

Transitioning solutions to government

A SUMMARY OF KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEWS



During the past several months, VillageReach and Spring Impact conducted interviews with nearly 40 stakeholders to:

- **Explore practical challenges** to government adoption of solutions where sustained impact at scale requires government ownership, management or operation; and
- **Gather input on forming a collaborative network** to address these challenges.

This document summarizes the key themes from these interviews. We initially framed this process as a transition to government and continue to use the term in this document. However, it is clear that this framing does not resonate across all stakeholders and will shift in future documents.

Government Partnerships are Essential

Government partnerships are essential for many solutions to have sustainable impact at scale, particularly in low-resource settings. Governments bring networks and/or infrastructure to reach more people, fiduciary authority over spending, and an understanding of their population’s needs and values. As one funder said, “They are the custodian of the environment in which whatever it is we are scaling is going to play out and that needs to be respected.”

Finding the right partnership avenue for a particular solution is important, especially when government is the pathway to sustainable impact.¹ Scaling Pathways (a partnership between the Innovation Investment Alliance and CASE at Duke University) describes four avenues for collaborating with national, regional and local governments.

Figure 1: Potential Government Partnership Goals

 Clear the Path	Enterprise directly implements its product/service, engaging with government to seek informal permission and/or avoid potential barriers.
 Outsource	Enterprise directly provides a service/product—either through a government contract or by leveraging government resources/infrastructure.
 Adopt	Enterprise works to transfer management/implementation of solution to a government partner—either fully or partially (with enterprise maintaining a role).
 Change Policy	Enterprise influences the way government approaches or implements policy, allocates resources, and/or structures regulations.

¹ Worsham, E., Langsam, K., Martin, E. [Scaling Pathways: Insights from the field on unlocking impact at scale](#). Scaling Pathways; 2018: 1-7.

Significant philanthropic funding from OECD countries supports programs in the Global South.² Many social impact organizations and funders ultimately aim to sustain solutions at scale by working toward government adoption or uptake of solutions, positioning this as the “ideal state.” This is typically important to broader systems change efforts as well. Stakeholders recognize that transferring management of a solution to government is complex, and depends on the type of solution, the context and the country.³

However, stakeholders pursuing this “adopt” avenue of partnership lack a clear roadmap. Literature on planned transitions is scarce; most social impact organizations exit due to aid withdrawal, shifting donor strategies, or changing political climate,^{4,5} rather than meeting an impact goal. Due to these challenges, social impact organizations often transition solutions with little strategic planning³ and miss opportunities for broader systems change.

Supporting Government Adoption of Solutions

In order to address the dearth of practical information on the adoption or transition of solutions to government, VillageReach and Spring Impact, with the support of a coalition of funders, are spearheading development of a *Learning Network*.⁶ This network will bring stakeholders together to improve the likelihood of successful transitions in order to achieve sustained impact at scale. The intent is to help source, develop, test and share best practices to improve the way solutions transition to government ownership or stewardship, as well as influence funding practices to create a more enabling environment for government adoption. Transition in this context mirrors the “adopt” partnership avenue from Scaling Pathways, positioning government as the owners, managers and/or operators of a solution.

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VillageReach and Spring Impact conducted key informant interviews with government partners, social impact organizations, coalitions and academic partners to explore practical challenges and questions around government adoption. (See Appendix.) We also gathered perspectives on the format of a potential *Learning Network*. Informants provided input on the challenges in transitioning solutions to government, as well as suggestions on the best approaches to tackle them. For confidentiality, we removed key informant names in the following summary.

Perspectives on Transition to Government

Most funders and social impact organizations stated that transitioning solutions to government or government uptake is a fundamental component of their organization’s strategy. As one funder said, “I see the role of private philanthropy and NGOs in de-risking and developing innovation, showing that it works. **But once something has been proven, the most sustainable way for it to scale is for government to take it over and run with it.**”

2 Embracing Complexity: Towards a Shared Understanding of Funding Systems Change. Catalyst 2030.

3 Lemme, K., Latham, K., Kugler, K. 2016. [A Suite of Tools to Support a Systems-Based Approach to Sustainable Management of Water Service Delivery](#). Water for People.

4 INTRAC. 2016. [Praxis Paper 31: Developing a timeline for exit strategies](#).

5 Hayman, R. 2015. [NGOs, aid withdrawal and exit strategies](#). Journal fur Entwicklungspolitik, 31, 48–64.

6 This is a working name for this collaborative network, subject to change based on additional discussion.

Government informants likewise noted the value of partnerships with social impact organizations, saying transitioning solutions creates “a positive opportunity for government to have innovative solutions.”

