

Reimagining Scaling

Reflections, Principles, and Perspectives
on Scaling Locally-led Humanitarian Innovations

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Indigenous & Modern (I&M) is a research and consulting agency developing a trans-disciplinary methodology, which combines indigenous knowledge, participatory research, community-building, and impact evaluation to transform complex systems. Their mission is to bridge the Global South and Global North through leadership development, community-building, and sustainable stewardship.

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About the Community-led Innovation Partnership (CLIP)

The Community-led Innovation Partnership (CLIP) aims to support the emergence and development of locally driven solutions to humanitarian problems, identified by people affected by crises. These partners are working together with values and principles of equal partnership and mutual accountability. All organisations have significant and unique experience in humanitarian innovation or community-led development. Humanitarian innovation, particularly the institutional support for community innovation in humanitarian contexts, is very much an emerging field. Our collective experience is thus critical to the delivery of this programme and enables the emergence of new tools and more effective approaches that are urgently needed as this field grows and the approach becomes more widely adopted in the sector.

About the Partners

Elrha is a global organisation that finds solutions to complex humanitarian problems through research and innovation. We are an established actor in the humanitarian community, working in partnership with humanitarian organisations, researchers, innovators, and the private sector to tackle some of the most difficult challenges facing people all over the world.

The Start Network is a network organisation working to change the way the humanitarian system operates and serves people in need. The Start Network's aim is to drive and catalyse change in the global aid system by tackling what it sees as the biggest systemic problems that the sector faces. The Start Network's vision is for a proactive, innovative and locally owned humanitarian system in which people receive better quality humanitarian aid, maintain their dignity and are protected from suffering and harm.

The Asian Disaster Reduction and Response Network (ADRRN) is a network of national civil society organisations across the Asia-Pacific region. Since 2002, ADRRN has rapidly evolved from an awareness focused network to a regional voice in advocacy and capacity building issues as well. Its main aims have been to promote coordination, information sharing and collaboration among CSOs and other stakeholders for effective and efficient disaster reduction and response in the Asia-Pacific region.

La Asociación de Servicios Comunitarios de Salud (ASECSA), representing the Start Network Guatemala Hub, is an association of over 48 community-based organisations in Guatemala fighting for rural, indigenous health access since 1978. ASECSA works to support cohesive communities with mutual solidarity, and to participate in and actively advocate for their rights to humanitarian preparation and response. This is grounded in a vision of holistic, integral, and harmonic connection between human beings, mother earth, the cosmos and everything that surrounds us.

The Center for Disaster Preparedness (CDP), in the Philippines, works with non-government organisations, people's organisations, communities, and government agencies at all levels to enhance their capacities in disaster prevention and mitigation, preparedness, emergency response, and rehabilitation and recovery. Innovation is a strategic element of CDP's core work, cross-cutting DRR, response and recovery, and CDP has regional offices across the archipelago.

YAKKUM Emergency Unit (YEU), in Indonesia, has a mandate to deliver inclusive emergency response where community participation in needs assessment and relief distribution are encouraged. YEU works to articulate initiatives to build community resilience through community-led disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation. YEU is National Coordinating Organisation for GNDR in their Views from the Frontline, and a part of various networks, including the National DRR Platform, Provincial DRR Platform in Yogyakarta and Sigi (Central Sulawesi), Humanitarian Forum Indonesia, and National Clusters. YEU is also an umbrella organisation for organisations of persons with disabilities.

CAFOD & Trocaire in Partnership (CTP) and Titi Foundation, on behalf of Start Network South Sudan hub. Titi Foundation is a South Sudanese national NGO active since 2015 that focuses on humanitarian relief and services to the most vulnerable such as women and children. CAFOD and Trocaire in Partnership (CTP) is the joint operation between the two sister agencies in South Sudan to increase programme scale and impact, CTP programmes provide humanitarian assistance to thousands of displaced people and promote peacebuilding and reconciliation.

Executive Summary

This report delves into the complexities of scaling locally-led humanitarian innovation, presenting findings from case studies across five countries: Guatemala, Indonesia, the Philippines, Brazil, and Cameroon. Each case showcases unique perspectives on scaling that depart from traditional, Western frameworks — particularly Silicon Valley-inspired models focused on entrepreneurship. For local innovators, scaling is an organic process that emphasises social impact, community ownership, and contextual adaptation over universal application. This report synthesises these examples to provide recommendations on reimagining scaling from a locally-led, decolonial perspective.

Key Findings

1. Redefining Scaling in Local Contexts

Across these diverse communities, the concept of "scaling" defies conventional definitions. Each case study highlights that scaling, for local communities, is rooted in relational and ecological approaches rather than numerical growth or market expansion.

2. Drivers and Strategies for Locally-Led Scaling

Several common drivers underpin locally-led scaling practices, including:

- **Community Ownership:** Local innovators embed shared leadership, allowing communities to directly influence project execution and benefit distribution.
- **Cultural Resilience:** Solutions are often inspired by traditional wisdom, helping to sustain cultural practices and reinforce identity in the face of external threats.
- **Trust Networks and Solidarity:** Collaborations within and beyond the community, as seen in the formation of "impact networks" in Brazil and Cameroon, reinforce long-term durability and facilitate adaptation.
- **Advocacy and Engagement:** Influencing local and national stakeholders is critical for legitimising innovations, ensuring sustainable funding, and embedding solutions within broader systems.

