What does it take to scale social impact?

Insights from South Asia

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Twenty years ago, Indian activist Arbind Singh pleaded with local officials to address the issues facing the urban poor. The state government of Bihar had recently carried out a massive anti-encroachment drive that left thousands of street vendors without the means to earn a living. Across India, cities were being 'beautified'—which in part meant kicking out vendors. The urban poor were largely ignored and unwanted.

Frustrated, Arbind launched Nidan. It was an organisation that worked with informal workers to address their needs and to help them fight for their rights. Many paid hefty, informal "tariffs" for their vending spaces and frequently faced harassment from the police. With Nidan's support, they began to protest and gained more attention from the local municipal government. However, Arbind knew that without changes at the national level, gains would be slow and require action city by city.

In 2003, the National Association of Street Vendors of India (NASVI) was established as an independent sister organisation that enabled the vendors to set their own priorities and advocacy activities. Nidan aggressively expanded its presence beyond the state of Bihar to 29 states believing that a national movement would greatly increase their legislative influence. Over the next decade, NASVI's members would advocate tirelessly for the passage of policies that addressed their needs.

Earlier this year, India passed the Street Vendors (Protection of Livelihood and Regulation of Street Vending) Act, a law that recognised street vendors and provided many important protections for their wellbeing. While the work was by no means complete, establishing a firm, legal basis for their demands was a significant achievement.

Around the world, there are many people like Arbind who dream of scaling a movement to affect the lives of thousands, even millions. Yet most of them fail. What is it then that Nidan and other organisations that succeeded in taking their impact to scale do differently?

At the BRAC Social Innovation Lab based in Bangladesh, we have spent the last two years studying precisely this question. While development overall is brimming with pilots and small organisations, South Asia in particular has given rise to a number of large-scale organisations and movements that buck the trend. We worked closely with practitioners in five South Asian organisations, including BRAC, to understand how they conceptualised scale and ensured that their initiatives succeeded at scale.

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Know the problem you're trying to solve

Too often, scale is simplified as something to think about *after* completing a successful pilot. We found that the reality was much messier—often organisations don't think about their early work as a pilot, per se, and they may start *thinking* about scale much earlier than their actions reveal. Many organisations do not necessarily start with the aspirations for their initiative to scale nationally or internationally, but eventually they conclude that the problems that they were addressing required a bigger, more comprehensive solution. Nidan realised that trying to mobilise street vendors on a state-by-state basis and hoping for broader public support for the cause would not work. They saw that they had to make it a national movement.

Before scaling, organisations developed a deep understanding of their environment and the layers of the problem. This knowledge was crucial to developing a model that addressed the full range of relevant issues. The organisation Gram Vikas had a mission of eliminating poverty in the Indian state of Orissa. Over time, it found that one of the primary drivers of poverty was poor health, and many illnesses were caused by water and sanitation issues. Even within water and sanitation, they found that there were issues of social inequality for lower castes and

women. Creating equal access to water and sanitation would be socially transformative and could dramatically improve the health of a community. These insights led it to develop its 100% participation model: it would provide significant support to villages to construct latrines and water taps for every home, as well as a sustainable potable water supply, but only if the entire community committed to the process and contributed the equivalent of $16 USD per household.

Despite the fact that reaching 100% participation took several years for most villages, Gram Vikas refused to negotiate on this requirement for two reasons. First, if any members of the community continued to openly defecate, the community's health would not improve significantly, and secondly, Gram Vikas know that part of the resistance, usually from the elites, came from the fear that 100% access would threaten the status quo. As Chitra Chowdhury, Gram Vikas, says, "It's easy to get to 80%, a bit challenging to get to 90%, but hardest to get to 100%. The process moves everyone and the entire village is changed. Once you start lowering your bar, you never know when to say this is enough."

Even in organisations that are focused on scale, leaders may spend significant time testing and refining their model prior to expanding. Following a successful pilot, leaders may even choose to run a slightly larger pilot to refine their understanding of it, prior to a full-fledged scale up.   For once that begins, the time for iteration and learning will decrease dramatically. One of the BRAC projects we followed was an initiative called the "model ward," led by the Community Empowerment Programme. The idea was to bring a village together to define their own vision of a model community, then work together to realise it, creatively mobilising resources from the local government and non-profit organisations as needed.

The first efforts were initiated in an area of Bangladesh where BRAC historically had a strong presence, in a ward where the local government officials saw development gains as beneficial for their re-election. Consequently, local leadership supported the initiative and took ownership of the process. They set community goals. Community members worked together to increase school enrolment, latrine availability, and economic opportunities. Shopkeepers turned their televisions off during the times when children should be headed to school. Women cared for trees they planted on public land bordering the roads, sharing the harvest with the local government. Many positive changes happened quickly, and the local elected officials deemed it a model ward within a year.

