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FOR HEALTHY AND EMPOWERED WOMEN,
CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS
INNOVATION MARKETPLACE



Technical Assistance Support for Health Innovations in Low- and Middle-Income Countries

A WHITE PAPER

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The [Every Woman Every Child \(EWEC\) Innovation Marketplace](#) is a strategic alliance of development organizations including Grand Challenges Canada, the Norwegian Agency for Development, the U.S. Agency for Development and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. The EWEC Innovation Marketplace selects and supports the scaling of promising innovations that address high mortality and morbidity health conditions for women, children and adolescents in low- and middle-income countries.



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[Results for Development \(R4D\)](#) is a leading non-profit global development partner. R4D collaborates with change agents around the world — governments, civil society and innovators — to create strong systems that support healthy, educated people. R4D combines global expertise in health, education and nutrition with analytic rigor, practical support for decision-making and implementation, and access to peer problem-solving networks. This paper was developed in partnership with [Global Innovation Exchange \(GIE\)](#) which is part of [R4D's Innovation Practice](#) and supports the scale-up of innovations.

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INTRODUCTION

The 'valley of death' has become a well-used term in the sector of innovation, regardless of the international development context¹. The term refers to the funding gap that often occurs near the mid-point in the development cycle of an innovation, and is a feature of innovation and entrepreneurship; it is contrasted against the relative ease of obtaining funding and support at the outset and later in development. It is further accentuated in the sector of global health and impact. To traverse this valley of death (typically at the transition-to-scale stage²), innovators require support from the sector, with the aim of protecting the impact at stake and the entrepreneurial spirit itself. This support is often framed as 'technical assistance' and is usually provided to address common barriers to scaling faced by innovators.

The ideas expressed in this white paper evolved from expertise developed while studying scaling and in working with funders and innovators through the *Every Woman Every Child* (EWEC) Innovation Marketplace, a strategic alliance of development organizations consisting of Grand Challenges Canada, the Norwegian Agency for Development, the U.S. Agency for Development and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation – an initiative housed at Grand Challenges Canada. That expertise was combined with the latest research^{1#} conducted by the Global Innovation Exchange (GIE) team part of Results for Development's Innovation Practice, which explored various barriers to scale faced by development innovations across geographies and sectors as well as the appropriate type of support to address those barriers. The points that we make should be interpreted as scholarly observations, rather than as an agenda endorsed by the partners of the EWEC Innovation Marketplace or Global Innovation Exchange.

Key barriers, best practices for success and a breakdown of support types available when scaling innovations in LMICs

1. BARRIERS TO SCALING

As the global health and development sector matured, there has been a continually evolving understanding of the barriers faced by innovators in a changing political, funding and health landscape.

- a. Financing
- b. Product Development
- c. No/poor Scaling Plan and Business Model
- d. Market Awareness
- e. Public Sector Adoption
- f. Impact Measurement
- g. Communication and Presentation
- h. Talent
- i. Operational Management
- j. Human Rights, Environment and Gender Perspectives
- k. Partnerships



A. FINANCING

This barrier to scale is probably the most significant and obvious one. Lack of financing is often tied to the barriers described hereafter. It is commonly observed that, while innovators may list the lack of financing as the main barrier, deeper analysis often exposes other barriers, such as lack of impact evidence or networks to accessing funding. To tackle the financing gap itself, we have presented a navigational guide for innovators seeking various types of capital (along with characteristics, expectations and sources) in a separate white paper in this series³.

B. PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT

While early prototypes often demonstrate the promise and viability of an innovation, continued product development (especially for devices, diagnostics, therapeutics and digital platforms) is an ongoing priority, particularly in response to early market feedback, pilots and demonstration studies. Product development may include design, research and development (R&D) or refinements to increase efficacy, lower the cost of goods sold (COGS), expand use cases, improve local contextualization, provide language translation, ensure continued relevance and improve efficiency. Barriers to adoption must be identified and addressed quickly, especially at the early stages. Rewarding product development, both from a business and impact perspective, is linked to a strong awareness and understanding of the markets served.

C. NO/POOR SCALING PLAN AND BUSINESS MODEL

A significant number of early innovators develop promising and innovative products and services, but have no clear plan or strategy to bring it to

the markets of interest. While support may be available to help craft strategy outlines, the strength of the team is closely tied to scaling impact, as they must ultimately judge the strategy's appropriateness, proficiently execute it, and be able to pivot and refine as the landscape evolves. Depending on the type of innovation, a variety of business or scaling models may be feasible. For example, we have highlighted the range of business models appropriate today to scale medical technologies in our third white paper of this series⁴. A viable business model is key to the long-term sustainability of any innovation.

