

An evaluation of the International Development Research Centre (IDRC)'s strategy to scale research results

Lessons and considerations for researchers and funders 2021



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01. Introduction

The International Development Research Centre (IDRC) invests in knowledge, innovation and solutions to improve the lives of people in the developing world. IDRC's 2015–2020 strategic plan included a strategic objective to 'invest in knowledge and innovation for large scale positive change'. As IDRC prepared to enter a new 10-year strategic period, it commissioned OTT and Southern Hemisphere to evaluate the implementation of its strategic objective to scale and what was achieved by those efforts.

This document summarises key learning from the evaluation and proposes considerations for others seeking to scale research results for the public good.

Read the full evaluation report:

bit.ly/IDRCscalingevaluation

The evaluation

The evaluation took an exploratory approach, identifying the practices, systems and processes that supported or hindered scaling efforts at IDRC during the five-year strategic period.

It employed a mixed-methods design with four interconnected components, including an organisational review, studies of grantee perceptions and experiences and IDRC's external position, and four thematic case studies.

Data collection for the evaluation involved interviews, focus group discussions and surveys with IDRC staff, grantees and informants from other organisations. Findings from across the components are integrated into this summary and the full report.

Scaling Science

At the beginning of the 2015–2020 strategy period, there was no standard definition or approach for achieving ‘large scale positive change’ at IDRC. Over the five-year strategic period, senior leadership and programs have grappled with the notions of ‘scale’ and ‘scaling’ and approached the strategic objective in different ways and to different extents.

Alongside this experimentation, IDRC launched the Scaling Science initiative in 2017, designed to learn across programs and advance the organisation’s understanding of scaling. It resulted in the publication of the book *Scaling Impact: Innovation for Public Good* (McLean & Gargani, 2019) and *The Scaling Playbook: A Practical Guide for Researchers* (Price-Kelly, van Haeran & McLean, 2020).

IDRC’s Scaling Science approach focuses on scaling impact rather than actions. It includes creating new knowledge, applying it to a real-world challenge, and ensuring the solution aims for impact at optimal scale. This is not necessarily about scaling up or out, because bigger outputs or more actions do not always lead to better impact.

Four guiding principles for scaling impact emerged from IDRC’s Scaling Science initiative:



Justification: scaling is a choice that must be justified based on a balance of evidence and values, and agreed to by key stakeholders.



Optimal scale: scaling produces a collection of impacts, and we must consider the trade-offs between them to determine the magnitude, sustainability, variety, and equity of impact at optimal scale.



Coordination: a high level of planning and adaptation is required for scaling impact in complex systems involving multiple stakeholders.



Dynamic evaluation: is needed to understand the multiple intended and unintended outcomes of scaling in a complex system.

As the guiding principles were not available for much of the 2015–2020 strategy timeframe, we did not use them as an evaluation framework; rather we built the principles into the evaluation’s learning questions.

Read more on Scaling Science:
www.idrc.ca/en/scalingscience

The scaling pathway: a conceptual framework

Through the course of the evaluation, a conceptual framework emerged for scaling at IDRC (see Figure 1) comprising two interconnected pathways: a policy pathway and an innovation pathway,¹ joined via a third pathway related to system strengthening. The pathways follow a trajectory from the supply of knowledge and innovation to the demand for and adoption of solutions at optimal scale.

The scaling pathway makes an important distinction between policy change or adoption of an innovation by *primary intended users* and policy change or adoption of an innovation *beyond* primary intended users at optimal scale (i.e. policy or innovation outcomes achieved through scaling the results achieved with primary intended users).

A ‘scaling mindset’ is applied at all stages of the scaling pathway, so that even in the early stages of developing new knowledge or an innovation, the research team is thinking about and planning for impact at optimal scale. This is equivalent to what IDRC’s Scaling Playbook describes as the need for continuous reflection on the four guiding principles before, during and after an innovation effort.

