Three Questions for Nonprofits That Want to Solve Social Problems at Scale
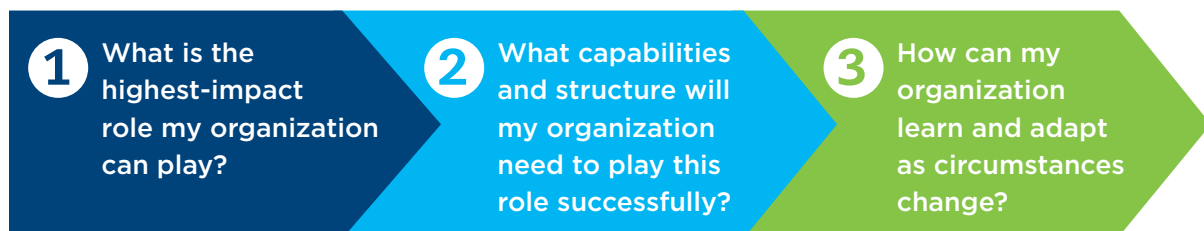
By Marina Fisher, Alyson Zandt, Angie Estevez Prada, Paola Jimenez-Read, and Bradley Seeman

A significant number of nonprofit leaders strive to achieve much more than they currently do—contributing meaningfully to solving social problems at a population-level scale, while keeping their own organizations at a sustainable size and budget.

In 2014, Bridgespan Group authors Jeffrey Bradach and Abe Grindle explored this topic in "Transformative Scale: The Future of Growing What Works." Since then, Bridgespan has had the privilege of working with and learning from dozens of leaders in the United States, Asia, and Africa, who have pursued different pathways to solving social problems at scale. This article discusses some highlights of what they—and we—have learned from this work. It is intended for nonprofit leaders seeking practical guidance for their journeys toward solving social problems at scale. (For more information, data, and examples about the most commonly used pathways for this work, see our research covering 80 organizations' strategies in "A New Look at Strategic Pathways for Solving Social Problems at Scale" on Bridgespan.org.)

Solving social problems at scale isn't just about growing vital direct service programs to reach more people and communities. Rather, it means fundamentally altering policies, norms, behaviors, and power structures to remake the entrenched systems that perpetuated the inequitable outcomes in the first place. To be sure, direct service providers, as well as other organizations, can still contribute powerfully toward solving social problems by effectively deploying their unique skill sets, experiences, leadership, and partnerships to address critical components of that problem.

In doing this kind of work, leaders must navigate three big questions:

1 What is the highest-impact role my organization can play? **2** What capabilities and structure will my organization need to play this role successfully? **3** How can my organization learn and adapt as circumstances change?

Together, these questions help an organization develop its strategy for impact at scale and refine it over time. Tackling them can lead to what Kevin Starr, writing in *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, describes as learning how to "focus your resources on the big shift … [to] drive the kind of exponential impact that can actually solve problems."

