

Five steps to scaling social impact

How and why do some impact-orientated projects scale, while others fail? Over the last eight years, much of our research at the LSE's Innovation and Co-Creation Lab has focused on the question of how sustainable organisational models for large-scale impact can be developed.

RLabs: From idea to scale

One of the organisations that we have accompanied on their path to growth is Reconstructed Living Labs (RLabs). RLabs started in the Cape Flats in Cape Town, South Africa, to address complex problems faced by former drug addicts and other vulnerable people. Stemming from community members' need for emotional support, RLabs developed a simple mobile counselling approach. This approach facilitated peer-to-peer support through the use of existing mobile phones that were available within the community. RLabs then assisted the community in working with the few existing resources available to them to teach one another to use social media, allowing them to share their stories with online audiences, and connect with like-minded people around the world. Soon after, this simple education/training model scaled into 22 different countries, and the platform is now used by over 5 million people. This rapid growth is not a result of investment into cutting-edge technology, but because RLabs inspired local leaders and organisations in different communities to use their methodology as a way to strengthen existing social, natural, and human capital. RLab's story illustrates how inclusive growth can happen if bottom-up (local communities) and top-down (global platforms) are combined. Rather than pouring in new resources, RLabs use a bricolage approach ('making the best out of whatever is at hand') – combining existing human capital (e.g. local trainers), material resources (e.g. local low-cost phones), and skills (e.g. learning on the job). However, instead of focusing on a small, local level, as most start-up enterprises are used to doing, RLabs managed to scale it up globally.

Five steps towards scaling social impact

From studying RLabs and other organizations around the world, as well as our work on the 'Impact Organization', we have identified five actions that can help scale social impact from scratch or via existing structures:

1. **Move from reliance on external resources to sustained bricolage.** Organisations have long relied on pouring external resources into their growth efforts. However, facilitating platforms, such as in the RLabs example, that enable people to make the best out of whatever is at hand is not only cost-effective, but can potentially **lead to more sustainable outcomes**.
2. **Relate organisational purpose to genuine values and impact measures.** While mission- and values-statements have been a marketing-exercise for many companies, those that **align organisational purpose with individuals' purpose and values** can be effective. Much can be learned from companies such as RLabs, Buutzeorg or Heiligenfeld, which integrate their (genuine) values into processes such as recruitment and promotions. Organisations such as Aravind Eyecare and Acumen Fund **show us how impact can be measured**.
3. **Switch from new to embedded technology.** Rather than seeing technology as a solution, it can be an effective platform that facilitates real life impact. The RLabs example shows that rather than coming up with a new technology, leveraging mobile phones and computers that exist within the community can be just as effective as developing new technology. Indeed, RLabs learned the hard way that pushing technology on people, rather than leveraging whatever people are using already, can quickly backfire. When introducing a new technology that was driven by developers' ideas, rather than the community's real needs, the technology was not used by members and quickly abandoned. Moreover, in networked structures technology platforms such as Facebook allow for transparency and can be useful in holding people to account on a peer-to-peer level, rather than hierarchically. For example, posting weekly goals

(and if there were achieved) in an internal forum accessible by the rest of the team can lead to increased motivation and self-monitoring, especially if goal delivery is crucial for the work of the whole team.

4. **Change from pursuing organisation-centric initiatives to fostering effective communities.** It can concern organisations such as R Labs that explicitly focus on community-building, or larger organisations that build internal innovation communities: If done well, facilitating communities/networks can help get things done faster and more effectively. Many companies fail in these efforts. As we have discussed [elsewhere](#), effective innovation communities are based on shared values, empowered ambassadors, curated diversity, and peer-to-peer accountability. This often allows making positive coincidences (and thus eventually, innovation) more likely to happen – therefore, [accelerating serendipity](#).
5. **Advance from product innovation to system-innovation.** From our studies and work with companies and social organisations, we have seen that [successful enterprises often orchestrate whole ecosystems](#). Rather than investing into their own value chains only, they become an active part of the supply and value chains of their partners. HoneyCare, for example, not only sells beehives to farmers in Kenya and then buys back the honey, but it also helps farmers with the financing of these beehives via third parties.



Where does this leave us?

These five approaches have been shown to be effective in different contexts. While in certain contexts some might be more effective, in other contexts they might not. However, what each of these have in common is that they are explicitly people-focused. Which leads us to the normative dimension of business. Goethe once said that 'if we take man [or woman] as he is, we make him worse; but if we take man as what he could be, we make him capable of becoming what he can be'. My hope is that this research will help us build organisations that enable people to develop into who they are truly capable of becoming. This would not only be fruitful on the aggregate societal level, but it would also facilitate building

organisations that are fit for the future.

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