While this framework is still emergent and specific to the IDRC experience, the evaluation team found it a useful tool for our analysis, and we refer to it in some of the learning and considerations in this brief. A full explanation of the scaling pathway is available in section 1.3 of the evaluation report.

¹ The policy and innovation pathways relate directly to the corporate scaling indicators adopted by IDRC and they reflect the way many programs reported progress against the scaling objective.

01. Introduction

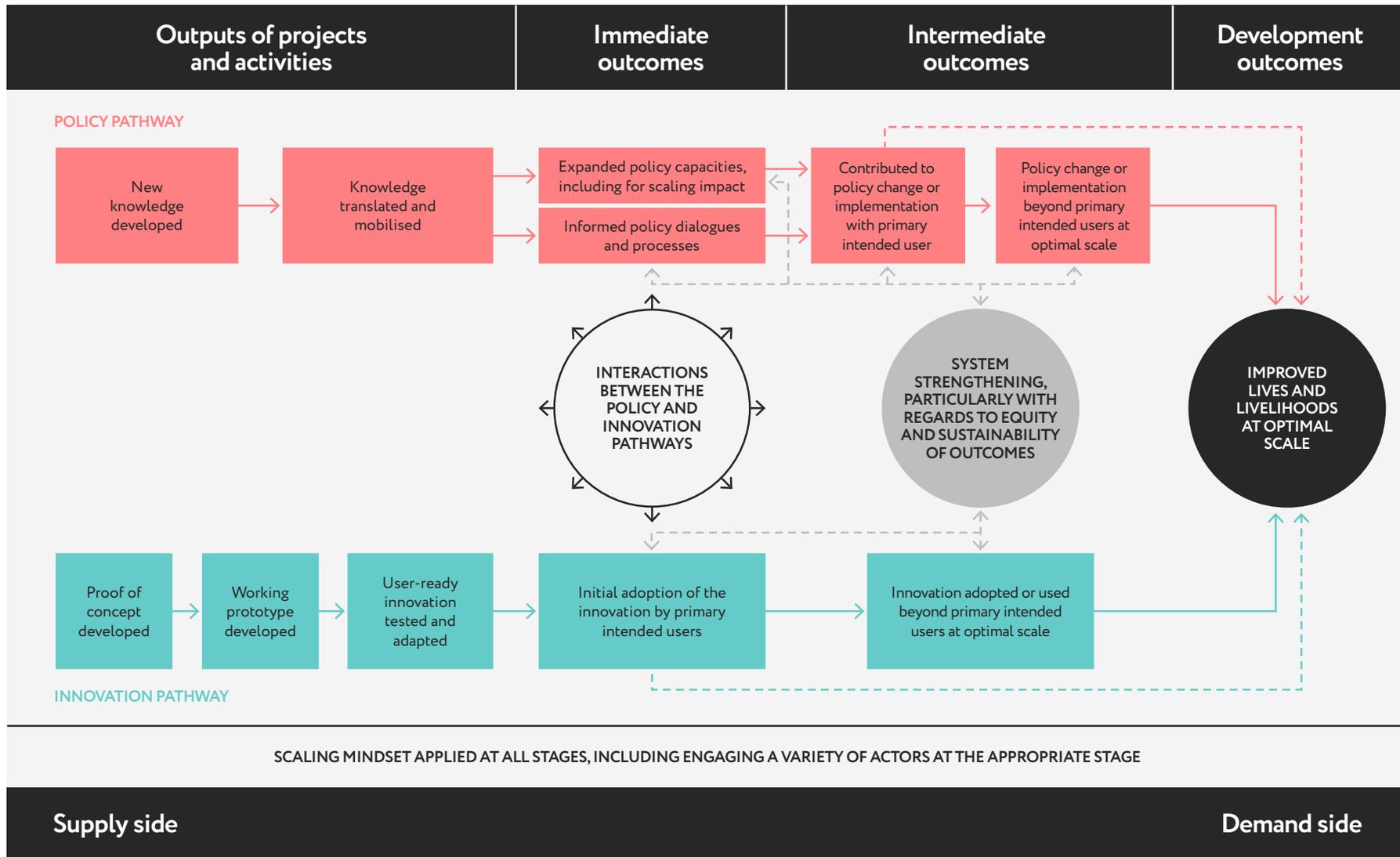


Figure 1: The scaling pathway

02. Insights from researcher and funder perspectives on scaling

The evaluation team had significant engagement with researchers (IDRC grantees) and informants from other funding organisations, via interviews and surveys. While