However, each of these big questions involves tensions and tradeoffs that organizations must carefully balance over time. The "right" answer for one organization may not be appropriate for another working on a related social problem. Furthermore, the "right" answer for a single organization may change over time.
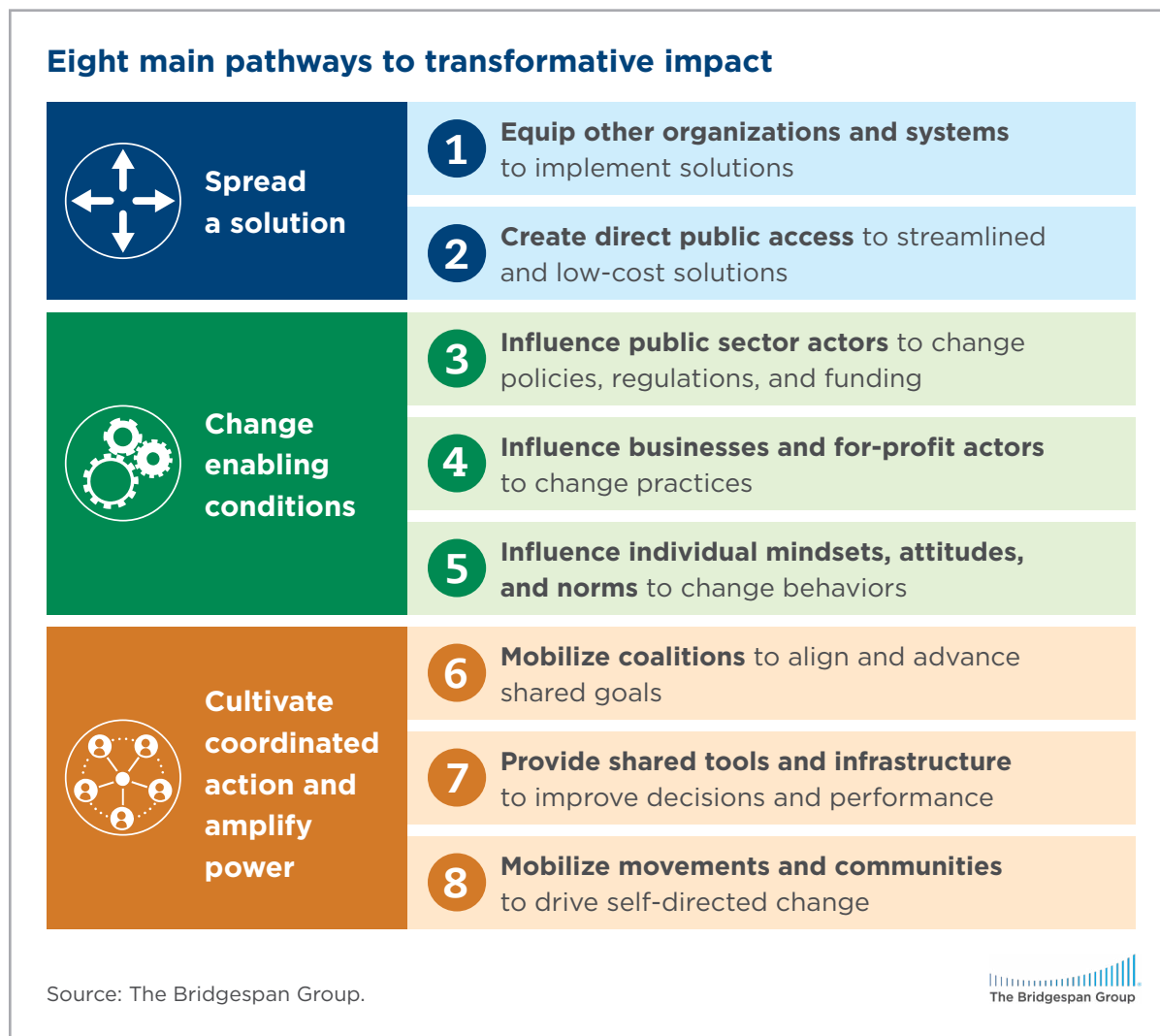
Just as policy and political changes can create windows for advancing impact, they can also create barriers. For example, many US organizations in the reproductive rights field had to shift strategy after *Roe v. Wade* was overturned by the Supreme Court in 2022. Facing adversity, organizations might need to focus on minimizing backsliding and lean

into new opportunities, such as working at the state or local levels, when the national policy context changes. The questions remain relevant, even as the answers respond to the times.

We reflect on these three questions and the ways organizations have approached them below, drawing on Bridgespan's advisory experience as well as in-depth interviews with 11 nonprofits and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs).

① What Is the Highest-Impact Role My Organization Can Play?

Our refreshed look at the strategies of 80 organizations seeking to solve social problems at scale identified eight main pathways to transformative impact, falling into three categories. (We highlight references to the categories and pathways in the remainder of the article as a reminder.)

Eight main pathways to transformative impact

Spread a solution	1	**Equip other organizations and systems** to implement solutions
	2	**Create direct public access** to streamlined and low-cost solutions
Change enabling conditions	3	**Influence public sector actors** to change policies, regulations, and funding
	4	**Influence businesses and for-profit actors** to change practices
	5	**Influence individual mindsets, attitudes, and norms** to change behaviors
Cultivate coordinated action and amplify power	6	**Mobilize coalitions** to align and advance shared goals
	7	**Provide shared tools and infrastructure** to improve decisions and performance
	8	**Mobilize movements and communities** to drive self-directed change

Source: The Bridgespan Group.

