, as demonstrated by the Loess Plateau project in China and the regreening experience in Africa. Empowered rural communities can serve as strong drivers of scaling up and as agents of accountability for public agencies. Finally, those institutions that have pursued a scaling-up agenda consistently and successfully evidently found ways to ensure internal accountability of their managers and staff to align with institutional goals.

Spaces

- **Institutional space.** A pervasive theme of the briefs in this series is the need for effective development and deployment of institutions that can carry forward the scaling-up process. The institutions that have promoted the original innovation or pilot may not have the capability to scale up or manage the initiative at scale. Special institutional capacity may have to be found or created. Often, many institutions are involved and need to cooperate or be coordinated. Institutional rivalries may prevent effective leadership of the process, and decentralization of governmental responsibility, now frequently promoted in developing countries, may interfere with effective leadership by national ministries. And yet the successfully scaled-up initiatives described in this series demonstrate that with imagination, persistence, and selectivity the institutional space can be created. Richard Kohl (Brief 12) concludes that the best approach is to focus from the outset very deliberately on the institutional choices to be made and the capacity-building needed for the chosen scaling up pathway.

- **Policy space.** The policy and regulatory framework is critical for effective scaling up. For farmers, ownership rules and their enforcement provide incentives or disincentives for adoption of innovations. The roles that rural communities are allowed to play and the support communities receive from local, provincial, and national governments are essential factors for empowerment and capacity. The general business environment and specific regulatory interventions can hinder or support effective development and scaling up of value chains. Rules governing rural credit, deposit, and insurance schemes can limit or support expansion of the rural economy.

- **Fiscal and financial space.** The extent to which fiscal and financial resources are available to sustain and scale up an initiative beyond the original donor-supported project needs to be addressed from the outset. National governments must make credible commitments to provide sustained budget funding where appropriate, or initiatives have to keep cost down to minimize dependence on outside funding. In the case of commercial ventures, such as the orange sweet potato initiative, innovations must be able to compete with other traditional products.

- **Political space.** Small initiatives tend to fly under the radar of major political actors, but, when scaling up is the goal, it is important to create the space needed to avoid political obstacles by advocacy and outreach to key constituencies and actors, as stressed for the regreening initiative in Africa. Brief 14 documents a case in which a highly successful Indian nongovernmental organization had to suspend a program in one state due to problems with state-level authorities. In countries subject to electoral cycles, building constituencies of support across the spectrum of political parties is important.

- **Partnership space.** All the successful scaling-up initiatives reviewed in these briefs involved deliberate efforts to seek out and mobilize the appropriate partners from the outset. In more advanced developing economies, this generally means national and local partners in the countries themselves; for less-developed countries, it also often means partnering with external donors. But in all cases, seeking local counterparts that own the donor initiatives and can eventually drive and sustain the scaling-up process is critical. For example, in its rice intensification project in Vietnam, Oxfam is deliberately planning for a "phase down" of its own engagement in support of project execution as local partners increasingly take over.

- **Learning space.** An evidence-based approach to scaling up is invariably needed. It starts with a good situation analysis, as stressed by PepsiCo in its approach to value-chain development, followed by effective monitoring and evaluation (M&E) along the scaling-up pathway, as in the case of HarvestPlus and Oxfam, and complemented by intensive institutional learning from experience, as documented by the Gates Foundation. Traditional modalities of M&E, which have focused exclusively on the achievement of project-specific input and output goals, need to expand to include the dimensions critical for scaling up. They must go beyond narrow project confines to measure whether and how the project supports the overall scaling-up process, in which the project is only one step along the pathway.

- **Other spaces.** Dealing with a severely constrained environmental space was of critical importance in the case of scaling up the Loess Plateau project in China. Capitalizing on the cultural characteristics of community action was a key asset for success in the Peruvian Highlands. Cultural obstacles needed to be addressed in the development of the orange sweet potato initiative, and PepsiCo had to adapt to the cultural context of the environments where it developed its value chains. Many of the briefs stress the importance of creating social space for women to contribute to the scaling-up process, whether it involves community-driven development, new agricultural crop methods, or the adoption of nutrition initiatives.