3. Toward Decolonial Approaches to Scaling

A recurrent theme is the imperative to decolonise humanitarian innovation and scaling by shifting power and prioritising local values. Drawing on Start Network's Anti-Racist and Decolonisation Framework, the report underscores the need to confront colonial dynamics and recognise the agency and expertise of local innovators. Decolonial approaches in scaling prioritise local norms, traditions, and community-centric practices over one-size-fits-all frameworks, redefining success based on local knowledge systems and relational indicators, rather than solely on quantitative metrics.

Recommendations

1. Co-Define Scaling with Local Stakeholders

The diversity of scaling interpretations across these case studies points to the importance of co-designing scaling goals with community partners, ensuring these goals reflect local knowledge, needs, and ambitions. Creating space for consultation can lead to approaches that align with local realities rather than imposing external expectations.

2. Align with Localisation and Decolonisation Agendas

Local innovation is most successful when linked to localisation and decolonisation principles. A more inclusive approach to scaling in humanitarian contexts must recognise the biases that can perpetuate inequity and aim to balance power between local and international actors. Strategies that are contextually relevant and community-focused have the potential to advance equity and enhance local impact.

3. Adapt Metrics to Capture Relational and Cultural Impact

Across the case studies, innovators highlighted success indicators that reflect cultural traditions, quality of relationships, and community wellbeing. Moving forward, scaling frameworks should include these relational metrics and community-defined impact indicators, capturing evidence such as collective ownership, cultural resilience, and lived experiences.

4. Embrace Non-Linear, Adaptive Scaling Models

Local solutions rarely follow linear paths and require adaptive, iterative processes to scale effectively. Humanitarian innovators and researchers are encouraged to explore flexible models that integrate local dynamic capabilities, allowing continuous evolution in response to changing needs and contexts.

5. Foster Donor and Stakeholder Collaboration on Rethinking Scaling

The humanitarian sector's focus on impact metrics and value for money often imposes constraints on local scaling efforts. Rethinking scaling models to be locally inclusive requires the active engagement of donors and stakeholders. Through continuous dialogue, research, and practical learning, donors can become partners in promoting new, locally-led definitions of success.

Conclusion

This report illuminates the nuances of scaling locally-led innovation in humanitarian settings, underscoring the importance of moving beyond traditional frameworks. The five case studies demonstrate that local innovators prioritise community cohesion, cultural integrity, and relational scaling over expansion or profit-driven growth. The research provides a foundation for reshaping scaling approaches to emphasise context, collaboration, and long-term community empowerment, ultimately contributing to a more localised, equitable humanitarian sector.

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Introduction

Scaling has long been seen as an essential benchmark for success in humanitarian and social innovation, frequently serving as a measure of an innovation's broader impact. Typically, an innovation progressing from proof of concept into a growth stage, to achieve impact "at scale", represents a pathway and a metric that has been used to identify and compare successful innovations since the formal establishment of the humanitarian innovation sector. Although scaling remains a fundamental concept in the humanitarian innovation field, the assumption that scale equals impact is rooted in frameworks developed primarily within the private sector. Often associated with "Silicon Valley" models, these frameworks have historically prioritised financial gains and increase of reach as both the drivers and indicators of successful innovations.

In the humanitarian and development context, however, alternative models have emerged that offer a more nuanced approach to scaling of innovations. Concepts such as "scaling up," "scaling out," and "scaling deep" (Moore, Riddell, & Vocinsano, 2015) advocate for broader criteria beyond financial success, emphasising the importance of depth, reach, and contextual relevance. Despite the availability of such frameworks, research on humanitarian innovation scaling suggests that the sector remains heavily influenced by metrics similar to those prevalent in the private sector. Current success metrics still favour reach, revenue growth, and international recognition rather than prioritising local needs, sustainability, and self-determination. This trend is further compounded by the humanitarian ecosystem's concentration of funding, resources, and expertise in the Global North, often sidelining locally-led approaches.

Launched in 2020, the CLIP programme has constantly sought not only to highlight the power of community-driven innovation and locally-led action in the humanitarian sector, but also committed to interrogate and challenge the mainstream humanitarian innovation agenda. Over the past four years, the programme has seen the emergence and development of over 100 grassroots innovative solutions and has accompanied them throughout their journey to adoption, sustainability, and - where appropriate - scale. In doing so, the programme has encountered numerous challenges rooted in conventional scaling paradigms, challenges which are particularly pronounced for community-based innovation teams. It is in this spirit that this research was undertaken, seeking to build a more contextualised and locally led meaning of, and pathway to, "scale" for grassroots innovations. This paper does not represent an end point, but instead is the start of a journey of reflection, questioning, and re-imagining. We hope this introductory research will be interesting and valuable to those operating in the strategic, policy, and funding space of innovation in humanitarian aid, and that it will generate useful discussion and reflection.

Approach and Methodology

Research Aim

The research investigates how scaling is intended and applied from the perspective of local grassroots innovators. It proposes alternative pathways and practices rooted in locally driven insights and offers recommendations for re-imagining and implementing scaling practices. Grounded in a decolonial and anti-racist perspective, the methodology prioritises a localisation agenda within the humanitarian sector, challenging traditional scaling approaches by centring the experiences and insights of locally led humanitarian innovators.