The Bridgespan Group

Solving social problems and achieving durable population-level change frequently requires multiple organizations collectively pursuing multiple pathways at the same time. For individual organizations seeking to make a powerful contribution, there is no one-size-fits all answer to the question of which pathways to pursue or how many. Over 80 percent of the organizations whose strategies we reviewed in this research pursue more than one pathway, often working across categories. However, most also limit their focus to two or three primary pathways, being careful not to overextend themselves. Success usually involves carving out a role that maximizes an organization's contribution to solving a social problem, while collaborating, influencing, and learning from other actors seeking to change the larger system.

To define its highest-impact role and prioritize the pathways it will pursue, an organization should:

- **Clarify the problem and develop a vision for durable population-level change**
- **Understand what it will take to solve the problem**
- **Identify the unique contribution the organization can make**

Clarify the problem and develop a vision for durable population-level change

Critical steps toward identifying an organization's strategy include defining the specific problem an organization will work to solve and developing a clear vision for what solving it would look like. In taking these steps, leaders must balance ambition and expansiveness with precision and pragmatism. Organizational experience and deep connections to the communities and individuals served are among the most important assets in this work.

For example, HealthySteps is a national program of the US nonprofit ZERO TO THREE, which is focused on ensuring that all babies and toddlers, particularly those in low-income communities, have a strong start in life and reach their full potential. Because 90 percent of children receive pediatric care in their first six months of life, the pediatric primary care system can be a powerful channel for supporting parents in fostering healthy child development. So HealthySteps homed in on a vision, grounded in decades of practice and research, of transforming pediatric primary care so that all families of children ages 0-3 receive services and supports critical to healthy development, including regular check-ups, timely developmental screenings, vaccinations, and guidance on childhood development, early learning, and positive parenting.

Understand what it will take to solve the problem

Tackling society's most entrenched problems is difficult because there is rarely one cause or simple fix. And strategies may need to evolve, particularly as political leadership and other conditions change. This makes understanding critical levers for addressing the problem, and identifying near-term opportunities, particularly important—yet very often complex. One leader we interviewed likened the process of understanding the system and potential solutions to peeling back the layers of an onion.

To better support the healthy development of babies and toddlers, HealthySteps knew that pediatric care providers would need to adopt new practices. In the early 2000s, explains Rahil Briggs, national director for HealthySteps, there was a fundamental need to convince health care providers of how much early childhood development matters. "Fast-forward a decade, providers understood it, and the conversation became much more about *how* you promote early childhood development within pediatric settings." This enabled HealthySteps to identify barriers that were holding practices back and that HealthySteps could help providers address, including a lack of child-development expertise in many pediatric primary care practices, a lack of integration with behavioral health, and challenges in billing and reimbursement for preventive services that benefit children and caregivers.

Another crucial aspect of health care in the United States is that it is heavily influenced by the policies of insurers, which tend to focus on treatment and not prevention. This meant that enhanced preventive services in pediatric care for families with lower incomes (the primary population HealthySteps focuses on) wouldn't be sustainable for providers without changes in Medicaid policy and funding, which happen at the national and state levels. Therefore, solving the problem would take a combination of changes within pediatric practices and government policies.

Identify the unique contribution the organization can make

The most effective and durable change strategies often happen when an organization focuses on what it is good at or can become good at and supports others to take on different and complementary roles in changing the system. As Kasthuri Soni, the CEO of Harambee Youth Employment Accelerator, a South African NGO that works with government, NGOs, and the private-sector partners to find solutions for the challenge of youth unemployment in South Africa, explains: "We need to ask, 'What is it that the system needs, who is best placed to do that, and what is our role in that?'"

Understanding what is needed to solve a social problem is one critical input; another is identifying the combination of expertise, relationships, and credibility an organization already has. A final element is assessing the expertise and role of other actors in the field.

