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Scaling Up Innovations With Government

How to overcome the barriers that large institutions like the government put in the way of scaling up social innovations.

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Governments aren't generally known as innovative environments. But although innovation may not always come naturally to these institutions, scale certainly does. So when they do find ways to incubate and support promising social innovations, especially in partnership, the impact can be tremendous. In South Asia, where a great deal of innovation is happening in the development sector, creating mechanisms to connect the vast public sector apparatus with new models for poverty alleviation is of critical importance. The challenge is to strengthen the link between innovation and scale. Doing that begins with a clear understanding of the barriers that innovators in government and other large institutions face in scaling their work and an examination of what's working.

THE "PATHOLOGY OF GOVERNMENT"

Why do governments find innovation so challenging? To answer this question, we must understand what Indian civil servant and innovator R. Gopalakrishnan called "the pathology of government": the causal mechanisms that generate institutional behavior. These mechanisms can collaterally, or deliberately, damage innovation. Consider the following ways the damage can occur:

Democratic governments are typically designed to avoid concentrating power in a single individual or agency. To prevent civil servants from misusing public power for private benefit, government bureaucracies divide and dilute their own powers among various divisions and offices—each watching and counterbalancing the others. For example, bureaucracies often place expenditure approval powers within financial divisions that are at arm's length from operational teams. Civil servants are encouraged (by formal rules and informal nudges) to follow administrative precedent: well-tried branches in the decision tree, tested for safety by their predecessors. What is novel in decision making may be considered rash, even corrupt, and needs verifying; it is institutionally safer, efficient, even responsible, to do what is pre-verified.

Government bureaucracies are driven to avoid and mitigate risk, whereas innovation often requires failures along the way. The very arrangements that assure the responsible exercise of power can restrict the lifeblood of risk-taking social innovation. Innovators explore solutions through aggressive, discretionary decisions; bureaucratic decision chains, by design, protect against whimsy. Innovators need to swiftly channel money into new experimental approaches; bureaucratic financial approval processes deliberately dam and regulate public expenditure channels. Innovators need freedom to strike out and explore new approaches; bureaucracies confine their functionaries to narrow corridors of approved operational procedure, safely paved with precedent. Social innovation, therefore, too often falls into the crack between the organizational interests of governments and of innovators. By conforming to bureaucracies' structural design and following the decision-making

priorities that result, civil servants can internalize and institutionalize a risk-averse behavioral culture. This is not conducive to scaling innovation.

Innovators—whether they're working for a government or a large institution, or trying to access support from the outside—thus face a sequence of progressively hardening barriers to scaling their work. As Everett Rogers wrote in his 1962 book, *The Diffusion of Innovations,* innovators depend on a starting group of innovative adopters. Risk-averse government cultures tend not to select such individuals into bureaucracies or encourage those who do get in, thus depressing the supply of innovative adopters. Should a social innovator manage to find any other innovators, she will find it difficult to organize their support: Distributed, diversified bureaucratic decision making makes for more stakeholders—and more kinds of them—to win over, complicating social innovators' marketing within governments. What's more, even if a social innovator succeeds in mobilizing the right civil servants around her idea, she may find her idea excluded from the policy mainstream. The sheer difficulty of negotiating bureaucratic buy-in for any ideas results in a small number of hard-won mainstream consensus priorities and delivery models, which are promptly ring-fenced. Adding new ideas—especially innovative ones—is too difficult, and hence hindered.

Together, these three mutually reinforcing barriers make it difficult for radical innovations to access the scaling machinery of government.

> *For the social innovator within civil society who seeks to scale up through public systems, conversation will be as important as innovation.*

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INSIGHTS FOR SCALING INNOVATION

How can we break this pattern? How can social innovation leverage the vast replicating machinery of government? One important breakthrough has been the efforts of some innovators to design explicitly for scale. When the potential for widespread impact is considered from the initial conception, it can drive important decisions around inputs, activities, human resources, costs, and complexity. These choices lead to innovations that are operationally viable for the government to consider replicating and mainstreaming. Some organizations, including BRAC, have built the ability to design for scale into their ethos and avoid projects that have no possibility of scaling up.

Through our work with, and observation of, BRAC and the Indian government, we have identified several crucial lessons for innovators and governments that make it easier for both to contribute to a faster and wider scaling of social innovation.