Research Objectives

The specific objectives of this research are to:

- Deepen understanding of locally-led scaling as envisioned and practiced in non-traditional and non-Western settings.
- Identify instances of community-led scaling tactics and supportive models for innovators based on community-driven approaches, as well as local, traditional, and indigenous knowledge and strategies.
- Provide preliminary recommendations and suggest learning pathways for further research into scaling practices for community-led humanitarian innovations.

Research Methods and Sample

Data was collected through online interviews with representatives from five national humanitarian and social organisations, aimed at understanding local contexts and support processes for scaling innovations. Additionally, in-person interviews and focus group discussions were conducted with over 40 local innovators across five countries, facilitated by local partners, to gain in-depth insights into how scaling is perceived and enacted for individual solutions.

Verbal consent was obtained at the beginning of each interview, with consent forms read aloud for transparency. With permission, interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and subjected to thematic analysis. All interview data remains confidential and anonymous, and quotations are de-identified.

Report Structure

Part 1 reviews existing literature on scaling in humanitarian innovation, examining prevalent frameworks and introducing alternatives, such as the SCALE 3D model.

Part 2 presents the journeys of local humanitarian innovators, detailing their unique perspectives and approaches to scaling. The analysis draws from the experiences of local innovators within CLIP (including Guatemala, Indonesia, and the Philippines) as well as other contexts (Brazil and Cameroon).

Part 3 synthesises these local insights through a decolonial lens, concluding with recommendations for humanitarian practitioners to rethink scaling strategies and pathways when engaging with community-led humanitarian innovations.

Part 1: Current Views on Scaling within Humanitarian Innovation

Scaling: A Western Concept and Practice?

The scaling of humanitarian innovations—particularly products and processes—has been widely researched and debated, especially concerning its role as a universal marker of success. Before examining these discussions, however, it is crucial to establish what “scaling” means within the humanitarian context.

Elrha (2018) defines scaling as *“building on demonstrated successes to ensure that solutions reach their maximum potential, have the greatest possible impact, and lead to widespread change.”* This definition centres scaling on the impact achieved and the degree to which an innovation addresses relevant problems, rather than on specific numerical targets or thresholds. Notably, this definition is inclusive and transferable across various actors in the humanitarian space, making it adaptable to different contexts. Other interpretations exist, but for the purpose of this research, Elrha’s definition serves as the primary understanding of “scale,” with additional insights provided by local innovators’ perspectives.

Practitioners and researchers working in humanitarian innovation often assume that successful innovations are those that can easily be adopted, replicated and taken to scale. Although these can be markers of successful innovations, as McClure and Gray (2014) note, purely defining success through these dimensions fails to acknowledge the contributions of innovation processes that struggle with what has been called the ‘missing middle’ of innovation. The ‘missing middle’, they present, is the gap between an innovation that improves prior humanitarian practice and those that achieve wider uptake in the sector. Innovations can fall into this gap due to poor diffusion strategies, but also due to broader factors and barriers in the humanitarian system outside of the control of innovating teams. Research by the Global Alliance for Humanitarian Innovation (GAHI, 2018) echoes this view, highlighting the complexities of scaling humanitarian innovations and warning that commercial, product-based scaling models often fail to address sector-specific challenges effectively. They note that any approach to scaling humanitarian innovation must instead recognise the diversity of pathways to scale, and the important choices that an innovator must make in determining which factors to focus on when scaling.

The prevailing focus on scaling through commercial and for-profit lenses is influenced by broader elements of capitalism, patriarchy, racism, and colonialism, which have historically shaped the humanitarian system itself (Ramalingam, 2013; Mignolo & Escobar, 2010; Peace Direct, 2021). Consequently, humanitarian innovation is subject to similar pressures with funding, resources, and decision-making power predominantly held by organisations in the Global North, while locally driven initiatives are often undervalued if not discovered, developed, or funded by Global North practitioners (Medem & McClelland, 2022). Jimenez and Roberts (2019) critique the influence of Western private-sector and “Silicon Valley” models, pointing out that common innovation practices—such as hackathons and pitch events—evaluate success based on scalability, financial return, and monetisation overlooking cultural uniqueness and local contexts.

As a result, many frameworks have been created to guide innovators to scale, but few are specific to the humanitarian sector, and even fewer explore the needs and contexts of local and community innovators who are challenging Western-centric assumptions and methods of scaling, growth, and exponential adoption (Ramalingam, 2013). Recognising this gap, and that scaling the impact of isolated experiments or organisations can be particularly difficult, Riddell, Moore, and Vocinsano (2015) propose a three-tiered approach to scaling of innovations:

- **Scaling out:** The conventional route, which involves replicating successful interventions across different geographies or communities to reach a greater number of people
- **Scaling up:** Achieving policy or legal changes to support the adoption of an innovation.
- **Scaling deep:** Targeting shifts in cultural norms, values, and social beliefs to drive change.

While this framework offers more depth and nuanced view on scaling than Silicon Valley-style models, it continues to emphasise replicability and measurable mostly quantitative outcomes. This focus risks sidelining other pathways of scaling that align more closely with principles of community ownership, nature, and shared impact (Fraser, 2023). Emphasis on quantitative metrics can sometimes overshadow qualitative factors, such as contextual appropriateness and holistic impact, favouring rapid scaling over sustainable, context-sensitive solutions (Ramalingam, 2013).