Here is how HealthySteps looked at these three elements to select the pathways it would pursue. The organization's overall model of enhanced pediatric primary care was developed in the 1990s. Multiple evaluations have shown that its model was effective in increasing the use of developmental screenings, improving vaccination rates for the youngest children, and reducing harsh parental discipline, among other benefits. The organization did not have the capacity to provide services directly to children and families across pediatric practices, but it was well-positioned to distill the core components of its model into best practices that others could adopt. There was also a robust provider infrastructure in place across the United States for delivering pediatric primary care.

Therefore, HealthySteps selected the pathway of **equip other organizations and systems** to implement the solution it developed and tested. HealthySteps gives pediatric practices a variety of supports to help implement its model, getting into the nitty-gritty of team-based care and workflows, billing, electronic health records, quality improvement, and

more. This has helped HealthySteps reach significant scale. As of January 2025, working with pediatric practices across the United States, the HealthySteps model reached over 475,000 children.

However, sustaining these practice improvements requires changes in government policies and funding. To that effect, HealthySteps is also using another pathway that it sees as critical to its ability to change the system: **influence public-sector actors**. Credibility with policy makers and other government entities is a critical precursor to pursuing this pathway. HealthySteps had already built a meaningful track record of engaging with both providers and policy makers on key issues impacting pediatric care. So, in 2015, when HealthySteps became part of ZERO TO THREE, a leading national research, professional development, and advocacy organization focused on early childhood, it became feasible to pursue a public-sector influence pathway. HealthySteps now works with partners to advocate for government policy and funding streams (like Medicaid) at the federal and state levels, which has a big impact on how health care providers serve young children and families.

"Especially in the policy space," says Briggs, "when you have one success—like a change in Medicaid policy in one state—that can end up leading to other successes." In turn, its work to influence the public sector helps pediatric practices that implement the HealthySteps model access more sustainable funding sources—a key reason for the growth of the model.

The Tenure Facility's Highest-Impact Role

The journeys that organizations follow to define their highest-impact role and prioritize pathways are unique to their organizations and their fields. For example, the Tenure Facility, a global nongovernmental organization (NGO) focused on advancing Indigenous Peoples and local community land rights, followed a much different path than HealthySteps to create transformative impact.

Clarify the problem and develop a vision for durable population-level change.
Indigenous and local communities manage more than half of the world's land, but they have joint legal ownership of only 20 percent of their ancestral territories.[1] The Tenure Facility's vision is to strengthen land rights for Indigenous and local communities so they can thrive in their ancestral territories with full recognition of their right to own, manage, and develop their traditional lands, territories, and resources.

Understand what it will take to solve the problem. Over the past decade and a half, the Tenure Facility has clarified its perspective on the critical components of a solution that advances Indigenous land rights at scale. These include advocating for government titling and formal recognition of community land rights, helping communities to protect their own rights and strengthen their bargaining positions, increasing their ability to manage the forests and other land where they live, and

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1   *Who Owns the World's Land? Second Edition*, Rights and Resource Initiative, June 2023.

providing financial and other resources to make all of this possible. In addition, with Indigenous and local community groups spread all over the globe, the organization saw that there was a need to share the knowledge, innovations, and tools that emerged from individual efforts, helping build the cross-cutting movement for Indigenous land rights.

Identify the unique contribution their organization can make based on its expertise and the work of others in the field. The Tenure Facility was clear on the changes needed to advance Indigenous land rights, but *how* it would help advance them was a critical decision. Originally, the organization considered working mainly with NGOs and equipping them with strategies and tools to advance community land rights. However, in considering the unique contribution it could make, the Tenure Facility recognized that Indigenous and local communities themselves needed to be at the forefront of driving change, and that the strategies and approaches of individual groups might vary based on local context. Therefore, the organization pursued the pathway of **mobilize movements and communities**, providing financial and technical support for communities to drive their own strategies for greater land rights. (Many of the organizations pursuing this pathway operate as field builders or field catalysts. See additional Bridgespan insights on this kind of work on Bridgespan.org.)

