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Government

Making the Government Adoption of Social Innovations Work

How small and medium NGOs and social enterprises can help the public sector successfully adopt and scale their innovations.

By Daniel Stein, Rupika Singh & Madhav Seth | Nov. 10, 2021

(Image courtesy of Digital Green)

The holy grail for any development innovation is reaching people at scale, but there is frequently a disconnection between small and medium organizations that are innovating, and large organizations with the ability to scale up new initiatives. It's especially rare to find examples where governments have successfully and sustainably scaled up an innovation from a smaller nongovernmental organization (NGO) or social enterprise. Yet doing this successfully has the potential to unlock much more effective and efficient service delivery for millions of people.

So how can organizations make these kinds of partnerships work? It goes without saying that national governments are complex organizations with multiple, pressing responsibilities, and often little capacity or resources for innovation. In some instances, governments that directly partner with NGOs to co-design system or service improvements can yield positive results. But this often requires a commitment from both parties at the outset, with specific resources and established relationships to drive and enable scale.

While rare, there are some successful examples of government programs integrating, or "institutionalizing," projects designed and proven by smaller nonprofits. These include the Government of Bihar adopting the women's health Mobile Academy program (originally designed by BBC Media Action), Kenya's embrace of school-based deworming (based on a program run by ICS-SP), and the Government of Malawi's health hotline (originally developed by Village Reach). Recently, IDinsight conducted a qualitative case study that examines another success story: The government of Andhra Pradesh, India's adoption of a video-based, agricultural extension program pioneered by the NGO Digital Green. The study supports the idea that scaling through government is a viable strategy for smaller organizations to achieve impact, given the right environment and tactics, and offers lessons on how to do it.

Scaling Up Digital Agricultural Extension in India

Agriculture extension services—outreach and support services that help farmers improve production and reduce risk associated with things like bad weather or pests—are well-poised for high social impact and innovation. These policies and programs can do much to promote economic development, because most people in low- and middle-income countries work in agriculture. These services are also ripe for innovation, because traditional, in-person support is difficult to scale. According to the 2019 National Sample Survey in India, for example, only 3.1 percent of farmers reported meeting with a government extension office in the previous year.

Founded in 2008, Digital Green attempts to bridge this gap by creating digital solutions to improve agricultural, health, and nutrition outcomes in communities, and then partnering with local organizations and governments to scale these solutions. One of its solutions is a community-created, video-based agriculture training service, and over the last five years, it has worked with the Department of Agriculture and Cooperation in Andhra Pradesh, a state in southern India, to scale video-based extension across the state. Digital Green started with small pilots to design the content and mechanism for delivering the trainings, then worked with the government to test the approach together. Slowly, the government began layering the new content on top of its existing extension infrastructure and resources. As the state government realized the benefits and became convinced that farmers would adopt digital extension, it integrated the process into more of its systems and scaled it further in multiple districts in the states. Today, it has been scaled to all 13 districts in the state of Andhra Pradesh by the Department of Agriculture.

With support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, our research organization, IDinsight, interviewed a range of government and Digital Green leaders, at both the state and village levels, to learn

what has enabled successful institutionalization. From these, we drew a few general lessons for each of the three main phases of development:

- Initial Phase: Demonstrate the impact potential and scalability of the intervention.

- Transition phase: Identify opportunities to integrate the solution into existing systems and processes.

- Sustainability phase: As the intervention starts to run smoothly, pass ownership of the model to the government.

Here's a closer look at how to successfully move through these three phases.

The Initial Phase

Before institutionalization, organizations need to clearly convey the potential for impact to their government partner by demonstrating success in contexts where the solution is easy to implement.

- **Rigorously demonstrate efficacy.** While evidence that your solution works is not always sufficient to institutionalize a program, it can play a major role in getting buy-in and provides internal champions with talking points to bring others on board. Digital Green conducted multiple assessments, including externally run randomized controlled trials, to demonstrate the efficacy of its model. The evidence helped convince government officials that it was worth investment and informed decisions about scaling up. Similarly, it was a large impact evaluation that led directly to the government adoption of a school-based deworming program in Kenya.

- **Start where it's easy.** Demonstrating that a program can work in one area builds support for adopting the same program in less-favorable environments. The process also provides an opportunity to discover challenges and refine the model. Digital Green started with operations in departments and geographies that had greater government buy-in before moving on to ones where policy makers were less likely to engage. Digital Green's high level of engagement with decision makers within government led to faster, more-coordinated implementation. The downside of this approach is that areas where government officials are more likely to engage with new approaches tend to be wealthier. This raises distributive justice and equity concerns that NGOs should take it into account.

- **Stick it out.** Time plays a big role in the success or failure of government adoption. In the case of Digital Green, core team members worked with the government for close to a decade. Time helped build the government's trust in Digital Green and made it more receptive to taking on

greater responsibility. It allowed Digital Green to build the capacity of government staff to implement the solution as independently as possible. Time also benefited Village Reach, a health care NGO that transitioned its health hotline to the Government of Malawi after a decade of working together.

The Transition Phase

Through the transition phase, NGOs need build mechanisms for government partners to iterate and improve their approach, while integrating the model into its existing systems and processes.