D. MARKET AWARENESS

Global development focus implies the need to scale into markets that may be immature and rife with political, business and infrastructure barriers. A comprehensive market understanding of demand, product feasibility and strategy regarding segments, pricing and channels is critical for a successful business strategy. This is often a challenge, especially for teams not primarily based in these markets. Market data and insights are often not available or up-to-date for these contexts. Innovators that haven't consulted users or customers sufficiently regarding a product's or service's ease-of-use, accessibility or affordability will find it hard to form a thorough understanding of the market demand and appropriate strategy. User design often overlooks that health or impact need does not necessarily equate to market demand – a key to traction and scaling. Local partnerships, co-creation methodologies (especially where public sector adoption is required), human-centered design features, appropriate feasibility studies and customer engagement are critical to navigate these barriers.

E. PUBLIC SECTOR ADOPTION

Governments often play the predominant role in providing healthcare in low- and middle-income countries (especially for the LMIC populations that will drive impact) and increasingly so as Universal Health Coverage gains momentum. A lack of bandwidth from the public sector, lack of expertise to evaluate innovations, unclear processes, political risks, bureaucracy and high competition for small budgets all serve as tough barriers to navigate for an innovator with a solution. Identifying the right local stakeholders that can inform creation of and champion the solution, continue engagement and share data from customer demand and cost effectiveness are strategies of successful public sector adoption models. A notable tool that helps different stakeholders, innovators, funders and government themselves navigate this pathway is Village Reach's *Journey to Scale with Government*⁵. A positive example of innovation that has worked well in the public sector is Praekelt's *MomConnect* digital platform in South Africa, adopted by the National Department of Health, which already serves more than one million pregnant moms.

F. IMPACT MEASUREMENT

Given that achieving impact is the overarching goal of scaling innovative solutions for global health and development, robust measurement is the only tool at one's disposal to measure, inform and act upon the progress achieved. It is also a key performance indicator that is required to attract financing from impact funders, as well as supporting public sector adoption and other types of partnership and support. Many entrepreneurs lack expertise within their teams to develop measurement tools and require support to differentiate between user adoption and impact on health and lives, and between implied impact and quantifiable evidence, in order to create

systems that are suited to measure impact and to present such data appropriately to different stakeholders. There is also a need for financing in the sector to support the collection of this evidence, as the cost of data collection is not inexpensive.

G. COMMUNICATION AND PRESENTATION

Even with appropriate solutions and strategies, communication and marketing of the innovation is critical to both financing and partnerships. Stakeholders may find alignment with slightly different aspects of the solution, and it is important that material be provided in the formats preferred by each sector to enable successful outcomes and transactions. For example, typical investor pitch decks capture succinct information on the market size, intellectual property, team and strategy in the form of PowerPoint slides, but donors may require detailed proposals capturing technical details of the solution, evidence to date, impact to date and partnerships, while still other stakeholders may prefer summary concept notes or one-pagers. Building such communications material can be an asset to the scaling of any innovation. It is important to note that these barriers can be especially pronounced for local innovators, not only because a majority of funding is in high-income countries that are not always a part of local innovator networks, but also because the above frameworks all have roots in Western society – together, these aspects often contribute to selection bias among innovators, which few funders are willing to address.

H. TALENT

The strength of teams can make or break the success of any venture or entity. Appropriate expertise for the stage of growth is imperative – often a particular challenge in the early stages, when teams are typically very lean. Additionally, sourcing talent (especially in low- and middle-income markets where entrepreneurial ecosystems are less developed) can become a serious barrier to the success of an entity and often requires support. There is a systemic need for capacity building and centralized mechanisms to find appropriate skills in these contexts that would apply beyond a single innovation.

I. OPERATIONAL MANAGEMENT

Efficient financial and operational management is an ongoing concern for entities, especially while transitioning to scale. They must have robust internal operations that are structured, organized and cost-effective, to effectively execute on growth and scaling plans, forecast growth and capital needs and manage supply chains and logistics.

J. HUMAN RIGHTS, ENVIRONMENT AND GENDER PERSPECTIVES

Concurrent with impact measurement support, innovators may also require support to challenge their own perspectives, share and learn from peers and identify practical solutions to implementing frameworks, to protect human rights and protect the environment during the activities they undertake and to drive gender equality. Emphasis on ESG (Environmental, Social and Governance) values of an entity has drawn

attention to the specifics of how an innovation or an organization embeds culture, policy and goals around ensuring environmental protection, social inclusion and impact, along with governance issues related to diversity, decision-making and accountability.

K. PARTNERSHIPS

Partnerships can be pivotal to enabling faster scaling within a complex environment with elements of health, business, market access, finance and impact. These entities – whether local or global – can range from governments, civil society organizations, NGOs, academics, multilaterals, manufacturers, distributors and the wider private sector. Innovators typically require support to access networks of such stakeholders and facilitate the building of partnerships. While needs do overlap, research reveals that local innovators require access to global networks, mainly for funding, while high-income country (HIC) innovators additionally desire the networks to drive local partnerships that are required to scale their innovation. This access can be facilitated through provision of a platform for exposure and advocacy.