BRAC's leadership was pleased and a bit surprised by the speed of the initial success. Nationwide, the Community Empowerment Programme had helped over 13,000 villages create community action groups *(polli somaj)* and continued to support their activities. A new initiative like the model ward had an instant infrastructure to go to scale—the platform was ready. And yet BRAC decided to expand to just one new ward that

looked significantly different from the first; it was more urban and a very different community politically. The team knew that there were many positive external factors that had contributed to the quick successes, and ultimately they could not yet identify the crucial ingredients that would be essential to include. Despite having the infrastructure in place, they did not want to scale without the confidence that the model was ready.

Some issues require rapid action, whereas others have to move at an organic pace. Identifying the minimum core set of values and activities to insist on is difficult, but of crucial importance. Balancing speed, quality and sustainability is a constant challenge on the path to scale.

To scale or not to scale?

The BRAC Community Empowerment Programme, like many organisations we studied, knew that the act of scaling is resource intensive. Often it means a significant decrease in the time and energy for learning, experimenting, and reflecting on the problem. Leaders are forced to make difficult decisions—scale almost always results in a compromise of quality, but if the quality level falls too far, what's the point of scaling at all? Some issues require rapid action, whereas others have to move at an organic pace. Identifying the minimum core set of values and activities to insist on is difficult, but of crucial importance. Balancing speed, quality and sustainability is a constant challenge on the path to scale.

A balancing act

When going to scale, leaders must understand the relationship between three fundamental dimensions.
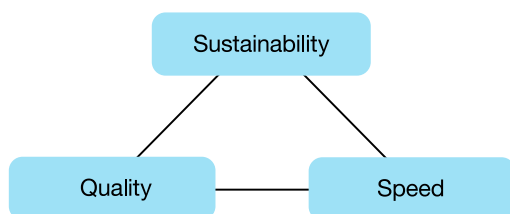
The organisations that we looked at maintained a level of flexibility and openness, recognising that the context of rapidly changing South Asia required them to make constant adjustments. Several organisations, such as Gram Vikas and Nidan, actively chose to remain relatively small, with their total staff of a few hundred people. Nidan created a separate institution for vendors that could scale independently, and Gram Vikas moved out of villages once the initial work was complete. They wanted to avoid bureaucracy and stay nimble. BRAC meanwhile has over 100,000 staff in Bangladesh, having concluded that an ongoing presence and service delivery is its best way to have an impact.

Scaling also requires difficult trade-offs. Maintaining a shared vision across all staff is much easier when the team is smaller and working in a single area. The quality of implementation may be compromised if the speed of scaling up is a top priority.

But as Nidan's leader Arbind found, without scale, some initiatives simply will not work. This thinking was shared by the Access to

At the end of the day, what really matters is who your champions are in the government. Identifying the people who believe in your cause and who are willing to help you move it along is the most critical part of the process.
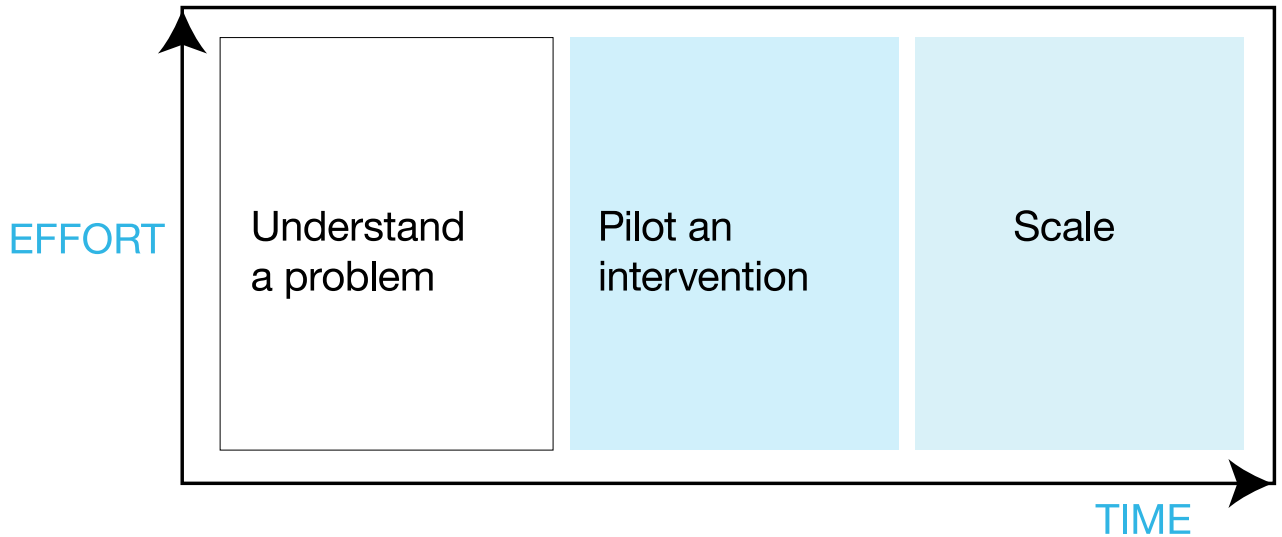
Information Initiative (a2i), which was managed by the Bangladesh Prime Minister's Office and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). One of their primary strategies to fulfil their objective of "bringing public services to the citizens' doorsteps" was to create information and service centres for Bangladesh's 4,500 offices at the union level, which was the smallest administrative unit and comprised of nine wards or villages. a2i had designed an entrepreneurship model that they believed would deliver responsive services and create a livelihood for a young man and woman in each union. But it knew that with the political situation in Bangladesh, if they didn't establish themselves completely before the next national election, there was a good chance that the project would be abandoned by the next administration.

