

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

# JOURNEYS TO

# SCALE

Accompanying the Finalists of the  
Innovations in Education Initiative

PRODUCED IN PARTNERSHIP BY



CENTER FOR  
EDUCATION INNOVATIONS  
An initiative of Results for Development Institute





# JOURNEYS TO SCALE

## Journeys to Scale



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**As has been well documented, the last two decades have been marked by a significant increase in the number of children who have access to schooling. Yet, millions of children still lack the opportunity to attend school and those that do are often not learning.<sup>1</sup>**

This growing recognition of what UNESCO noted as the “global learning crisis” has coincided with a proliferation of promising innovations in education.<sup>2</sup> These innovations range in both form and function, from results-based financing instruments to novel pedagogical instructional techniques to play-based learning practices. While none of these innovations are silver bullets, they hold the potential to complement effective existing practices, displace ineffective ones, and ultimately accelerate improvements in learning.

## **THIS REPORT TELLS THE STORY OF FIVE SUCH INNOVATIONS AS THEY ATTEMPT TO SCALE—AND ULTIMATELY IMPROVE LEARNING OUTCOMES.**

To effectively leverage innovations, it is critical to identify those which hold potential, test them in a specific context and, depending on the results, adapt and scale them to other contexts. Ultimately, this scaling up process renders new evidence of an innovation’s ability to mainstream in larger education systems. In an effort to support this cycle, UNICEF and the Center for Education Innovations (CEI)<sup>3</sup> partnered to initiate UNICEF’s first-ever *Innovations in Education Initiative*. 162 programs, sourced from UNICEF and CEI, applied to receive financing from UNICEF and technical support from both organizations.

**Based on a number of criteria, such as equity, learning, access, and systems strengthening, five innovations were named finalists. These innovations include:**

**CAN’T WAIT TO LEARN (SUDAN):** Supported by facilitators who are trained in child-friendly approaches, children who have never attended school use solar-powered tablets to access the official Sudanese Alternative Learning Program’s math curriculum for grades one to three, through a self-guided game.

**PALAVRA DE CRIANÇA (BRAZIL):** Teacher training, parental engagement, and use of assessment data are employed to strengthen school readiness and achieve basic literacy for all children by the end of grade three.

**ACCELERATED SCHOOL READINESS (ETHIOPIA):** Grade one teachers are trained in engaging pedagogical methods, used to teach an accelerated, two-month curriculum to 6-year-olds to promote pre-literacy, pre-numeracy, and positive attitudes toward school.

**LIVELY MINDS (GHANA):** Volunteer mothers from the community are trained in play-based learning and health activities to improve school readiness, socio-emotional, and health outcomes for young children.

**EDUTRAC (PERU):** Mobile technology is used to gather educational data in remote communities to inform decision-making at regional and local levels. These data include teacher and student attendance, timely delivery of education materials, and school maintenance.

<sup>1</sup> UNESCO (2013).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> The Center for Education Innovations is a global database of over 750 education innovations administered by Results for Development Institute.

Over the past year, as these innovations have tried to build their models and measure their impact, CEI has documented their journeys to scale. Through this documentation process, a number of insights have emerged across four domains:

## DEFINITION

The five innovations challenged ideas about what it means to scale an innovation, highlighting the reality that scaling does not happen in a straightforward manner and that progress is often accompanied by setbacks. They revealed that the conventional idea of scaling as simply the process of reaching more beneficiaries does not account for steps like the inclusion of new services to an existing package of interventions, the formation of new alliances with government and donor partners, and team capacity building.

### KEY FINDINGS

- Scaling is about more than simply increasing the numbers of beneficiaries.
- Innovation is about more than the intervention itself. It is about a broader and deeper spread of new norms and beliefs.

## CONTEXT

The case studies highlight the importance of designing an innovation with deliberate consideration of the environment in which it will reside, especially for technology-based programs. At the same time, the profiled innovations also underscore the truth that resources are finite and that customization is not costless.