Despite flexibility for adaptation, most scaling models follow a "one-size-fits-all" structure, which can overlook vital contextual differences and the unique needs of local communities. This standardised approach risks undermining local autonomy and the perspectives of those directly impacted by humanitarian crises (Moyo, 2009). To address this gap, further exploration of alternative scaling approaches that prioritise contextual needs and qualitative metrics is needed within the humanitarian sector.

Alternative Perspectives on Scaling Innovation

To reimagine scaling, it is essential to harness insights from local communities and grassroots innovators, who bring valuable perspectives to designing contextually relevant innovations. These innovators often offer unique cultural, social, and practical knowledge that challenges the top-down approaches typical in conventional scaling models (Hilhorst, 2003).

In contrast to traditional emphasis on growth and expansion, local approaches to scaling often prioritise cultural, social, and economic sovereignty, centring three key principles: sovereignty, solidarity, and self-determination.

- **Sovereignty** recognises the right of communities to govern themselves and make decisions independently, free from external imposition (Mignolo, 2017).
- **Solidarity** emphasises collective support and mutual cooperation, fostering social justice and confronting systems of oppression (Smith, 2021).
- **Self-determination** underscores the right of communities to pursue economic growth and cultural identity autonomously, without external control (Mignolo & Escobar, 2010).

Valuing these principles over conventional scaling metrics requires a commitment to centring local voices in the innovation process. Scaling locally-led innovations necessitates a more nuanced approach, one that considers multiple pathways and reflects local principles and practices (Taylor and Salmon, 2022). In response, various frameworks have been developed to foster more holistic scaling practices. One example is the SCALE3D Framework (Strasser et al., 2020), a model designed to support networks and organisations seeking to scale social impact while driving systemic, lasting change. SCALE3D stands for **Strategic Capacity-Development, Leadership, and Evaluation for Transformation in Three Dimensions** and proposes three dimensions to guide the scaling of innovations:

- **Scaling Deep:** Focuses on creating fundamental shifts in rules, values, and discourses. Here, leadership advocates for structural and cultural transformation by promoting policy changes and building the innovation team's capacity for impactful, lasting shifts in the cultural and structural landscape. This dimension aims to embed changes deeply, resulting in "depth impacts" that reflect the innovation's cultural and structural influence.
- **Scaling Long:** Emphasises sustaining and evolving innovations over time. Strategic leadership clarifies objectives and the means to achieve them, providing long-term guidance. This approach builds a group's capacity to sustain and accelerate transformation, fostering "length impacts" that ensure the innovation persists, adapts, and evolves within the community and beyond.
- **Scaling Wide:** Aims to broaden reach across diverse communities, geographies, and contexts. Community weavers play a central role by connecting people to foster learning and mutual support. This leads to "width impacts," expanding the innovation's influence widely and coherently across diverse spaces and people.

Each of these dimensions serves as a practical guide to understanding complex scaling processes (Strasser et al., 2020). By promoting transformative change across systems, behaviours, mindsets, and structures, the 3D Framework provides a pathway for more holistic scaling of humanitarian innovation. It equips practitioners, policymakers, and funders with an intuitive model for embedding durable and transformative impacts within local contexts.

This model offers a more nuanced alternative to scaling within the humanitarian sector, moving beyond private-sector success indicators. Alternative scaling approaches of these sort can help practitioners, policymakers, and funders to understand how to embed new patterns across systems, structures, practices, spaces, behaviours, mindsets, and values. However, to truly adopt scaling practices that reflect the priorities of local innovators, their voices must be at the forefront of the discussion. The next section of this research centres on these voices, presenting insights into their approaches and priorities for scaling—insights that could inform future methodologies tailored to the needs and aspirations of communities and local innovators.