a more fulsome account of these perspectives is captured in the evaluation report, here we provide a few key insights for scaling that emerged from this engagement.

Survey respondents were engaged and informed about scaling, with 79% (n=95) of grantee respondents and 100% (n=16) of other funder respondents rating themselves as very or somewhat knowledgeable about scaling.²

² The evaluation team worked with IDRC's Policy and Evaluation division (POEV) to promote the online surveys via email, the IDRC newsletter and Twitter.

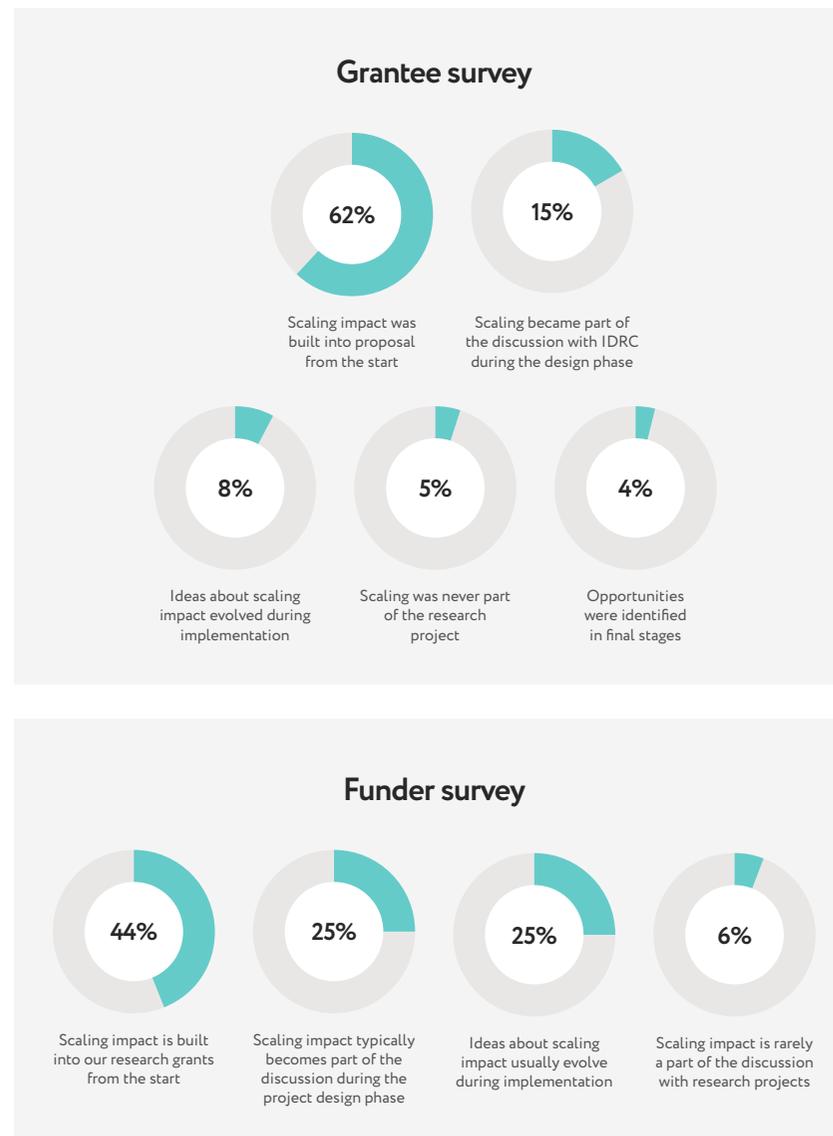
Discussing scaling early on

IDRC’s book *Scaling Impact* (McLean & Gargani, 2019) and a recent report by the Scaling-up Community of Practice (Khol, 2021) both identify the importance of discussing scaling early on in a research or innovation project.