Context also influenced pace of scaling. The speed at which innovations scaled was driven by windows of opportunity, especially around donor support. Innovators had to walk a careful balance between pragmatically taking advantage of such windows of support and carefully rolling out a program once a pilot had proven its effectiveness.

### KEY FINDINGS

- Careful consideration for the surrounding context is necessary for technology-based interventions to achieve their intended impact.
- Trade-offs must be made between customization and replicability of innovations which aspire to scale.
- There may be trade-offs between optimizing program design and “seizing the moment.”
- To ensure continued relevance of an innovation, intensive local collaboration is vital.
- The choice of a pilot site may have important implications for the success of a program.

# PARTNERSHIPS AND PEOPLE

The current development discourse rightly notes the potential of partnerships to amplify a program's impact. While this is often the case, these case studies also speak to the double-edged sword that is a partnership, challenging the commonly held notion that the more partnerships, the better. Each of the five innovations benefited from collaboration with other partners—yet such alliances come at a cost, including dedicated personnel time to cultivate a shared sense of purpose and an agreed timeline to achieve results. Their experiences suggest that while new alliances can yield new benefits or connections, they need to be developed with great intentionality.

Beyond partnerships, the importance of individuals was highlighted during the one-year incubation phase: where there was strong personnel and leadership, programs were better able to overcome unanticipated challenges.

## KEY FINDINGS

- The reputation of institutional partners can catalyze buy-in for an innovation.
- Active community engagement must be matched by strong institutional commitment.
- Managing complex, multi-stakeholder partnerships requires sustained effort and differentiated approaches.
- Human capacity at all levels matters.
- A culture in which key staff members feel ownership and a sense of empowerment can improve results and create a more sustainable model.

# STRATEGIC PLANNING

The five profiled innovations showed mixed evidence of long-term planning. While we don't know how the innovations' journeys to scale will end, those that have adopted a long-term view by identifying sustainable sources of financing, adopting strategies to drive down unit costs, planning for scale from day one, and consistently evaluating their impact, appear to be better positioned to achieve long-term sustainability and handle unforeseen challenges.

## KEY FINDINGS

- Continual testing and experimentation can enhance the likelihood that an innovation will effectively scale.
- Designing with scale in mind from day one may bolster the chances that an innovation meets its scaling target.
- Buy-in cannot be viewed as a single activity to be carried out upfront.



In light of these findings, a number of priority actions emerge. These 10 recommendations are oriented toward different, but equally important, stakeholders who support the scaling of innovations.

## DONORS

### PROVIDE FLEXIBLE, MULTI-YEAR FUNDING:

The provision of flexible, long-term funding responds to the reality that the scaling process will inevitably involve some setbacks. This modality also provides autonomy to implementers, who are closest to the ground, and often best placed to make judicious resource allocation decisions. In contrast, the short-term funding paradigm used by UNICEF's *Innovations in Education Initiative* highlights some of the pitfalls associated with not adopting this approach.

**THE PROVISION OF FLEXIBLE, LONG-TERM FUNDING RESPONDS TO THE REALITY THAT THE SCALING PROCESS WILL INEVITABLY INVOLVE SOME SETBACKS.**

**SUPPORT PEER LEARNING:** The observed challenges across the five innovations were not unique. There may be value in providing regular opportunities for implementers to share their experiences and jointly develop approaches to common operational challenges.

### ACKNOWLEDGE NON-FINANCIAL CONTRIBUTIONS DURING EARLY PLANNING STAGES:

Multi-stakeholder partnerships hold the potential to amplify the impact of an innovation, especially if the unique skills of partners are adequately exploited. For example, donor organizations can serve as more than simply sources of funding—they often bring connections to key actors, technical assistance, and communication channels. Early dialogue with partners about expected contributions can serve to maximize a project's potential and set appropriate expectations about roles.