Cross-cutting issues

- **Sustainability.** Sustainability and scalability are deeply intertwined. Where a project is not sustainable, it is not likely to be scalable unless special attention is given to the factors that impede sustainability. These, in fact, are often the same that prevent scaling, such as institutional weaknesses, policy constraints, and excessive costs in relation to financial resources or to consumers' or recipients' willingness to pay. The good news is that typically by focusing on these factors as part of the scaling-up challenge, constraints to sustainability are also addressed.

- **Risk taking.** Scaling up generally involves taking risks. Aside from exogenous risks (such as natural disasters, conflict, and poor weather) the risks involved are most likely related to the loss of key drivers and the inability to create sufficient spaces to allow the initiative to grow. Many of these risks can be mitigated by explicitly considering the scaling-up pathways, identifying the risks, and deploying measures to address them as far and as early as possible. This was the approach followed in the case of the Loess Plateau project, for example. However, not all risks can be mitigated, and what risks remain must be managed and responded to as they materialize. It is important to recognize, however, that scaling up does not necessarily involve higher risks than continuing the proliferation of disconnected small projects. The scaling-up approach may, in fact, be less risky, since it allows one to learn more systematically and build institutional capacity and stakeholder support, and thus mitigate important sources of risk.

- **Fragile states.** There is no doubt that many of the factors that support scaling up are more constrained in fragile and conflict-affected states than in stable environments. But, as noted in Brief 19, a fragile state should not avoid scaling up successful interventions. Indeed, the evidence shows that scaling up is possible in fragile states, and a good case can be made that while it will likely take longer and require perhaps different modalities, a scaling-up perspective will help address the huge challenges that people in these countries face.

Role of external donors

Ultimately, the scaling-up task is one that must be addressed by stakeholders within developing countries: government, business, civil society, rural communities, and individual farmers. External donors can help or hinder this process. They hinder when they intervene with fragmented and short-sighted initiatives. They can help by focusing on the task of scaling up. Long-term engagement and sticking with it is an essential prerequisite, since scaling up by necessity is generally a long-term process, especially in fragile states. A systematic focus on scaling up in donor strategies, operational processes, and internal incentives is needed. The experience of vertical funds reviewed in Brief 18 shows that this is possible, and IFAD's scaling-up agenda, described in Brief 17, demonstrates a way to systematically increase effectiveness in supporting smallholder development. The Gates Foundation has made scaling up a clear objective for its operations. Based on an explicit stock-taking of its experience to date, the Foundation recently recalibrated its strategy of support for agriculture and rural development with a view to effective impact at scale.

Donors should avoid what the authors of Brief 18 call "a narrow view of scaling up, in which each donor goes from its own pilot project to scaling up particular (sets of) interventions." All scaling-up interventions, whether specific interventions, area-based or sectorwide country programs, or global initiatives like the Global Fund and SUN, should adhere to the principles of aid effectiveness from the 2005 Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness—ownership, alignment, harmonization, results, and mutual accountability—and, where applicable, consider broader sectoral and cross-sectoral linkages. Concerted donor support for "mainstreaming" the right policies and institutional mechanisms for agriculture, rural development, and nutrition; community empowerment; and supportive gender policies is a key aspect of effective scaling up.

Conclusion

Scaling up is "mission critical"—to use IFAD's term—if developing countries and their external donor partners wish to tackle effectively the multiple challenges of agricultural development and the reduction of rural poverty, hunger, and malnutrition. As the briefs in this series show, we have many good examples of successful scaling up. We also have some very helpful cross-cutting insights into the institutional, policy, and process requirements that make scaling up possible in addition to a simple framework with which to assess the challenge and tailor a suitable response. The main issue now is whether, collectively, we have the will to work systematically—and together—toward meeting this opportunity.

***Johannes F. Linn** (jlinn@brookings.edu) is a senior resident scholar, Emerging Markets Forum, and nonresident senior fellow, The Brookings Institution, in Washington, DC.*

INTERNATIONAL FOOD POLICY RESEARCH INSTITUTE
sustainable solutions for ending hunger and poverty
A member of the CGIAR Consortium
www.ifpri.org

Copyright © 2012 International Food Policy Research Institute. All rights reserved. Contact ifpri-copyright@cgiar.org for permission to republish.