While many agreed that government partnership, in some form, is required when developing solutions, much nuance exists regarding when and how this should happen. A shared vocabulary is lacking. Some describe the process as scaling through government; others refer to transition to or adoption by government. Others see this as less defined: “Government never just picks up a solution and runs with it; that concept is not correct...It can’t be ‘I am bringing this to you to scale’—it needs to be demand-driven from the government.”

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This sentiment was echoed by another stakeholder who said, “my own reflection is that it is less about transition and more about co-designing and having governments own this from inception. When you approach it from that way, the transition is sort of automatic...it increases the likelihood of sustainability and the likelihood of [governments] taking [a solution] in the long run.”

A difference in opinion also concerned government’s role post transition, i.e., owner, implementer or manager. Several informants mentioned that implementation of a solution might be a role for the private sector rather than government. One funder suggested that government should be contracting out the implementation of most (health) solutions, saying, “Rather than getting better at transitioning programs for government implementation, I’d like to see organizations prepare themselves to be contracted by government.”

In sum, many stakeholders we interviewed operate on the premise that government is the ideal place for innovations, to live, particularly for those related to health care. The form that partnership takes, or should take, and the process to get there are a lot less clear.

Understanding the Real-World Challenges of Transition

Informants were quick to list the challenges around transitioning solutions to government, and pointed to challenges from funders, social impact organizations and government itself. Challenges stem from differences in organizational structures, goals and priorities. They also come from power imbalances and changing political and financial landscapes. Informants noted that even the definition of success differs—e.g., some funders may see cessation of donor funding post-transition as an achievement while social impact organizations may focus on continuing impact even if external funding is still required.

CHALLENGES ORIGINATING WITH SOCIAL IMPACT ORGANIZATIONS

Informants suggested that early government engagement is more the exception than the norm, and noted that social impact organizations sometimes make assumptions about what solutions governments want or need. “We need to challenge [social impact] organizations to come up with innovations to the problems we care most about. There are some brilliant innovations, but they are not in line with [government] strategic plans, so they go down the drain,” said one government representative.

Another government representative offered that, “partners pay allegiance to donors, not government. Organizations, donors, and partners need to not take advantage of weakness [of government coordination or processes]. And you [partners] must be transparent as you are there to support others.”

More than one funder mentioned organizations lack an understanding of the realistic cost of an innovation if government is the eventual owner, and that this should be determined much earlier in the process. One said, “Many international organizations don’t have a clue about how ministries of health actually function in resource-constrained environments.” Informants noted these misunderstandings negatively impact the long-term sustainability of a solution, because if the solution is designed in a way that is cost prohibitive to governments then adoption of the solution by government is impossible.

Informants also mentioned that gaining government buy-in is difficult because of competitive solutions among social impact organizations. According to one informant, “There are so many innovations out there. It’s hard for governments to cut through the noise and understand which ones are most impactful, appropriate for [their citizens], and cost-effective.”

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FUNDER-DERIVED CHALLENGES

Time and flexibility are vital to co-create solutions and transition them to government. Informants lamented that most funding organizations do not allow for this. One shared, “A lot of co-creation fails because not many [social impact] organizations can commit the upfront time to understand the landscape without initial funding for research and landscape analysis.”

Informants acknowledged that funders have goals, priorities and desired outcomes that do not always align with those of governments. A funder said, “There are a lot of philanthropists who don’t know what they don’t know, and aren’t able to understand when a solution is actually a good fit.” This misalignment compounds the power imbalance that exists between governments, social impact organizations, and funders. Another funder mentioned the difficulty of governments voicing opinions with powerful funders, saying, “Donors have more power, so even if social impact organizations do everything right—if the donor is pushing in the wrong direction, it just doesn’t matter.” Another funder said, “it is very easy for financing entities to presume that they understand the issues and what is being solved for. And that presumption, if played out to its fullest, could constitute a very, very important barrier to successful outcomes.”

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Many informants emphasized that funders need to be partners, not just donors. According to one representative from a social impact organization, “donors say shared ownership is important and that [organizations] need to show some level of commitment, but it’s unclear what they really want.” Another stakeholder said, “[Donors] are funding [social impact organizations] to do this work, but

not fully engaging in the substance of this.” Informants agreed that when funders fully engage to understand the dynamics of a particular solution, in a particular country context, stronger partnerships are developed.

More than one informant questioned the posture of funders, suggesting that funders should better position themselves to support a process led by government. Finally, informants also acknowledged issues with measuring impact. Social impact organizations stated that it may be better to invest in government reporting but feel stuck since funders rarely invest in measurement and evaluation and “Often the monitoring and evaluation required by a funder will not match the data tracking and indicators that governments need to evaluate” [a solution].

GOVERNMENT-DERIVED CHALLENGES

One oft-cited challenge for government adoption is managing solutions in a constrained environment. “It’s unrealistic to expect in any scenario—including in the US government—that 100 percent of [a solution] will be 100 percent paid for by the government,” said one representative of a social impact organization. A funder agreed saying, “Government implementation or management or oversight capacity isn’t what it needs to be” for transition. Government informants echoed this, with one noting, “The main challenge is sustainability, because a new solution means additional capacity that sometimes the government doesn’t have due to continuous budget shortfall.”