2. BEST PRACTICES AND COMMON ISSUES

There are many barriers to scaling a global health venture. To complicate matters, these are not consistent through time, nor are they equally important at all stages. The following are commonly seen as best practices.

-  **Participate early** Innovators can benefit most through early participation in one or more Technical Assistance (TA) programs to identify elements that uniquely work for their vision and to build their networks in the sector early.
-  **Continue appropriate participation** Participation should become more selective and targeted to solve for more specific gaps or take advantage of benefits over time. Specifically, a comprehensive analysis of barriers (done internally or with the help of advisors) can identify both gaps and strengths. It is important that lean organizations not waste the limited resource of time on programs not suited to fulfil their gaps.
-  **Develop a scaling plan** This is a foremost priority, especially within the goal of financing the scale-up. At all stages, irrespective of the organizational type, innovators must be able to realistically distinguish between optimistic and conservative plans, and to inspect over-achievements and under-achievements in the plan to inform what the average looks like in forecasts. Specific plan evolutions, or pivots, may be necessary and must ideally be undertaken after incorporating the advice from similar pivots. Additionally, presenting information on the scaling plan in a format that is suitable to the capital type being pursued can lead to better success. See our white paper on financing instruments³.
-  **Set up a board** Building a strong formal board (or, at a minimum, an informal advisory board) that is appropriate to the stage is key. While a comprehensive discussion of board composition is beyond the scope of this review, directors/advisors must be sought out relevant to the stage who can speak to the various facets of the innovation and growth plan (e.g., angel investors, technical experts in health, technology or regulation, expertise in commercialization, fundraising or working with the public sector, etc.). Ensuring diversity of sector, perspective, gender, race and markets can enable the long-term growth of an entity.
-  **Continuously identify areas of improvement** Innovators must leverage the skills and expertise of teams, boards and diverse advisors to actively identify areas of weakness for improvement. These will typically evolve as well as cycle through common challenges, such as markets, talents and operational management.



Understand the nuances of TA support

Various TA platforms are available. While a full review of that universe is beyond the scope of this review, a brief breakdown of the various types and their expectations are identified below.

i.) Accelerators

Accelerators are programs designed for early-stage businesses, to develop and validate their business and market strategies by providing education, mentorship and potentially small investments. Well-known examples include Y Combinator and TechStars; the global health and impact space have numerous programs led by or partnering with various funders (e.g., the World Food Programme Accelerator). Innovators typically engage with an intensive program for several weeks that provides helpful support for early-stage entities.

ii.) Incubators

Incubators are different from accelerators in that they may help innovators develop their ideas further, to a minimum viable product, as opposed to accelerating a business with an effective growth strategy. Incubators are also less structured and longer term, and can focus on providing product development, design support, co-working space, lab space, etc. A good example is the Stanford BioDesign program that fuels the conversion of ideas into feasible concepts. In the context of development and impact, numerous local accelerators have successfully emerged⁶. Satisfaction for support received is reported to be high, as these entities are better able to understand local infrastructure, market and positioning. On the other hand, global accelerators may provide better exposure to funding opportunities. A key finding has been that, due to the differences between geographies (Asia versus Africa), products (devices versus digital platforms), entities (non-profits versus businesses) and scaling pathways (public sector versus private sector), there may be limitations for accelerators with mandates that are too broad.

iii.) Individual Experts

Innovators can also often benefit from one-on-one support of trusted mentors and advisors with sectoral expertise in different areas ranging from commercialization, impact, procurement, public sector, finance, gender, health sector and markets. Mentors and advisors, whether from current investors or external, can be critical in growing the networks of an innovator. Accelerators that offer mentorship can benefit from providing a diverse list of mentors from various backgrounds, combined with platforms that provide better matchmaking. While expertise lent may be short-term or pro-bono, it can also be long-term in the form of a hired consultant, often filling expertise gaps in lean teams.

iv.) Peer-to-Peer

Challenges within each sub-sector can be quite unique and many innovators appreciate the efforts of platforms that allow peers to connect and learn from each other. For larger funders that support a portfolio of innovations within a sector, there may be opportunities for cross-learning and partnerships, especially when these opportunities to connect may not arise organically (e.g., if innovators are from different geographies). This is more common for service innovations (where competition risk related to intellectual property is not typically high) and is a feature of accelerators that bring together similar peers as part of the same focus or common portfolios.



