

SCALING SCIENCE

innovation for the public good

SOUTHERN PERSPECTIVES ON FUNDERS' SUPPORT FOR SCALING

lessons from the scalingXchange



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**scaling
science**



In 2020, the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) launched the scalingXchange to convene and learn from a group ‘[Scaling Advisors](#)’ (biographies at the hyperlink, names and affiliations in Annex)—researchers and innovators from the Global South, from across the regions and research themes we work in, with experience scaling impact¹. An initial 11-week online program of exchange, discussion, and debate provided an opportunity to share and consolidate learning about scaling from the too-often underrepresented perspective of the Global South. For IDRC – and in our view other development funders – this represents a treasure trove of feedback and insight. The results will be immediately useful for sharpening our approach to supporting impact-oriented research at IDRC.

Discussions to date aimed to unpack, challenge, and develop the four guiding principles of [scaling science](#), identified through a comprehensive retrospective study of more than 200 research projects with real-world impact objectives. The advantage of the guiding principles is that they present an evidence-based framework for scaling impact that offers options for innovation and creativity, rather than outlining a singular pathway to success. Together they form an understanding of scaling as: a *coordinated* effort to achieve a collection of impacts at *optimal scale* that occurs if it is both morally *justified* and warranted by the *dynamic evaluation* of evidence.

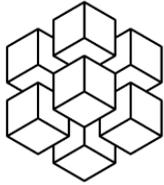
Discussion of these principles with Southern thought leaders offered an occasion to reflect on their validity as a scaling framework for innovation and research, on opportunities and challenges for putting the principles into practice, and on what IDRC and other funders can do to play our part in the partnership this will require. This report summarizes what we heard and provides a starting point for action. The primary intended audience is IDRC grant-makers. Others may find useful lessons for their own work.

Given the positive direction of the scalingXchange to date, next steps will include the drafting by the Scaling Advisors of an independent statement on scaling impact. This will make an important contribution to the science of scaling, and provide a roadmap for funders who aim to invest in sustainable development.

¹ Scaling Advisors who generously lent their expertise to this effort included representatives from Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, and the Middle East and North Africa. Their professional expertise ranged from finance to genetics, from law to climatology, from geoscience to patient-centered health care.



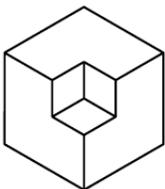
What opportunities and challenges do researchers face putting the principles into practice?



Justification

The choice to scale must be justified based on a balance of evidence alongside values—and this choice must be shared among a broad range of stakeholders. Justification calls for asking “why scale?” at the start of and throughout any scaling process.

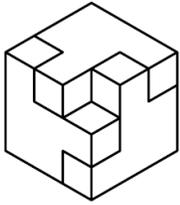
The conversation around this principle highlighted the need for continual assessment of both the technical and moral justifications for scaling, and the need to provide space to do so within the parameters of projects. As new evidence is generated throughout the scaling process, the technical justification must be revisited and re-assessed. Similarly, as the identification of new stakeholders and new interests evolves in the scaling process, additional (and potentially conflicting) values are likely to emerge. Sound moral justification therefore also requires an ongoing understanding and balancing of these interests and values, and there is a need for powerful enablers such as funders to accept this alongside technical evidence when formulating their expectations around scaling. Funding mechanisms that support inclusion, participation, and consultation are deeply valued, even when they increase budgets, timelines, and complexity.



Optimal Scale

Optimal scale challenges the “bigger is better” logic of scaling. It recognizes that scaling produces a variety of impacts, and there is a need to balance dimensions of magnitude, variety, equity and sustainability of those impacts when determining the “right” or optimal scale.

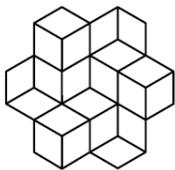
The discussion of optimal scale confirmed the importance of recognizing that more is not always better. It highlighted a continuing and problematic tendency among funders to focus on magnitude as the predominant measure of successful scaling—with less attention to dimensions of variety and equity, and only some consideration of sustainability of impacts. Advisors noted that sufficient information is critical to understanding optimal scale, but that lack of resources to collect it can often present a challenge. Furthermore, pursuit of optimal scale needs to be balanced against the risk of not scaling at all—there is a need to promote, as much as possible, simple and practical approaches to incorporating this principle. Finally, there was discussion of considering the “optimal speed” of scaling processes – acknowledging that particularly in cases where we need to influence behaviours as a part of a scaling process, the speed at which we attempt to do so will likely affect the chances of success. To uphold the principle of optimal scale, Scaling Advisors note the need for openness on the part of funders to a multi-dimensional view of impact, and acceptance of the possible trade-offs among these dimensions that may be necessary in pursuit of an optimal scale. Funders were encouraged to play a role in supporting innovators to plan and re-plan for these trade-offs as they emerge.