## PRACTITIONERS

### USE MONITORING DATA TO INFORM LEARNING, ESPECIALLY DURING THE DESIGN PHASE:

Beyond just encouraging accountability, monitoring data can be used to enhance learning, inform scaling decisions and improve programmatic design. While there is particular value in using data collected early in the innovation design phase to make adjustments to a model, this should be a continuous process as the program scales.

### BE CONSCIENTIOUS ABOUT INVOLVING THE VOICES OF USERS, ESPECIALLY MARGINALIZED GROUPS:

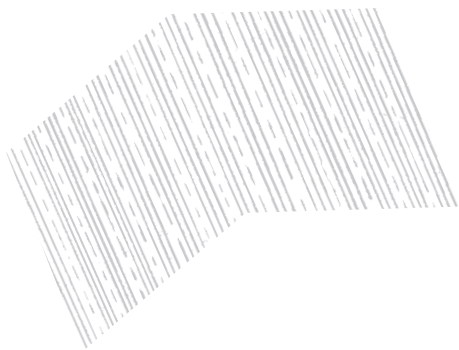
Designing programs with end users, especially the most marginalized (whose voice is often not sought out during an innovation's formative stage), is not only important for reasons of equity, but also may lead to very practical improvements in program effectiveness.

### SMALL, SYMBOLIC ACTIONS MATTER:

The potential value of low-intensity, symbolic actions in cultivating, and especially maintaining, buy-in should not be overlooked. While for some partners, rigorous impact data are critical for engendering support, for others, site visits or co-sponsorship of events can yield similar benefits.







## RESEARCHERS

**DISSEMINATE RESEARCH ON SCALING TO INNOVATORS:** There is a growing body of literature around scaling innovations in education, yet the risk of programs “reinventing the wheel” remains high. Greater efforts are needed to disseminate research and present evidence in ways that promote the uptake of lessons learned and best practices (e.g. through experiential learning activities).

**REVIEW THE USE OF TOOLS FOR ASSESSING SCALABILITY AND READINESS TO SCALE:** The above-mentioned uptick in research around innovation and scaling has been accompanied by the development of a potentially useful set of tools to assess scalability, most notably the Management Systems International (MSI) Scalability Assessment Tool.<sup>4</sup> Understanding how and in what contexts these tools have been employed will help assess their predictive potential and maximize their use.

**WHILE THE EFFECTIVENESS OF AN INNOVATION SHOULD BE A CENTRAL ELEMENT IN A GOVERNMENT’S DECISION TO ADOPT OR SCALE A PROGRAM, EQUAL WEIGHT SHOULD BE GIVEN TO AFFORDABILITY AND AVAILABLE FUNDING.**

## POLICYMAKERS

**ESTABLISH CLEAR POLICY TARGETS:** Evidence from the innovations speaks to the catalytic value of establishing clear policy targets—especially those born of consensus-building activities. These targets can serve as a rallying cry to mobilize widespread support for a program and thus provide an enabling environment for the incubation of new innovations.

**INVEST IN RIGOROUS FISCAL SPACE ANALYSES:** While the effectiveness of an innovation should be a central element in a government’s decision to adopt or scale a program, equal weight should be given to the program’s affordability and available funding. Investment in costing, cost-effectiveness, and fiscal space analyses can forestall adoption of effective yet unsustainable innovations.

While these recommendations aim to stimulate further discussion about pathways to scale, as well as offer a practical set of actions, they should not be interpreted as a definitive guide for scaling. To do so would fail to recognize the diversity of contexts in which innovations reside. Instead, we hope that others will draw their own insights about what it means to scale an innovation and take inspiration from the stories presented here.

<sup>4</sup> The criteria found in the MSI tool are as follows: 1) Is the model credible? 2) How observable are the model’s results? 3) How relevant is the model? 4) Does the model have a relevant advantage over existing practices? 5) How testable is the model? and 6) Is there a sustainable source of funding?, from Cooley & Linn (2014).

**WE SHOULD NOT ASK  
HOW INNOVATIONS  
SCALE, BUT HOW THIS  
INNOVATION SCALES.**

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