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Informants also said changes in leadership, and in political agendas, make transition challenging. Even “if you sign an MOU with a person in the federal government they may be gone by the time a project is complete,” said one representative from a social impact organization. These changes in leadership require social impact organizations and funders to have “a layered engagement strategy, including having people from both high and mid-level [government] to ensure that you still have champions when there is turnover.”

Many reinforced the need to collaborate more closely with government. As one government stakeholder said, “There is no question that government needs to be more proactive and assertive [about their priorities and with partners], but stop blaming government. We need to instead figure out how to work proactively together.”

Informants recognized solution adoption by government will continue to be challenging until all stakeholders can agree on solution outcomes and goals, as well as define a better process for engaging in transition.

In summary, informants acknowledged effective development and transition of solutions to government requires better alignment of all parties. People often describe the process of transitioning solutions to government as difficult and long, or as one informant said, “It’s one step forward, two steps back.” Informants recognized solution adoption by government will continue to be challenging until all stakeholders can agree on solution outcomes and goals, as well as define a better process for engaging in transition.

Moving to Strategies for Success

Informants clearly articulated that successfully embedding solutions in government depends on all parties working together and utilizing each others’ strengths. Each stakeholder group depends on the other for success. **“No one actor can shift the system on their own—to be successful [transition] must be highly collaborative,”** said one funder.

Informants reflected that overcoming challenges with transition requires (1) engaging government early and often, (2) tailoring solutions and support to meet country needs, (3) a realistic timeline and flexibility to adapt plans and approaches, and (4) a safe space to collaborate and share failures. The existing literature echoes these informant suggestions.⁷

⁷ Lemme, K & Latham, K. 2018. [How to Create a Checklist for Nonprofit](#) Exit. SSIR. June 13, 2018.

GOVERNMENT ENGAGEMENT EARLY AND OFTEN

Informants and existing literature,^{2,8} agree on the need for government engagement prior to the development and/or implementation of a solution, particularly in health. Government is “the custodian of citizens’ health care. That needs to be respected and acknowledged,” said one funder. Some described this as “co-creation in direct partnership with government, with the government’s ownership and buy-in” while others referred to providing a technical role to foster implementation with some level of government involvement. More than one informant suggested the need to undergo a paradigm shift of putting the government in the driver’s seat.

Regardless, informants generally agreed, “There must be an indication that government is contributing in some way” and several suggested that better understanding what this could look like should be investigated further.

TAILORING SOLUTIONS AND SUPPORT

Informants said successful transition requires that the solution is relevant to a particular country context, and the government systems within a certain country. “I don’t think I can generalize [on an ideal transition]. It differs from context to context,” said one funder. In one context, transition might entail a complete hand-over to government, but in another context, transition may require continued support. Most informants thought the latter was more likely. “When projects are transitioning to the government there is still a need for continued support with financing and aspects to do with continued advocacy and mobilization,” said a representative from a social impact organization. Another said, “Transition to government is a mechanism. It should not mean ending all support, whether financial or technical.”

REALISTIC TIMELINE AND FLEXIBILITY

Nearly all informants recognized that transition to government takes a long time and requires compromise. The literature backs this up.⁹ “[Funders] need to have patience. Take the long view and don't be distracted by the short term fall backs,” said one funder. A social impact organization stakeholder said, “It's unlike a normal grant cycle, it requires patient capital, it requires to be flexible, to know that things are going to change. The timeframe isn’t fixed and undoubtedly just like politics anywhere in the world, there’s going to be surprises. And they have to be willing to deal with that level of uncertainty over a long period of time.”

Some informants mentioned funders should expect a decrease in program impact and the focus should be on measuring processes rather than outcomes. “[Partners] have to understand that quality will not be the same when you transition, and may lose some of the initial impact,” said one funder.

SAFE SPACE FOR COLLABORATION

Finally, informants reiterated the need for a safe space to share amongst stakeholders, including failures, as well as to address the power imbalances that exist. “We need local government to feel comfortable to contribute. Ultimately when donors are at the table, governments who have a stake might hold back, or are guarded—they don’t want to jeopardize their funding,” said one funder.

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8 icaso, 2016. [Handing Over Health: Experiences with Global Fund Transitions and Sustainability Planning in Serbia, Thailand and South Africa](#). icaso. January 2016.

9 Gotsadze, G., Chikovani, I., Sulaberidze, L., Gotsadze, T., Goguadze, K., & Tavanxhib, N. 2019. [The Challenges of Transition From Donor-Funded Programs: Results From a Theory-Driven Multi-Country Comparative Case Study of Programs in Eastern Europe and Central Asia Supported by the Global Fund](#). *Global Health Science and Practice*. 2019 Jun 27;7(2):258-272.