Coordination

Scaling impact occurs in complex systems, and this complexity requires flexible scaling processes. Moreover, it requires consideration of an evolving range of stakeholders who may affect and be affected by the scaling process.

The conversation around the coordination principle emphasized the need to consider power relations throughout the scaling process. In particular, this calls for efforts to incorporate the views and interests of an appropriately diverse range of stakeholders in a rigorous *Justification* for scaling. In addition, there is a need to think on an ongoing basis about effective strategies for influencing an evolving set of stakeholders who may initiate, enable, inhibit, or be affected by a scaling process, and create tailored strategies to influence different stakeholder types. There is a need for evidence not only about the innovations involved in scaling processes, but also about the actors that need to be involved—Scaling Advisors noted that in a pilot project, for example, there is often a lack of understanding of the broader range of stakeholders that need to be engaged to scale impact. Scaling Advisors also noted that timing is crucial in developing collaborative relationships, especially when stakeholders are evolving and changing over the course of a scaling effort. There is a related need to manage scaling processes across funding cycles as well as across funders who may support different aspects of a scaling process. In sum, Scaling Advisors highlighted that while coordination is key to effective scaling for impact, it is an often-unpredictable process that can rarely be described in complete accuracy in a proposal. Funders who approach projects as brokers and relationship builders, and who support innovators to network and consult even when this deviates from preconceived plans were highlighted as partners in impact.



Dynamic Evaluation

Scaling is an intervention that must be evaluated on an ongoing basis. To address this, Dynamic Evaluation is a stance—not a specific method—that goes beyond asking whether impact was achieved at a certain point, to understanding how, why, under what conditions scaling leads to a range of impacts, and importantly, how this might change over time and place.

Each discussion leading up to the session on dynamic evaluation highlighted its importance to informing and upholding the other three guiding principles. Scaling advisors raised the importance of a learning culture within projects and their own organizations to enable dynamic evaluation. In environments where evaluation is understood as mainly an accountability-oriented tool, there may be a reluctance to use approaches that will surface the information needed to identify and pursue optimal scale. For example, advisors noted that there is often an overestimation of the value of experimental approaches like Randomized Control Trials (RCTs) to demonstrate the impacts of interventions—but this is usually not the most efficient, effective, or trustworthy way of understanding scaling processes. There is also a need to think beyond individual projects when taking a dynamic evaluation stance, given that scaling processes typically span multiple projects, even multiple funders.



As a result, dynamic evaluation requires sufficient resources, but also, flexibility around what will be assessed. Scaling Advisors spoke to the power that funders can hold over what gets evaluated, and why. Where the goal of the funder is to “demonstrate results”, scaling impact and scalability of innovations are issues that are too often overlooked or undervalued in project plans and reporting requirements. Scaling Advisors suggest a learning-focused approach to flexible and dynamic evaluation of scaling processes, which—if valued and supported—may incubate more meaningful and robust impact.

How can funders support researchers in the Global South with scaling?

Many ideas and lessons emerged from the scalingXchange. Here we summarize five leading lessons. The diversity of perspectives represented lends this synthesized and collective advice considerable strength.