Naimuzzaman Mukta from the a2i team explained, "At first we started scaling in phases involving 100 or 200 Union Information Service Centres but we realised that at that rate, to get to 4,500 would take over 20 years. We wanted to reach that target within the government's current term in office. So, the strategy was to scale up to the fullest extent through an administrative enforcement. Then, once that was achieved, we could address the particular challenges that arose."
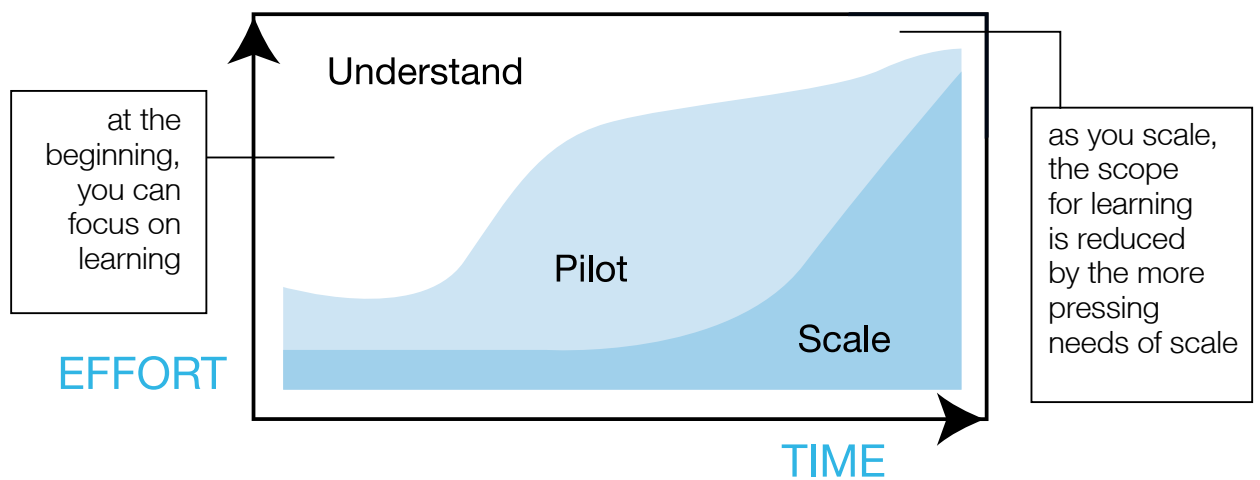
There was an explicit decision to prioritise quantity over quality. Not every initiative is willing to make that decision, nor should they. Gram Vikas has chosen consistently to stick to its 100% participation criterion, sacrificing speed, because it's central to their objective. But they are facing certain challenges as a result. As they work with other organisations to replicate the model, this has proven to be a very difficult component and ideology to convince others to adopt.

Scale, particularly the kind required for effective policy advocacy, can come from the shared voice of many smaller implementers. One example is the work of the Rural Support Programme Network of Pakistan, an umbrella organisation that works with social development organisations across the country. Representing Pakistan's largest NGO network, RSPN is also one of the most respected voices in South Asia about rural social development. Their CEO, Shandana Khan, said, "Scale is a big reason we have been able to have a policy impact. Saying that you work in two villages is fundamentally different than if you say you are working with thirty-five million people."

Typically, we describe scaling up as distinct phases.

EFFORT

| Understand a problem | Pilot an intervention | Scale |

TIME

The reality is that these activities overlap.

Understand

at the beginning, you can focus on learning

Pilot

Scale

as you scale, the scope for learning is reduced by the more pressing needs of scale

EFFORT

TIME

Effective organisations never stop learning and evolving.