This coincides with results from the evaluation grantee survey: the majority of respondents (62%) had scaling intentions right from the start of their projects, and 15% said that scaling became part of their discussions with IDRC during the design phase (see Figure 2). For other funders of development research, a similarly high number (69%) of survey respondents said that scaling is typically built into grantee projects from the start, or is identified in the design phase.

Most grantee respondents (74%) said that IDRC had helped them consider a number of different factors related to the implementation of scaling; and 74% also said that more discussions with IDRC about scaling would have been useful, indicating an appetite for talking more about scaling.

Figure 2. Survey results: Intentions for scaling in projects (grantee survey n=90, funder survey n=16)



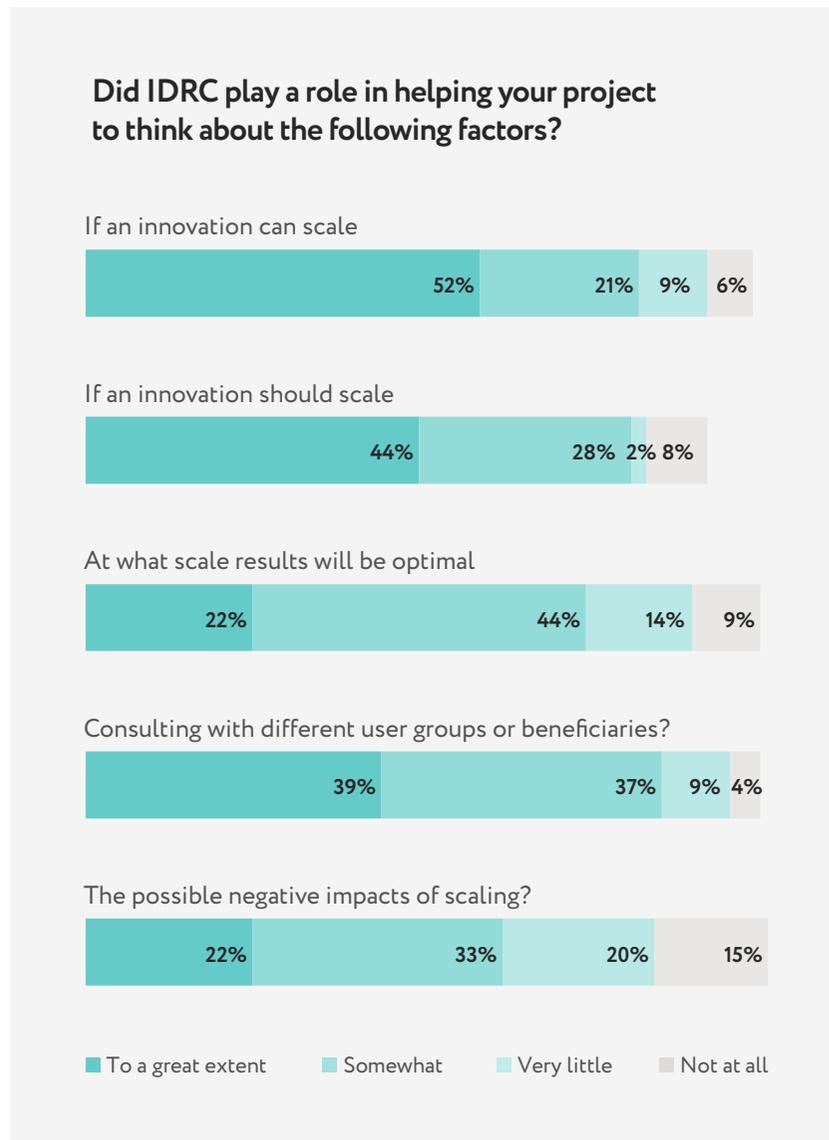
The need for further discussion about optimal scale and possible negative impacts of scaling