There were initial doubts in the field that funding Indigenous and local community groups could lead to scale. "The conventional wisdom was that you can't channel large amounts of money to Indigenous Peoples' organizations, that they lack financial capacity," explains David Kaimowitz, the organization's chief programme officer. But the Tenure Facility knew that some Indigenous organizations already had significant scale, so it set out to blaze a new path based on its knowledge and existing relationships, demonstrating that by providing larger amounts of funding and technical assistance to these groups, it could have a big impact. "A significant amount of our work is about strengthening Indigenous and [local] community groups in the land rights field," explains Kaimowitz. "And we've been able to provide them with levels of financing and support they've never seen before, with average grants of about $800,000 yearly for each organization." This work is seeing large-scale results. In 2023, governments formalized Indigenous and local communities' land rights to almost five million additional acres (two million hectares), with progress being made on improving tenure security and governance on more than 50 million additional acres (almost 22 million hectares), benefitting 14,000 communities across the globe.

② What Capabilities and Structure Will My Organization Need to Play This Role Successfully?

The leaders of organizations seeking to solve social problems at scale must navigate a core tension between charting an ambitious strategic path and taking time to build essential capabilities. On the one hand, an organization's existing capabilities should not rigidly constrain the selection of pathways. We have seen many successful organizations define a strategy for transformative impact and then significantly enhance existing capabilities, build new ones, and shift ways of working to make this strategy possible.

On the other hand, strengthening capabilities and organizational structures is hard work, especially in periods of rapid innovation and growth. We have seen setbacks or outright failure occur when leaders underestimate the difficulty of learning how to do something new for their organization and the people in it.

Regardless, our research shows that a core set of capabilities is critical to carrying out a strategy for large-scale impact:

- **Get clear on what is essential and what is flexible**
- **Develop and maintain relationships with key partners**
- **Be responsive to the needs of the "customers" served**
- **Build pathway-specific capabilities and structures**

Get clear on what is essential and what is flexible

Many organizations we studied seek to build on a program that has already demonstrated small-scale impact. They may gravitate toward the pathway of **equip other organizations and systems to implement solutions**, although some seek other pathways to build on their success. They then have to decide which elements of their model are fixed and which ones implementing partners can adapt. Those are important decisions that balance the evidence of what has led to robust outcomes with pragmatism about what is feasible for implementing partners. Organizations will make different choices about this balance because evidence bases vary, and stakeholder dynamics are unique in every field.

HealthySteps, for example, requires a high degree of fidelity to its model. It spent years developing, evaluating, and revising its model for integrating early childhood development and behavioral health promotion and prevention expertise into pediatric practice, and it has a strong sense of the elements essential to its success. Its current model is defined and organized into eight Core Components—ranging from care coordination and systems navigation to screening for child development and family needs—to make sure all families with children ages 0-3 served by a practice receive support that meets their unique needs. Because all these components have a demonstrated role to play, HealthySteps works with partner sites to implement each Core Component.

Even so, HealthySteps' experience demonstrates the importance of negotiating this balance of rigor and pragmatism over time. Originally, its model also included home visits by child development specialists. Later research showed that HealthySteps could achieve strong outcomes without home visits, *and* that many sites struggled to manage the visits efficiently and sustainably. So, HealthySteps removed home visitation as a required component.

Similarly, HealthySteps published materials laying out the baseline skills, knowledge, and dispositions that child development specialists need to perform their roles most effectively, while also adding flexibility in the credentials required for specialists. The added flexibility has broadened the pool of potential providers, given current workforce shortages, and enabled greater scale while maintaining strong outcomes.

In contrast, Educate Girls, an India-based NGO founded to address the problem of girls dropping out of school, recognized the potential to build in more flexibility from the start as it, too, pursued the pathway of **equip other organizations and systems to implement solutions**. In its earlier years, the organization worked to develop, test, and deliver its direct service model, which mobilizes field staff and a large team of local volunteers to identify out-of-school girls in rural villages, and uses tactics like individually counseling parents, holding neighborhood- and village-level meetings, and strengthening the curriculum to enroll and help keep girls in school and learning. Today, as it seeks to scale its impact beyond what it can do on its own, it supports approximately 25 NGO partners and regional governments in implementing the model.