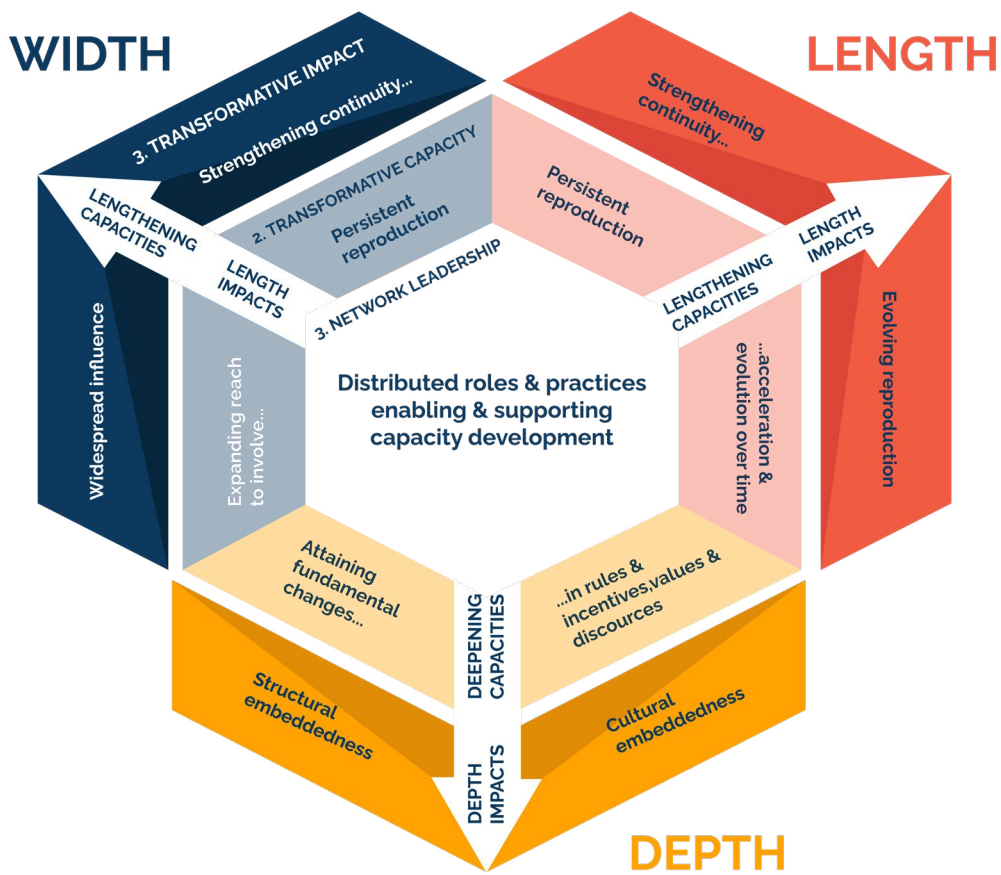


Figure 17: Visual overview of the 3D framework

Part 2: Perspectives and Approaches on Locally-Led Scaling

This section delves into the perspectives of local innovators on scaling across five countries: Guatemala, Indonesia, the Philippines, Brazil, and Cameroon. The first three case studies are drawn from the CLIP, providing firsthand accounts of the learning, successes, and challenges in scaling grassroots solutions to humanitarian crises. The final two case studies extend these insights beyond CLIP, illustrating how local communities apply humanitarian and social innovation to address complex, region-specific challenges.

1. Guatemala – Scaling Guided by Buen Vivir

Defining Scaling

ASECSA ground its innovation approach in the Mayan philosophy of *Raxnaquil Kaslemal* or *Buen Vivir*, which promotes interconnectedness, reciprocity, and harmony with nature and the cosmos. This perspective informs ASECSA's methods for developing and scaling local solutions, where scaling is viewed as a process of building both individual and collective capacities to strengthen community resilience and response to humanitarian crises.

“As a community, we should be united, we should support each other when growing our innovation in order to improve the whole system we are part of. We all have children and the first thing we think about is our family, that our children can have a better future and the same with our fellow members of the community – that scaling our innovations will lead to a better life and benefit for everyone.” (Mujeres en Búsqueda del Desarrollo Sostenible, Innovator Group, 2024).

“Our ancestral knowledge informs how we see scaling. We do everything based on our cultural worldview, so this has a big effect on how we scale our innovation.” (La Unidad es el Éxito, Innovator Group, 2024).

Drivers and Strategies of Locally-led Scaling

1. Cultivate Individual and Collective Resilience.

For ASECSA and their partnered innovators, scaling is closely tied to building resilience at both the individual and community levels. Facing numerous challenges, such as resource scarcity, limited government support, and community disengagement, innovators must bolster their resilience to sustain and scale their ideas. Grounded in *Buen Vivir*, where individuals are intricately connected to family and community support, scaling innovative ideas is viewed as a process that must engage the entire community and ecosystem.

2. Leveraging Community-Based Resources and Networks.

Another essential component of scaling is creating a supportive ecosystem for innovations to flourish. Guatemalan innovators stress the importance of strengthening local economic models, such as mobilising local funding to reinvest in solutions and incorporating revenue-generating elements into each innovation's model. Additionally, they emphasise the value of community networks that facilitate the sharing of knowledge and capabilities to replicate solutions, which, they believe, is key to sustaining their innovations long-term.

3. Fostering Intergenerational Solidarity.

The Mujeres en Búsqueda del Desarrollo Sostenible (Women in Pursuit of Sustainable Development) project produces organic concentrates and transforms them into pellets using local materials, promoting sustainable agriculture and preserving ancestral knowledge. A core objective for this group is to create lasting impact so that future generations benefit from improved community conditions. They have fostered intergenerational spaces for learning and solidarity, where knowledge is shared across ages and community members. The aim is for these practices to be passed down and embedded in community traditions.

In Guatemala, scaling locally-led innovations is a multidimensional process rooted in Mayan philosophy. Stories from innovators reveal a strong focus on emphasising resilience-building across individuals, communities, and generations. Additionally, this long-term approach to scaling is underpinned by relationships and connections within and between families and communities. While elements of extending reach within the community, there is less focus on expanding beyond the community ecosystem. This may reflect the realities of indigenous, remote areas where infrastructure is limited, and government or external support is minimal.

2. Indonesia – IDEAKSI: Scaling Locally and Inclusively

Defining Scaling

In Indonesian culture, the principles of '*kerja bakti*' or '*gotong royong*'—mutual aid and collective support—are central. These values frame scaling as an endeavour rooted in unity, community, selflessness, and resilience. This philosophy guides IDEAKSI, a community-led innovation initiative by YAKKUM Emergency Unit, which supports 23 local innovators working on diverse solutions, from smart drip irrigation systems and adaptable waste transport options to disability-inclusive disaster response plans and early warning systems.

"Expand, multiply, and deepen the capacity or scope of growth to become greater."
IDEAKSI Innovator

"Efforts to increase capabilities and capacity of both the community and existing infrastructure." – KSB Umbulharjo

"Growth of group innovation activities so they are more widespread and beneficial."
– Ngudi Makmur Farmers' Group

While IDEAKSI's local innovators may interpret scaling differently, they share a commitment to expanding impact while respecting cultural traditions, beliefs, and community values.