In line with IDRC’s principled approach to scaling, only 6% of grantees said that they would be happy to scale research results based purely on successful research outcomes. Most grantees (69%) said they had detailed (18%) or basic (51%) criteria for thinking about whether an initiative that showed positive research results should scale.

Over half of all IDRC grantees who responded to the survey told us that they were considering if an innovation can scale, if it should scale, what the optimal scale might be, consulting with others, and the possible negative impacts of scaling. Grantee respondents most frequently mentioned that IDRC had played a role in helping them think about consultation with user groups (76%).

Out of all the factors, however, grantees are thinking least about ‘at what scale results would be optimal’ (66%) and ‘the possible negative impacts of scaling’ (55%). This is a good reminder of how important it is to keep having conversations about optimal scale; scaling is an intervention in itself that can introduce unforeseen effects and risks and we need to be conscious of these.

Figure 3. Survey results: Did IDRC play a role in helping your project to think about the following factors? (Grantee survey n=90)



Paying attention to context and complexity

We asked funders which factors they expected grantees to consider when applying for a research grant, on the premise that scaling requires consideration of factors beyond the actions of immediate users.

The responses suggest that funders value attention to context and complexity of scaling. Most funder respondents (over 94% to a great extent or somewhat) expect grantees to consider alignment of the research to the policy context, regulatory frameworks that could enable or hinder uptake of an innovation, existing alternative approaches or innovations, and cultural and gender norms that might affect scaling.

Funder interviews were consistent with this, with interviewees mentioning policy context and enabling environment for scaling as important criteria when reviewing grant applications with a view to scaling research results. In addition, interviewees mentioned other criteria such as potential partners to scale impact, opposition to the initiative, government buy-in, cost-effectiveness of the solution and local ownership.

Two thirds of the interviewees also highlighted the importance of coordination with other actors to support scaling. For example, 4 out of the 15 interviewees said they wanted the grantees to think about who the champions for scaling are, who they will work

or partner with and who might oppose the scaling initiative. An additional two interviewees said they wanted the grantees to outline the stakeholders who can create access to funding and markets, and how they are going to work with the private sector. One funder requests that grantees set up a technical advisory group with key stakeholders, including government officials, and have several rounds of stakeholder workshops to ensure contextual factors are considered.



Figure 4. Survey results: To what extent do you expect your grantees to consider the following factors when applying for research? (Funder survey n=16)

03. Learning and considerations for researchers and funders

Based on the evaluation findings, the evaluation team proposed the following lessons and considerations for IDRC, researchers and other funders seeking to scale the impact of research results for the public good.

Time horizons for scaling

Scaling research results takes time; this was one of the biggest challenges to scaling consistently mentioned in interviews with IDRC staff, grantees and other research funders. Scaling research results could take 10–15 years, if not longer, depending on the stage of innovation, the maturity of the field and other contextual factors. Thus, one project or program is unlikely to take a research innovation or new knowledge all the way from proof of concept to scaling the impact of results.

Some of the strategies that IDRC programs used to provide more time for research results to scale were: building longer programs; introducing multi-phase programs in which projects that showed promising results were continued in a second phase; and using strategic partnerships with other funders to support projects to secure follow-up funding, or to develop new programs that build on previous results.

Consideration for researchers and funders: When developing a scaling strategy, consider the project or program's position on the scaling pathway and the maturity of the field in which you are working. Ask: what is realistic to achieve within the program timeframe and what needs to be set up for sustainable scaling efforts beyond the project or program's lifetime?