Building institutions is a critical part of scaling

Obviously to work at scale requires a relationship with public institutions. But in South Asia, it requires more than just a relationship. In fact, an appetite for ecosystem building and institution strengthening is recommended. We found that organisations at scale usually know how far they can push the public sector without jeopardising their work, and instead rely heavily on personal relationships, capacity building, and sheer persistence.

The Rural Support Programmes Network's history is littered with examples where a timely phone call from its well-connected founder was crucial to advancing its goals. Even now, Shandana Khan says, "At the end of the day, what really matters is who your champions are in the government. Identifying the people who believe in your cause and who are willing to help you move it along is the most critical part of the process." It was important for them to have relationships with all political parties, be perceived as neutral, and to build and maintain relationships even when they didn't need them. Knowing which favours to call in, from whom and when is a sophisticated skill.

When organisations take on extremely complex issues, such as property rights, they must engage with the public sector on multiple levels. Three years ago, the BRAC Human Rights and Legal aid Services Programme launched a property rights initiative, designed to help women and the poor better understand and exercise their rights to land. Property disputes are notoriously complex cases in Bangladesh, often taking decades to resolve, and they are a big contributor to violence and even murders. Strengthening the legal system was a long-term goal that was largely beyond BRAC's power, so instead it started where it worked best: in the villages, increasing the number of certified land measurers by training and supporting a cadre of social "land" entrepreneurs. In addition to providing measurement services for a fee, these entrepreneurs referred people to BRAC's legal aid clinics and offered free services to the poor.

But the planned activities were not enough—success would require a favour from someone up high. The land entrepreneurs struggled to procure the special maps they needed from local land offices that asked for steep fees or simply refused to provide them. But as a result of BRAC's relationship with the Ministry of Land, it was able to develop a special agreement to distribute them to its land measurers.

Sometimes it's better not to do it all yourself

From relationships to the courage to take tough decisions, it's clear that success at scale depends on much more than a sleek delivery model. Relationships, advocacy, opportunism and several other factors are part of the success story. Our research indicates that organisations need to think about their "intermediation" as much as their implementation. We

define intermediation as the set of activities and capabilities required for effective facilitation which brings about large-scale change.   BRAC for example has invested significantly in developing capacity for research, communications, and advocacy, recognising that these dimensions influence the overall impact of its work.

Not every organisation can become a jack of all trades, and many prefer not to.   We see examples of intermediaries that exist to partner with implementers and provide the additional bandwidth that they need to grow. Perhaps the most interesting example is the Rural Support Programme Network in Pakistan, which was established by the many organisations implementing the "rural support programme" model. They realized that none of them had the time for the advocacy, policy making, resource mobilisation, and capacity building that would benefit all of them, so they opted to develop a separate network organisation.

The National Association of Street Vendors of India and Nidan are another example of how two institutions can be greater than one. NASVI represented the vendors and excelled at activism. Meanwhile, Nidan worked behind the scenes to influence politicians, set up meetings between public officials and NASVI's leadership, and provide important intelligence to NASVI on when to crank up the heat.

Final thoughts

The path to scale is full of curves and bumps. It is difficult to develop generalisable principles or recommendations. In lieu of these, from the experiences that we observed over the course of this project, we identified five important issues that we think all organisations thinking about scale should address.

Don't jump to scaling up right away. Make sure you develop a deep appreciation of the problems and potential parts of the solution first. Maintain mechanisms for learning and refining even as you scale. It doesn't hurt to have scale in mind from the beginning, but don't rush through the preparation because you feel pressure to start showing results and growth.

Scaling is as much about removing or "scaling down" social barriers as scaling up impactful activities. Consider all angles when planning your approach, including the barriers that your organisation may face in the process.

Be pragmatic. To scale, you have to choose your priorities, opportunities and your battles wisely. Be flexible on everything, except those values that are absolutely essential to your goal. Your approach and potentially even your organisation will need to evolve. Prepare to reinvent yourself if necessary.

There's no avoiding the fact that relationships matter.
From day one, take time to cultivate a network and build trust and rapport with key stakeholders. Relationships are just one component of effective intermediation; if your organisation lacks the bandwidth or interest for these activities, consider partnering up with someone who can.

Most issues can't be tackled overnight. If it were that easy, we'd all be out of a job! Take a long view—many social issues may take a generation to truly overcome. Focus on laying the groundwork and changing those things that can be changed now, to create new opportunities for change tomorrow.

We learned a great deal over the past two years about how diverse organisations across South Asia think about and approach scale. These findings only begin to skim the surface of the deep wisdom left to be discovered. Historically relatively little research on these topics has focused on the global south, despite the known existence of organisations like BRAC, Gram Vikas, RSPN, Nidan and a2i with expertise on excelling at scale. We encourage others to join in these inquiries, as deepening the sector's understanding of scale can accelerate progress in poverty reduction globally.

Learn more