Drivers of Locally-Led Scaling Practices and Strategies

1. Fostering Community Engagement and Ownership.

IDEAKSI innovators emphasise that community engagement is fundamental to scaling. For example, CIQAL Foundation is creating a disaster response strategy tailored to people with disabilities, who are actively included in decision-making. As this innovation expands to a second community, the CIQAL team facilitates the transfer of skills and knowledge between communities. This approach not only supports the replication of effective practices but also cultivates community ownership, reinforcing the agency and empowerment of local individuals.

2. Integrating Indigenous Knowledge

Ngudi Mulya Farmers' Group addresses water scarcity among elderly farmers by introducing mist irrigation technology, which alleviates the physical demands of traditional watering. By weaving cultural practices and indigenous knowledge into this solution—such as engaging in almsgiving rituals—the group honours ancestral wisdom and connects older farmers with new methods. This culturally aligned approach not only preserves traditional knowledge but strengthens the scalability of the innovation, as communities can replicate the idea by leveraging familiar practices.

3. Ensuring Equity and Accessibility

IDEAKSI's innovators prioritise designing accessible products and services. For example, DIFAGANA, a task force focused on disaster response for people with disabilities, developed the DIFAGANA Disaster Emergency Support App to facilitate communication between older adults, people with disabilities, and disaster response teams. Thoroughly tested by users with disabilities, the app is refined as it scales to address the needs of the most vulnerable. For these innovators, scalability and inclusion are inseparable, as ensuring accessibility is key to a solution's long-term success.

For many IDEAKSI innovators, scaling involves reaching a wide community, to reach those traditionally most excluded, while ensuring accessibility, ownership, and cultural relevance. IDEAKSI's commitment to integrating indigenous knowledge reflects a focus on sustaining solutions that honour past generations. Additionally, there are elements that place emphasis on equity and inclusivity, as innovators work to challenge societal norms and practices that historically led to exclusion. This approach underscores that scaling locally-led solutions can both strengthen community bonds and foster long-term resilience.

3. The Philippines - Growing and Sustaining Innovations

Defining Scaling

In the Filipino language, there is no direct equivalent for "scaling." However, related terms such as *pagyabong* (growth) and *pagpapatuloy* (sustaining) offer insight into how communities perceive the expansion and endurance of their innovations. The Center for Disaster Preparedness (CDP) leads the CLIP programme in the Philippines, supporting local

solutions aimed at strengthening disaster risk reduction and management (DRRM). CDP works with eight innovation groups to explore their unique understandings of scaling, and the specific forms of support needed to make these ideas sustainable and impactful.

"A form of adoption and replication is being implemented through lobbying. It's about evolutions and continuous modification" (Las Piñas Persons with Disability Federation Inc. innovator group).

"With scaling, we want to expand our membership; we believe that numbers matter. If this will happen, then there is a bigger possibility that the government will hear us and will support us." (AMMS innovator group).

"Scaling is development of innovation, how a thing is progressing. Also, improvement in our knowledge, in our understanding." (Tanglag Women Organisation innovator group).

Drivers and strategies of locally-led scaling

1. Shared Leadership.

A central strategy for scaling among Philippine innovators involves inclusive leadership, where community members actively participate in decision-making and project execution. For instance, the Pandan Tri-People Women Organisation (PTWO) mobilises shared leadership in its House of Healing initiative. PTWO maps roles and tasks in project implementation, provides inclusive onboarding and training, and ensures marginalised groups, especially women, hold key positions. This approach strengthens community buy-in and gender inclusivity, with members not only contributing time and resources but also cultivating a deep sense of collective ownership over the solution.

2. Continuous Adaptation.

Continuous adaptation and refinement are recognised as crucial for developing and scaling solutions. For example, the Tanglag Women Organisation's Nutri-Bar/ Nutri-Mix initiative has iteratively pivoted and improved its product. Initially focused on creating a nutri-bar, the team found it perishable, leading them to develop a nutri-mix powder with a longer shelf life. This transition involved adapting production methods from urban oven drying to sun drying within the community, simplifying packaging, facilitating distribution, and reducing costs. Such adaptations have allowed them to scale the product supply more efficiently.

3. Lobbying and Advocacy.

Advocacy with local governments is another key strategy for scaling, especially for innovations requiring systemic support. The Las Piñas Persons with Disability Federation Inc., for example, actively lobbies for their Accessible Transport Mobile Service for Persons with Mobility Concerns (A-TraMS), designed to provide accessible transportation during emergencies for people with disabilities. By targeting 20 barangays (neighbourhoods), the group advocates for A-TraMS integration within local DRRM plans and budgets, aiming to build a future where accessible public transportation for people with disabilities becomes standard

In the Philippines, scaling is understood as a layered approach involving community engagement, adaptation of a solution, and advocacy. Local innovators intend scaling as collaborative leadership process, influencing and partnerships with local governments as well as by fostering community cohesion. Scaling and sustainability of innovations are guaranteed by continuously reassessing and adapting innovative solutions to evolving needs and contexts.