Educate Girls has a clear vision of what needs to be achieved. But its experience suggests that in the highly localized field of education, partners don't need to implement every component to achieve and sustain progress. "You figure out the non-negotiable elements and other pieces that can be localized to the context," says founder and board member Safeena Husain. "Our partners don't have to replicate all the elements of our model. For example, it's critical to identify all of the out-of-school girls in an area, they have to go door to door to do it. But who does the knocking is negotiable. Our partners have lots of knowledge about the places where they work. They can bring their own expertise in how the work gets done."

Negotiating the balance of what's fixed and what's flexible is often most challenging when equipping others to implement a solution, but it is also relevant to pathways that focus on changing enabling conditions. Consider Harambee, which is pursuing **influence public-sector actors** as one of its priority scaling pathways. It is flexible in its government-influence strategies, while anchoring on its underlying goal of shifting policies to reduce youth unemployment. "We don't assume that the same priorities and messages resonate with everyone," says Soni. "We use the data we have to focus on what our experience tells us matters most to each partner."

Develop and maintain relationships with key partners

As noted, most organizations need to carve out a bounded role in helping address a complex social problem at scale. This means they will be working alongside others within a larger system. The capacity to partner and collaborate effectively is key, regardless of the specific pathways an organization uses.

"We learned how important it is to stay in your lane, recognize what you don't know, and have the right partnerships," says HealthySteps' Briggs. For example, because electronic health records (EHR) are an essential part of medical practice, those systems are critical to whether HealthySteps can demonstrate impact and make real progress with health providers. Yet, EHR systems often can't fully support national clinical guidelines for pediatric care data and the HealthySteps model. After years of unsuccessful attempts to influence EPIC, the main EHR system in the United States, HealthySteps partnered with an innovative health technology vendor. With their combined technological and clinical expertise, they successfully worked with EPIC on modifications for pediatric practices to improve workflows and data collection.

Organizations also shared with us the importance of robust two-way communication with their partners. In addition to working with NGOs to implement its intervention, Educate Girls prioritized building partnerships with government leaders at multiple levels. It created an advisory panel consisting of retired government officials, which they consult for input on their program approach and strategy.

Dialogue with partners is also critical to the work of Global Fishing Watch, which seeks to transform how the ocean is managed by creating and publicly sharing map visualizations, data, and analysis tools with governments, multilateral organizations, NGOs, and others. Global Fishing Watch is one of several organizations we looked at or have worked with that are pursuing the pathway of **provide shared tools and infrastructure**, and in their case, with a tech solution. Almost all of them put in a great deal of effort collaborating with partners, customers, or communities to ensure that these solutions can be effectively used and have the desired real-world impact. As CEO Tony Long recounts, "Our first partner, an NGO, largely built its own expertise on how to use our open data platform. Since then, we've been working with a wider range of partners, and these are two-way relationships grounded in a strong understanding on our part of the need for co-creation and learning. Governments can help ensure more transparent data and derive benefits from using our data analysis tools, while Global Fishing Watch can use its expertise to build local capacity and generate actionable insights with the data shared."

Be responsive to the needs of the "customers" served

Organizations striving to contribute to social changes at scale need to stay deeply connected to the needs of the "customers" they seek to serve, whether on-the-ground individuals or implementing partners. An orientation toward the client, customer, or community is also important to ensure that the organization prioritizes the needs and perspectives of those closest to the work.

Partnering with rural communities and volunteers in those communities has long been at the core of Educate Girls' direct service work. As the organization pursued scale, it continued to prioritize deep knowledge of community needs—specifically by creating opportunities for volunteers with local experience to rise in its organization. "When the majority of your team is from the villages where you operate, the response on the ground is better and faster," says Educate Girls' Husain. "We grow our own timber. Many volunteers become block, district, and state leaders in our organization."

In turn, Husain sees a strong link between the organization's knowledge of local needs and its ability to partner effectively with governments across India. "We're a credible partner for government because we've done the work in the villages. State government officials are often testing to make sure your team really knows what happens on the ground. They might say, 'Name four villages where you've worked.'"