v.) Networking

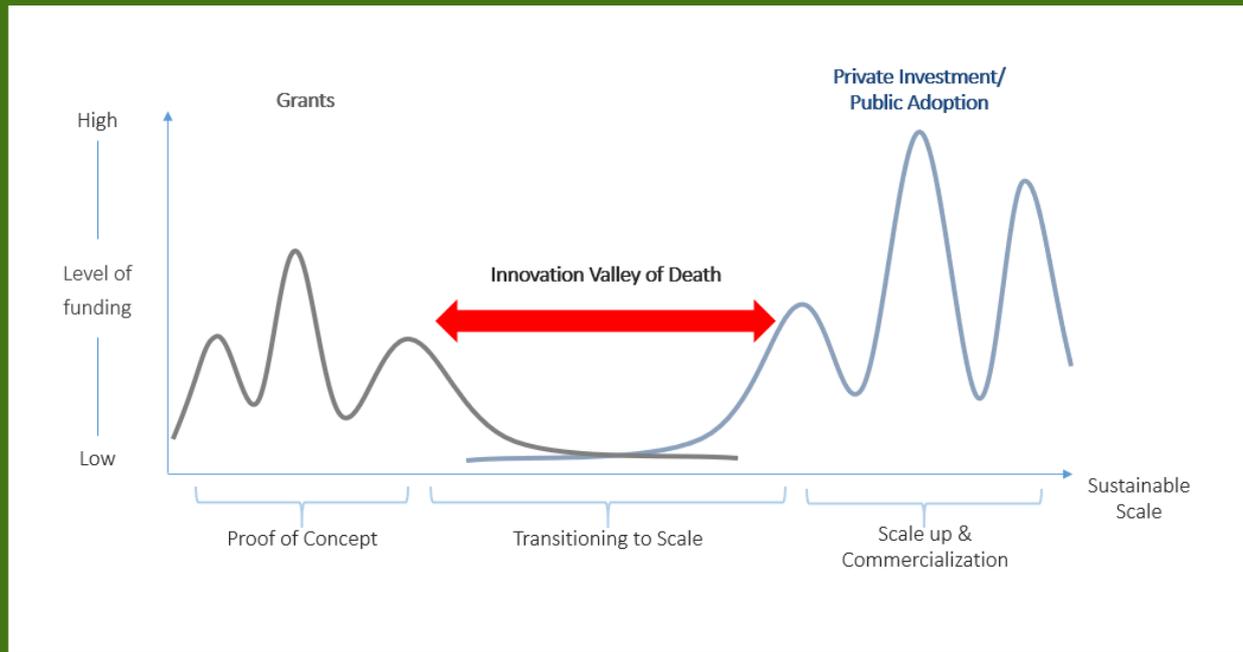
Networking is often an important or even primary goal at events and conferences, where the focus may itself be a particular barrier to scaling that brings together innovators along with other stakeholders. These platforms can serve as the building ground for partnerships and networks that are closely aligned with a specific barrier an innovator may be grappling with.

vi.) Online Platforms

Online platforms, such as the Grand Challenges Africa Innovation Network, may speak to the educational aspect of data, insights and learning, or may take the form of tailored webinars innovators can register for. Platforms can also be useful places to track opportunities, such as the Global Innovation Exchange or Devex, as well as other targeted trackers that often surface, such as those recently shared that specifically speak to COVID-related opportunities.

Figure 1

Technical Assistance is needed for innovators to traverse the innovation "valley of death"



CONCLUSION

In summary, this white paper summarizes the various barriers in innovation scaling that Technical Assistance programs support innovators to overcome. Specifically for the goals of Universal Health Coverage (which ensure health access, including to LMIC and last-mile populations), scaling models can be particularly challenged if they do not have highly efficient management, diverse and collaborative partnerships, and blended finance instrument options, all of which require very different funders and investors to align. Technical Assistance therefore plays a crucial role for the sector in the success of models to scale innovations.

From an innovator's perspective, this universe can seem overwhelming, with so many choices, all of which appear helpful. This paper identifies the key barriers an innovator must continuously monitor, the best practices in the sector for success, the internal 'North Star' an innovator must have for themselves and a breakdown of support types that may be available. Regardless of the type of support, the criteria for successful engagement are dependent upon the compatibility and trust between the advisor and the innovator, the ability of the innovator to learn from advisors while also remaining in charge of their venture, and their ability to forge strong relationships and partnerships that lift their progress towards the achievement of key milestones.

TA programs must focus on their expertise, resisting the temptation to attempt to tackle all barriers as collaboration with programs specialized in these other barriers is usually a better approach. They must also measure success metrics that can be specifically attributable to the support they provide. Insights drawn from the portfolio of the EWEC Innovation Marketplace, which adopts a multi-year, hands-on support approach, have been informed through innovators' demand for a longer-term, one-on-one format of TA support, in addition to the tactical short-term support provided by typical TA programs, which they also need. Development funders must assess how similar longer-term support can be provided to grantees and investees to protect the impact in which they have invested.

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