Consideration for funders: Consider investing in longer programs, introducing multi-phase programming and building strategic partnerships with other funders who have complementary mandates and interests.

Flexible funding

Scaling is a dynamic process that takes place in complex systems; thus, it is necessary to be ready to adapt. Both IDRC staff and grantees cited flexible funding as one of the most helpful tools to support their scaling efforts.

‘In a projec that lasts several years, it’s very hard to plan in detail for scale - especially in a context where technology moves fast. You have to jump at opportunities, these are things that happen unexpectedly, and you need to be ready.’ (Focus group discussion, grantee)

Examples of flexible funding mechanisms at IDRC were: ‘opportunity’ or ‘synergy’ funds for grantees to build on existing work or to take advantage of emerging opportunities to scale, and ‘rapid response’ funding. Balancing accountability with flexibility is an important consideration here, as is ensuring high levels of awareness across programs about flexible funding mechanisms and how to best use them to support scaling.

Considerations for funders: What opportunities exist or could be created to increase or leverage flexible funding mechanisms systematically and transparently across your organisation with the intention to support impact at optimal scale?

Paying attention to both supply and demand

How effective can a new livestock vaccine be if there are not enough veterinary scientists who are able to administer it? The low level of maturity in the field of veterinary science in one country in our sample limited opportunities for scaling.

Achieving impact at optimal scale, therefore, requires investment in strengthening the *demand* for the knowledge or innovation at the same time as developing the new knowledge or innovation. This might require field-building strategies. It is also important that efforts to support the demand for scaling are driven by considerations of gender, diversity and inclusion in scaling processes, who defines optimal scale, and the possible negative effects of scaling for specific groups, including those who are marginalised or vulnerable.

Consideration for funders: Could a portfolio of projects (within a program) be used more strategically to support equitable impact at optimal scale, by funding projects that focus on both the supply and demand side of the scaling pathway?

‘Field building is often spoken about as the left-hand side of the pipeline [scaling pathway], but we don’t build the other side that is going to take our research and take our ideas. We are doing a lot of product development, but we are really looking at the two big valleys of death – developing the product and delivering the product – and there is field building to be done on both sides.’ (Interview, IDRC staff)

Knowledge synthesis

Knowledge or research synthesis was cited by IDRC staff as a particularly valuable, but sometimes under-resourced, tool for scaling. Synthesis papers were considered helpful in identifying gaps and opportunities to scale impact, as well as helping to build a critical mass of knowledge from disparate research. For a research funder, these insights can also help inform investment decisions, such as whether to support a second phase of a project or program, or whether to invest in a new or alternative area.

Providing capacity-strengthening opportunities for both grant managers and grantees, as well as ensuring appropriate incentives are in place, is important for effective research synthesis in scaling efforts. For example, IDRC has established a knowledge translation team to support programs and increase capacity to engage key stakeholders more strategically through synthesis.

Considerations for funders and researchers: Are you investing enough in research synthesis to support scaling efforts?

What opportunities are available to enhance the resources, capacity, and expertise in your organisation, project or program to support effective research synthesis?

Staff skills and time

IDRC staff working on programs with intentions to scale research results found themselves playing a variety of roles, such as knowledge broker, knowledge translator, coordinator and strategic thinker. Many staff we spoke to were embracing and enjoying these tasks and at the same time realising the challenges of the additional time and resources involved in fully engaging in this important work.

Consideration for researchers and funders: As your organisation, program or project works to scale the impact of its research or innovation, consider how roles may need to evolve to meet new tasks and challenges. What are the potential gaps in skills, knowledge or capacity and how can they best be met?