Conclusion—The Role of a *Learning Network*

Transitioning solutions to government requires active collaboration of funders, government and social impact organizations. Informants demonstrated a good understanding of the principles needed for successful transition. However, people acknowledged a need for guidance about *how* to do this, and provided dozens of suggestions to help them put these principles into practice. Stakeholders articulated these needs in three over-arching categories (1) analyses of successful (and unsuccessful) government transitions, (2) strategies and tools to plan, implement and assess transitions, and (3) guidance on how to engage funders in supporting the time and resources required for solution adoption by government.

Through developing a *Learning Network*, VillageReach and Spring Impact plan to bring stakeholders together to help define the process of transitioning health solutions to government and source, develop, share and test best practices. Long-term, the network hopes to influence funding practices by creating an enabling environment for transitioning health solutions to government.

The *Learning Network* aims to support governments, social impact organizations, and funders primarily working in the health sector in sub-Saharan Africa, though recognizes other sectors and regions may both contribute and benefit. Additional stakeholder inputs will help further refine the priorities, structure and composition of the *Learning Network*.

This work will not be done in isolation. We are exploring partnership with other coalitions and networks such as the [Million Lives Club](#) and [Catalyst 2030](#) that are interested in addressing some of these issues. A key focus will be ensuring government voices are represented.



A working meeting of the *Learning Network* will occur as an ecosystem event Skoll World Forum in Oxford, England on Tuesday, March 31, 2020. Please RSVP at <http://bit.ly/2v5RAAC> if you are interested in attending.

Appendix: Informant Interview List

GOVERNMENT

Malawi Ministry of Health & Population: Nedson Fosiko, Deputy Director of Clinical Services

Mozambique Ministry of Health: Célia Chirindza, Expanded Program on Immunization; Rosa Maendaenda, Former Chief Medical Doctor, Tete Province; Célia Tomás Mutemba, Health Technician; Joaquim Pensando, field coordinator

Sierra Leone Ministry of Health & Sanitation: Alpha Bangura

PARTNERSHIPS AND COALITIONS

The Aspen Management Partnership for Health (AMP Health): Kiribakka Tendo, Deputy Director, Country Support (former Management Partner for Sierra Leone); and Robert Newman, Director of AMP Health

Community Health Impact Coalition (CHIC): Madeleine Ballard, Executive Director

International Development Innovation Alliance (IDIA): Tom Feeny, Innovation Program Director, Results 4 Development

Medicus Mundi Switzerland: Martin Leschhorn Streb, Director

Million Lives Club: Olivia Elson, Program Officer, Results 4 Development

Collective Impact Forum: Robert Albright, Director of Programs

ExpandNet Secretariat: Laura Ghiron, Vice-President of Partners in Expanding Health Quality and Access; Peter Fajans, International Health Consultant

Initiatives on System Change (CYFI): Jeroo Billimoria, Founder and Managing Director

ACADEMIC INSTITUTIONS

Bertha Center for Social Innovation and Entrepreneurship, University of Cape Town: Katusha de Villiers, Senior Project Manager

Center for Advancement of Social Entrepreneurship (CASE) at Duke University: Kim Bardy Langsam, Senior Program Director

SOCIAL IMPACT ORGANIZATIONS

Last Mile Health: Josh Albert, Chief of Staff

NexLeaf: Nithya Ramanathan, CEO and Cofounder; Natalie Evans, Strategic Partnerships and Fundraising Manager

Noora Health: Edith Elliott, CEO and Cofounder

Possible Health: David Citrin, Director of Evidence to Policy

Splash: Mike Kollins, Director of Programs

VillageReach: Emily Bancroft, President and staff

FUNDERS

Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation: Nosa Orobato, Deputy Director, Maternal, Newborn & Child Health

Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ): Martina Kress, Team Leader

ELMA Philanthropies: June Lee, Director of Monitoring and Evaluation

Fondation Botnar: Ursula Jasper, Policy Officer; David Suhr, Strategic Learning and Evaluation Manager

Gavi: Adrien de Chaisemartin, Director of Strategy, Funding & Performance

Hewlett Foundation: Dana Hovig, Director, Global Development and Population

Mulago Foundation: Kevin Starr, Managing Director

Open Road Alliance: Franklin Mora, Investment Officer

Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors: Heather Grady, Vice President

Skoll Foundation: Donald Gips, Chief Executive Officer; Liz Diebold, Principal; and staff

UBS Optimus Foundation: Marissa Leffler, Health Program Director

USAID: Lorin Kavanaugh-Ulku, Scaling Pathways Project

Vitol Foundation: Sarah Jeffery, Head of Health