4. Brazil - The Meli Bees Network Case

Defining Scaling

For centuries, Indigenous communities in Brazil have harmonised their practices with the land, embedding agricultural, spiritual, and cultural stewardship into daily life. However, colonisation and modernisation have increasingly endangered their cultural heritage, identity, and environmental guardianship. Within this context, the Meli Bees Network emerged to empower Indigenous communities to protect and revitalise their ancestral lands as part of a climate justice movement. The network currently spans over 60 rural communities across four of Brazil's six biomes, facilitating knowledge exchanges and reinforcing bonds of kinship and collaboration. Through skill-building activities, knowledge-sharing, hands-on training, and motivational support, Meli Bees strengthens local leaders' ability to lead projects like indigenous-led reforestation, sustainable food systems, meliponiculture (stingless beekeeping), and environmental education.

For these communities, scaling embodies *"the promise of extending sustainable practices and ancestral wisdom to communities far and wide. It's about dismantling colonial boundaries and embracing a worldview that transcends geography. Scaling is our way to protect cultural sovereignty and resist ongoing exploitation."* — Meli Bees Innovator Representative

Drivers of Locally-led Scaling Practices and Strategies

1. Building "Impact Networks".

Local innovators often aim to create influence beyond their immediate community, and "impact networks"—collaborative, trust-based partnerships—are key to this strategy. Rather than merely expanding individual innovations, Meli Bees leverages these networks to foster long-term collaboration and shared impact. By nurturing trust and interdependence, impact networks ensure that innovations endure and adapt over time, meeting the evolving needs of local communities. The Meli Bees Network is fundamentally guided by the voices and aspirations of indigenous communities, ensuring that their perspectives shape every project decision.

2. Creating Learning Spaces.

Meli Bees has found that creating spaces for continuous learning is essential to scaling local innovations. For example, Jerá Guarani, a leader from the Tenondé Porã Indigenous Land, empowers cultural leaders to replicate her initiatives across communities. Through cultural exchange programmes and knowledge-sharing networks, Jerá disseminates traditional wisdom while fostering collaboration among Guarani communities. Her strategies include reviving ancestral agricultural practices, promoting food sovereignty, and prioritising educational programmes, workshops, and cultural events. By blending traditional knowledge with modern approaches, Jerá sustains her innovations within and beyond the Guarani community, demonstrating how learning spaces are critical for scaling led by local knowledge.

3. Strengthening Solidarity.

Indigenous communities in Brazil underscore solidarity as central to sustaining local innovations and addressing both environmental and social vulnerabilities. For Brazil's indigenous communities, scaling involves a commitment to justice and mutual support, with innovations that respect both human and ecological relationships. Facing climate-related challenges and systemic marginalisation, their scaling approaches emphasise resilience and solidarity, recognising the interconnectedness of local biodiversity, cultural roles, and social bonds.

These elements of impact networks, learning spaces, and solidarity reflect a relational approach to scaling. The Meli Bees Network promotes scaling by aligning with natural cycles, seasonal patterns, and environmental cues, adapting thoughtfully to the rhythms of nature. At the same time, the network seeks to support federations, cooperatives, and international partnerships, amplifying indigenous voices and accessing critical resources for sustainability and growth of ideas. By focusing on enduring relationships that go beyond traditional project cycles, Meli Bees positions local innovators as pollinators of impact who spread opportunities within and between communities. Across the 60 communities it serves, Meli Bees fosters wellbeing for both people and nature, supporting the preservation and growth of indigenous knowledge.

5. CAMEROON – THE EXAMPLE OF BETTER WORLD CAMEROON

Defining Scaling

In North-West Cameroon's Bafut Community, the Indigenous concept of "Ndanifor," meaning "community fellowship" or "gathering," is central to local identity and values, rooted in a collectivist worldview. Drawing on this, Better World Cameroon (BWC) established the Ndanifor Permaculture Ecovillage, an initiative that blends indigenous knowledge, community-driven participation, and youth empowerment to tackle pressing challenges like food insecurity, social tensions, and environmental sustainability. BWC's innovative approach integrates traditional wisdom with a systemic perspective, addressing complex issues through a network of interconnected solutions rather than isolated interventions.

"Contrary to what is perceived in Western cultures, where scaling in business terms is always about how much funds, how much money, etc., but in Cameroon it is about the social impact that the projects have in the communities they are implanted in." (Better World Cameroon innovator).

"Socio-cultural models of scaling are rooted in respect, in morals and ethics. The incentive around building an innovation project is the desire to see your community thrive. So, there's no "I" without "we". Success, growth is seen via community. People want to see others succeed. So, everything I do is also for the community." (Better World Cameroon innovator).

Drivers and strategies of locally-led scaling

1. Focusing on Ecosystems over Single Solutions

Rather than scaling individual projects, BWC follows an indigenous-led approach centred on building a resilient, interconnected ecosystem. The ecovillage serves as a living system with diverse, locally-led projects such as regenerative agriculture, gender equality, sustainable architecture, and food resilience. This approach has allowed the community to build multiple, complementary solutions that interconnect within a holistic system. Scaling here refers to sustaining and expanding the ecosystem as a whole, creating a cohesive model that supports local needs and knowledge-sharing.

2. Providing Demonstration Sites.

To support knowledge transfer and community engagement, BWC developed a "demonstration site" within the ecovillage, where community members can explore, learn, and develop new skills. The ecovillage offers a space of lived experience, where local residents and visitors can observe and participate in a harmonious relationship with self, others, and the environment. This experiential learning encourages transformation, enabling community members to gain new perspectives on sustainable living and resilience.