'... if the ambition is impact at scale and projects working at multiple scales simultaneously then program officers need to work completely differently – they play more of a relationship management role, they are knowledge brokers and putting in early warning systems for conflict.'
(Interview, IDRC staff)

Coordination with different actors

Scaling takes place in complex systems and involves coordinating with a diverse and evolving set of stakeholders. (McLean & Gargani, 2019)

The evaluation found that the strategic objective to scale encouraged IDRC staff to approach coordination differently than they had in the past. Most notably, programs with intentions to scale were engaging more with stakeholders beyond the research community (such as private sector, policymakers or civil society) – both as external stakeholders *and* as program partners.

For example, the Innovating for Maternal and Child Health in Africa initiative was created with regional multi-disciplinary health policy research organisations that connected researchers and government decisionmakers. The Scaling Up the Production and Distribution of Double-fortified Salt in India project worked with the private sector to distribute double-fortified salt to more than 50 million people in three Indian states.

However, coordination of diverse stakeholders is challenging. Productive partnerships need to be nurtured and require careful thought to maximise value and minimise complications.

Considerations for researchers: In designing research programs and scaling strategies, which actors needs to be engaged and in what ways? How will this change over time?

Considerations for funders: How are the various coordination roles, both for coordinating across grantees and with external stakeholders, best filled and by whom to support scaling?

How can research funders support the competencies, skills and resources required for their own staff and for grantees to coordinate multiple stakeholders across a scaling pathway?

Monitoring, evaluation and learning

Scaling can be difficult to define, and therefore to integrate into monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) efforts in a meaningful way. IDRC took a flexible approach to implementing scaling that allowed programs and projects to interpret and innovate around the strategic objective. Overall, the evaluation concluded that this was sensible given the varied experiences that already existed within the organisation. However, it also introduced challenges for programs, and the lack of conceptual clarity or a common approach created difficulties for monitoring progress, evaluating the results of the strategic objective and learning across programs.

As a result, the evaluation found that MEL efforts tracked, assessed and reported on scaling in varied ways. Some programs adapted their evaluation approach to accommodate questions about scaling. For instance, the Collaborative Adaptation Research Initiative in Africa and Asia program took a staged approach to evaluation, which was perceived to have supported scaling by allowing them to develop learning questions throughout implementation. The Canadian International Food Security Research Fund program commissioned an evaluation to assess its contribution to food security, which assessed each project in terms of the prospects for scaling.

Many of the evaluation reports we reviewed concluded that it was too early to assess development outcomes or impact at scale in the final phase of the program. We found (particularly for programs seeking to scale impact through policy) that policy outcomes tended to be reported in a way that was disconnected from their context – emphasising how important it is to clearly document why the policy matters, and for whom it matters.

Considerations for researchers and funders: How are your current MEL efforts structured to capture scaling?

What modifications might be made to more clearly and accurately depict scaling outcomes and their significance and potential for impact (e.g., defining the why and who of scaling efforts, adopting flexible and dynamic approaches to evaluation to aid learning)?

Thank you for reading!

This evaluation set out to assess how well IDRC met its 2015–2020 strategic objective to scale and what could be learned from this experience to inform the implementation of its next strategic plan.

During the strategic period, based on the experience of its staff and grantees across the Global South, IDRC has developed a more nuanced understanding of scaling than was set out in the strategic objective ('to invest in large scale positive change'). The principled approach to scaling that emerged during the strategic period recognises that there is no blueprint for scaling research results, and makes an important contribution to debates on equitable and responsible scaling.

One consistent message from the evaluation is that partnerships and collaboration are essential for scaling. We hope the evaluation makes a fresh and a useful contribution to the emerging science of scaling and that sharing these insights and lessons will support the research community and other stakeholders to work collectively to achieve more sustainable and equitable development outcomes at optimal scale.

'We have learnt if the project involves decision makers from the system it becomes more effective... We have learnt that involving horizontal and vertical partners should be a cross cutting issue – and it should be continuous. Don't just implement the project and expect things to be better off; strategies to enhance scaling should start from design, selection of sites and involvement of the responsible authority to ensure a sense of ownership.' (IDRC grantee)

Read the full evaluation report:
bit.ly/IDRCscalingevaluation

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