Innovators need to speak "government," and vice versa. Rather than celebrating innovations as departures from "business as usual," social innovators should consider framing their innovations as more effective means of achieving the priorities of the development policy consensus. For example, when India's National Innovation Council sought between 2011 and 2013 to establish a government-seeded, privately capitalized venture capital fund to support scalable social innovation, it framed its case differently from traditional approaches. Such funds are typically justified by arguing that risk capital is urgently needed by social enterprise. Instead, the council positioned the fund as a means of mobilizing Indian private-sector talent and resources for inclusive growth— a core thematic policy priority for the government—allowing the council to navigate through the government's policy consensus ring-fence and secure funding approval from the Cabinet in December 2013.

It is equally important to align social innovation with priorities that resonate with local communities. When the National Innovation Council looked for ways to pilot rural public services with digital connectivity at India's elected *panchayat* (village-level) institutions, it learned to stop talking about telemedicine and Internet technologies. Instead, it focused on demonstrating how these approaches helped pregnant women avoid the ten-kilometer walk to the nearest hospital and thus lowered the risk of maternal mortality. This language made sense to local communities and administrations, which helped drive community participation and adoption.

Engage communities in innovation and scale. At the end of the day, governments answer to the people. Community capacity-building is operationally critical. It builds on genuine buy-in from (disempowered) citizens. In doing so, it grounds development initiatives, leaving them less vulnerable to funding reductions and changes in local government. It allows innovations to draw on a wider resource base from within the community, including not just hard assets, but also crucial intangibles such as know-how, influence, and culture—all of which are critical to scaling innovation.

In our experience, if we want the impact (not the project) to be sustainable, building such ownership becomes a crucial part of the early design. When the community decides who are the extreme poor among them, when women leaders become community health volunteers, and when underutilized educated village women are trained to become school teachers, the empathy and social capital that these previously overlooked people bring are crucial components of success.

By engaging the right people, it's possible to create new behaviors and demands in communities, even around public services. In 2011, BRAC received a small grant from the World Bank to raise awareness of the new Right to Information Act (RTI) and enable citizens to benefit from it. Early observations showed that many communities did not know about RTI, and even those that did faced difficulties in applying for information. BRAC built up a cadre of *tothyo bondhus* (infomediaries) who assisted community members in submitting applications. Organizing popular theater shows about RTI, which were followed by RTI clinics where the theater troupes answered questions, raised awareness and catalyzed demand. Independent assessments showed that BRAC's pilot led to a substantial increase in RTI applications over the 18 months of the pilot programs.

Don't underestimate the importance of informal dialog, trust, and relationships. Even in governments working to facilitate innovation, the reality is that most of the administrators will probably continue "business as usual." Therefore social innovators must become savvy at using stealth tactics to deal with bureaucracy when coordination and motivation are lacking. They must answer diversity with diversity, coping with fragmented bureaucracies by making individual policy cases to organizations' specific (usually understandable) consensus interests and networking these stakeholders into "coalitions of the willing." They can muster the support of enough like-minded stakeholders by giving them easy grounds to buy in, enlisting them in the innovation's cause. For the social innovator within civil society who seeks to scale up through public systems, conversation will be as important as innovation.

Social innovators must also be patient. For example, despite the findings showing that BRAC's community-based activities increased RTI requests, the organization could not attract external funds to scale up the program. Nonetheless, convinced that these innovations were highly effective, BRAC continued to scale up incrementally. It now supports 450 active infomediaries and has reached 160,000 villagers through popular theater shows and clinics. Thanks to persistent success and dialog, recently the Bangladesh Information Commission has expressed interest in partnering with BRAC to scale up the program nationally.

BEYOND INVENTION, TO IMPACT

Scaling up social innovation requires all of the strategies we've just outlined, and more. It requires marketing thinking to map and analyze user communities in the field and supporter communities in stakeholder organizations. It requires political engagement to anticipate and build coalitions of support across these communities. It must build on this engagement with a communications effort that listens continuously to these communities and responds to their concerns with purpose-designed mechanisms—from street plays, to start-up prototype trials, to program framing.

In other words, scaling up requires a multifaceted approach, distilled into a single stream of effort that spans the innovation development cycle: preceding, accompanying, and following the innovation design process. If we can scale such systems for innovation, imagine the channel we can create from invention to impact. ✖