- **Create a network of internal champions.** Internal champions help ensure that mandates to implement an institutionalized program trickle down to the grassroots level. It's important to convince at least three or four senior-level government officials of the potential of your program. Proof of efficacy and a willingness of the NGO to commit to the medium-term are invaluable to uncovering potential internal champions. In Andhra Pradesh, a core team of senior state leaders have accelerated the institutionalization of video-based extension, and regular inquiries by the senior team about the project's progress has both incentivized junior officials to devote resources to video-based extension and increased institutional interest in the program.

- **Assign responsibility to specific government departments and officials.** Projects can sometimes languish when no one believes it is their responsibility to ensure success. Clearly defining who is responsible for implementing an intervention enables targeted follow-up and review. In Andhra Pradesh, districts that assigned the responsibility for resolving equipment issues to specific district technology managers reported no related problems.

- **Include your program in routine government review meetings.** In many places, project monitoring and decision-making take place in government review meetings. Projects covered in these meetings receive visibility and support from high-level officials. As early in the process as possible, NGOs should push relevant government departments or ministries to place their initiatives on the agenda. Government and Digital Green interviewees noted that the inclusion of video-based extension in periodic state- and district-level review meeting agendas increased government focus on implementing the program well.

- **Regularly monitor the status of institutionalization.** A unique and salient element of Digital Green's engagement with the government of Andhra Pradesh was that it regularly monitored progress using a customized framework developed by the International Food Policy Research Institute. This framework examines both readiness capacity for activities (such as infrastructure and resources like data management system and budget), as well as progress on outcomes for

integration and institutionalization (such as the number of video-based extension sessions, and evaluations of extension agents). The framework enabled Digital Green to systematically observe the successes and challenges in institutionalizing video-based extension, and take appropriate action with state and district governments.

The Sustainability Phase

Finally, organizations need to set up systems that facilitate government's leadership and accountability so that the government owns the fully institutionalized model.

- **Define what the steady-state partnership will look like in the future.** In most cases, governments are best suited to general implementation tasks that can be easily rolled out at scale. If a program requires specific technical or managerial skills, NGOs should plan to commit resources to supporting program implementation long into the future. Digital Green's production team, for example, continues to support video production. Governments that don't have the interest in or capacity for taking on all tasks in-house can also establish a team, committee, or project management unit that procures and manages cost-effective external vendors to provide long-term support.

- **Negotiate government co-investment.** Government officials are more likely to work to make a program successful if it's part of their own budget. State-level officials in Andhra Pradesh said that paying for video-based extension motivated the government to find ways to make video-based extension more effective. As a Digital Green respondent said, "When the government is investing in training and equipment, they expect the training and equipment to be useful and used."

Challenges to Institutionalization

As noted above, while institutionalization of video-based extension in Andhra Pradesh has been generally successful, it has also encountered challenges. Issues related to government capacity, maintaining government interest and funding, and upholding quality are common to many institutionalization attempts.

1. **Limited government capacity for managing certain program components.** Especially for technical programs, government officials may not have the necessary capacity to carry out some tasks. While the government of Andhra Pradesh is responsible for most large-scale activities, such as video screenings and screener training, Digital Green continues to oversee video production activities, such as hiring technical staff and ensuring post-production quality. The government

doesn't seem to have a short- or medium-term interest in absorbing these specialized tasks into its ambit of activities.

2. **Costs.** Video-based extension costs more than traditional, in-person extension, and comes with corresponding expenses for things like screening equipment and staff training. Most government leaders perceived that the program would provide good value for money—that it would induce farmers to adopt new production techniques at a reasonable cost—as a precondition for adopting it. However, video-based extension requires ongoing budgetary support to produce new videos, and for the maintenance and replacement of projectors. Obtaining and retaining this budgetary support has been an ongoing challenge.

3. **Variability in interest among leaders.** Different government leaders have different personal priorities. While many district-level leaders in Andhra Pradesh were invested in seeing video-based extension work in the state, other leaders were more focused on other programs. Given the churn in government staff and postings, this has and will continue to pose a risk to institutionalization.

4. **Maintaining quality.** The government of Andhra Pradesh has significantly more resources than Digital Green, but it also has many other programs to oversee, and there's a risk that as it takes on more tasks, quality will go down.

At the time of our study in early 2020, the government had successfully adopted and scaled the video-based extension across most dimensions. State- and district-level government staff decided what videos ought to be created, and government frontline workers were responsible for screening those videos to farmers. The government had allocated a specific budget to conducting video-based extension activities, and incentivized staff by including their work on it in performance reviews and periodic progress review meetings. All the government interviewees we spoke to considered video-based extension an important part of their job.

Digital Green's experience in Andhra Pradesh demonstrates that under the right conditions, governments can successfully institutionalize NGO interventions. Entering a partnership with a plan of having the government take on program implementation, identifying internal champions, committing time to building a relationship, and encouraging the government to start funding parts of the program can dramatically improve the chances of adoption. Additionally, regularly monitoring the status of institutionalization can help course-correct and ensure that government uptake is progressing as planned. Though these partnerships require huge commitment, they greatly increase the likelihood of important, effective programs expanding and extending into the future.

Read more stories by Daniel Stein, Rupika Singh & Madhav Seth.

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