1. Provide support within projects for the ongoing engagement and consultation of the stakeholders whose values and endorsement will ultimately govern project success and sustainability. This implies not only financial resources to cover this time investment: it also means being open to innovators changing course, to meet the needs of the evolving actors who affect and are affected by scaling. These actors cannot always be predicted in a project proposal. It also means a nuanced understanding of the ethical considerations needed to obtain and weigh the accurate views and values of stakeholders in an equal way to the often more readily obtained ‘technical evidence’ for justifying a decision to scale.
2. Recognize and promote the different dimensions of impact at optimal scale internally and among other funders—including countering the disproportionate emphasis on magnitude of impact by equally valuing issues of equity, sustainability and variety.
3. Be critical, but flexible in allowing researchers to adjust course in response to new evidence about a scaling process. Coordinate with other funders where appropriate to support scaling processes that typically span more than a single funder’s project, portfolio, or financing expertise.
4. Partner with innovators, and help to broker connections and leverage platforms that will coordinate the relationships and opportunities scaling requires. Funders have significant power to affect change and benefit the impact of research in this way.
5. Promote alternative, innovative evaluation approaches that are well-suited to understanding and informing scaling processes, with an emphasis on the need to use evaluation for learning—both internally and among other funders. The desire for funders to ‘demonstrate results’ should not create reporting or budgetary stumbling blocks for innovators who might otherwise be focused on scaling and impact creation.



What comes next?

IDRC is deeply appreciative of the insights that the Scaling Advisors have shared to date through the scalingXchange platform. The convergence of such expertise to the benefit of IDRC's mission is timely and invaluable as we enter a new strategic cycle. To make the most of this experience, we will position this guidance alongside an external evaluation of IDRC's approach to scaling. Both will be used to improve the way we work and remain responsive to the voice of our community.

IDRC is also committed to amplifying Southern contributions to the emerging science of scaling. For example, by supporting the drafting of a 'Southern Statement' on scaling impact. The scalingXchange highlights the critical and influential contribution that a truly global effort can make to the theory and practice of scaling impact in development work of all types. Through targeted efforts we will support further communications and engagements to this end.

For further information contact IDRC's Policy and Evaluation Division, POEV@idrc.ca



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Canada

IDRC'S Scaling Advisors

(full biographies available [here](#))

Odunayo Clement Adebayo

Professor of Plant Physiology, Obafemi Awolowo University; Secretary-General, African-German Network of Excellence in Science

Ali Ben Charif

Postdoctoral Researcher in knowledge translation, Laval University

Petronella Chaminuka

Principal Economist, Agricultural Research Council, South Africa

Oumoul Khaïry Coulibaly

Socio-anthropologist, researcher & lecturer, École Supérieure d'Economie Appliquée, Université Cheikh Anta DIOP

Berhane Gebru

Director of Programs, FHI 360 Digital Development

Amédé Gogovor

Postdoctoral Researcher in knowledge translation, Laval University

Rachid Hakkou

Full Professor, Department of Chemistry, Cadi-Ayyad University and IDRC Research Chair in Management and Stabilization of Industrial Mining Wastes

Ursula Harman

PhD in Inclusive Innovation, Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú

Ermel Johnson

Implementation Lead, West African Health Organization

Lynette Kamau

Senior Policy and Communications Officer, African Population and Health Research Center

Blanca Llorente

Research Director, Fundación Anáas

Teresa Mosquera-Vásquez

Professor, Faculty of Agricultural Science, Universidad Nacional de Colombia

Tatiana Rincón

Vice-President, Social and Livelihood Promotion, Fundación Capital

Tobias Schonwetter

Director, Intellectual Property Unit and Associate Professor, Department of Commercial Law, University of Cape Town

Patterson Siema

Director, Policy Engagement and Communications, Africa Population and Health Centre

Issiaka Sombié

Acting Director, Directorate of the Department of Public Health and Research, West African Health Organization

Abu Syed

Senior Fellow, Bangladesh Centre for Advanced Studies and Director, Nansen-Bangladesh International Centre for Coastal, Ocean and Climate Studies

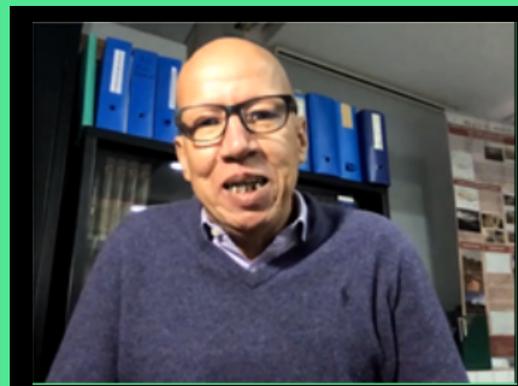
Ivonne Villada

Director, Proyecto Capital

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[Tatiana Rincón](#)
[Fundación Capital, Colombia](#)



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[Cadi-Ayyad University, Morocco](#)