3. Fostering External Relationships.

BWC has cultivated relationships with various external stakeholders, including UN agencies, the Global Ecovillage Network, permaculture organisations, and academic institutions, to support the ecovillage's growth and sustainability. These partnerships amplify the community's reach, facilitating knowledge exchange, broadening recognition, and influencing policy. The innovations that were incubated in the ecovillage have inspired other innovators and policy makers to evolve their approaches, demonstrating that long-term community relationships can drive wide-reaching impact.

In Bafut, scaling is grounded in the "Spirit of Ndanifor," aiming for holistic wellbeing across all living things. First, scaling is reflected in BWC's focus on fostering positive relationships within the community, shaping collective values and encouraging trust. Through this relational approach, community members have undergone gradual mindset shifts, reinforcing the ecovillage's longevity. Second, scaling is also evident in the trust that BWC has nurtured, allowing the ecovillage to grow organically and adapt dynamically over time. Third, through intercultural exchanges and contributions to global policy discussions, BWC has extended its influence beyond the local context. This holistic approach reflects a shared vision of thriving for both people and nature, grounded in community-driven, resilient growth.

Part 3. Recommendations For Rethinking and Reimagining Scaling from a Locally-Led Perspective

The case studies highlighted here reveal the need to reframe traditional scaling and innovation models, often inspired by market-driven approaches, which primarily suit large international organisations and enterprises. Local and community-based actors require a new construct that honours their context-specific needs, cultural values, and individual ambitions. A standardised scaling framework or set of metrics does not apply in the context of locally-led innovation. Not all innovations should or can be scaled in the conventional sense; some are crafted to address specific issues within a single community and might not be replicated elsewhere, yet this does not diminish their value or ability to create long-term impact.

Below are key recommendations for reimagining scaling from a locally-led perspective.

1. Co-Design Scaling Definitions and Approaches that Honour Local Knowledge and Goals.

The case studies across the five countries show that scaling carries different meanings across contexts and cultures. Before devising frameworks or supporting local innovation, it is critical to invest time in understanding and co-designing a scaling approach that aligns with local aspirations. This includes consultations, dialogues, and in-depth exploration of the term's meaning and relevance to the community. By defining the need and scope of scaling together, we can foster collaborative, rather than prescriptive, approaches.

2. Embed Decolonisation and Localisation Principles in Scaling Models.

Reimagining scaling involves addressing the colonial roots embedded in many humanitarian practices and ensuring alignment with principles of decolonisation and localisation. The Start Network's Anti-Racist and Decolonisation Framework (Start Network & Baguios, 2019) is a useful guide to examine how humanitarian actors can either perpetuate oppressive actions or reinforce reparative ones. Where innovation strategies are built around local priorities and community-focused principles, they are more likely to foster genuine equity. Scaling should be grounded in trust, cultural respect, and shared decision-making rather than standardisation or cost-focused metrics (Kalema, 2019).

3. Evaluate Scaling Success through Local Knowledge, Identities, and Values.

Each case study underscored the importance of local knowledge systems and cultural traditions as foundations for innovation and growth. In this light, scaling success should go beyond quantitative metrics and consider qualitative indicators such as the strength of local relationships and collective wellbeing. Alternative scaling models should value local narratives, lived experiences, and relational metrics as primary sources of evidence, reflecting a richer understanding of impact from the community's perspective.

4. Adopt Flexible, Iterative Strategies Aligned with Local Dynamics.

Scaling is often a non-linear journey requiring adaptable frameworks that embrace the complexity of local systems. Locally-led scaling models should allow for flexibility, encourage iterative improvements, and respond to evolving community needs. Dynamic frameworks that offer multiple pathways, rather than fixed steps, can help accommodate the uncertainties and unique challenges in humanitarian settings. These iterative approaches should be researched further and integrated with local capabilities to foster resilience and innovation.

5. Engage Donors and Humanitarian Stakeholders in Collaborative Learning

Impact measurement and value-for-money requirements often conflict with reimagined scaling models. To support local actors, it is crucial to include donors and stakeholders in this process, emphasising mutual learning, research, and evidence building. Engaging donors in dialogues around alternative scaling definitions and encouraging more adaptive, contextual approaches will allow greater support for community-led solutions that reflect the nuanced realities of humanitarian challenges.

Conclusion

Traditional humanitarian innovation scaling models often fail to address and engage with the unique needs and insights of communities affected by crises. How, then, can we integrate alternative perspectives and pursue a locally-led approach in humanitarian innovation and scaling? This research centred around three main objectives to explore this question.

Firstly, it examined how locally led scaling could be conceptualised and contextualised. Findings suggest that a single, universal definition of scaling does not exist; rather, scaling must be adapted to reflect local contexts, power dynamics, and community goals.

Secondly, the research identified locally-led scaling practices through case studies across five countries. These stories highlight the value of grassroots innovation, rooted in sovereignty, solidarity, and self-determination, offering models of decolonial scaling. While each story reflects unique elements, shared themes emerge, such as the importance of embedding local knowledge, preserving cultural practices, and strengthening resilience within communities.

Finally, the research outlined initial recommendations for practitioners, donors, and researchers. These are not exhaustive or definitive but are intended as a foundation for further exploration and conversation. Rethinking scaling through a locally-led lens is an ongoing process, requiring continuous interrogation and evolution of humanitarian innovation practices. This research aims to inspire future approaches that incorporate local voices, prioritise localisation, and support the decolonisation of humanitarian innovation.

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Appendix 1.

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