Build pathway-specific capabilities and structures

While the capabilities highlighted above are vital across pathways, our research and experience also highlight some important pathway-specific capabilities. For example, **spread a solution** pathways often require expertise in technical assistance and model fidelity monitoring; **change enabling conditions** pathways often require a deep understanding of legislation and administrative procedures; and **cultivate coordinated action** pathways often require access to (or ability to create) field-wide communication channels. (See the Appendix in "A New Look at Strategic Pathways for Solving Social Problems at Scale" on Bridgespan.org for an overview of capabilities identified as most critical to each pathway.)

As organizations shift from direct service to pursuing a scaling pathway, or as they add a new pathway to their strategy, they often need to develop new capabilities and change established ways of working. For example, many organizations that have chosen the pathway of **equip others to implement a solution** find that training and coaching can require very different skills from implementing a program directly. A senior leader in one US organization tells us, "As we began equipping other organizations to deliver our model, we had to go study implementation science and use what we learned to guide our work with implementing organizations. Don't assume that implementation works the same way externally as internally!"

Communications capabilities might also require significant evolution. Harambee has its roots in direct service and focused early communications on the beneficiaries it served. As Harambee focused more on the **influence public-sector actors** pathway, it had to build a new muscle for storytelling across the organization to effectively engage this new audience. Harambee's Chief Impact Officer Sharmi Surianarain explains, "You need to help government solve what it has identified as the key problems, not just come in with our own fancy solution. And we have to take the insights we've gotten from this work and say, 'Here are the trends you can use to inform your work and policy.'"

When building new capabilities to pursue transformative scale pathways, organizations should consider potential shifts to their structure and ways of working that can set them up for success. For example, one US organization we interviewed highlighted the value of separating its direct service and implementation support functions. "There's a kind of firewall," explains one of the organization's leaders. "Training for implementing organizations is a separate function from our internal program operations. Other organizations don't want to get gobbled up by our organization." At the same time, it is important to balance separation with information-sharing across teams and functions. As it has expanded beyond direct service, Harambee has prioritized hiring team members who are "boundary spanners," says Surianarain. "These are people who can understand both our [program-specific] operations and the big picture."

③ How Can My Organization Learn and Adapt as Circumstances Change?

This article has focused on how nonprofits and NGOs seeking to have a truly transformative impact can develop and plan their strategies. And, to be clear, good planning at the outset is critical. In the real world, however, things change. New laws and policies pass (or fail to pass), elections bring in different leaders with different agendas, doors slam shut, and others open. Consequently, we have seen some organizations fall far short of their ambitious goals or face outright failure, despite the best-laid plans. To maximize the chances of success, it's vital to learn, adapt, and innovate over time, assuming that circumstances can and will change.

A Note on Funding Strategy

When an organization pursues a new pathway to solving social problems at scale, it may also be shifting its business model and therefore needs to alter its funding strategy. As a Bridgespan team discusses in the 2024 *Stanford Social Innovation Review* article "A New Look at How US Nonprofits Get Big," larger nonprofits typically seek funding that is a "natural match" for their work. If the type of work changes, that natural match may change as well. Adding a major new pathway toward scale could move an organization toward a much greater reliance on government funding, earned revenue, philanthropy, or another funding category.

This shift, in turn, means that the organization needs to understand not only what one or two funding categories it will need to rely on to sustain its work, but also to build the dedicated capabilities and infrastructure to tap into the revenue categories it is focusing on. For example, an organization that has relied mainly on government funding but now plans to create direct public access to a streamlined solution, thereby generating earned revenue, may have to develop capabilities like product design, sales and marketing, and a customer focus. (See more at "Finding Your Nonprofit's Funding Strategy" on Bridgespan.org.)

An effective measurement, evaluation, and learning capability is the foundation for organizational adaptation and innovation over time. Critically, this capability and approach can look significantly different for organizations pursuing transformative impact pathways. Harambee's Surianarain reflects that as the organization has moved beyond a primary focus on direct service, "We're not just crushing targets, we're shifting systems." The organization has had to learn how to shift its measurement strategy from a dashboard mentality to one that focuses on more systemic questions, and from measuring short-term change toward medium- and longer-term change.

With this in mind, let's look at a few specific examples of the kind of learning and adaptation that may be necessary, grounded in the three categories of pathways identified in Bridgespan's work.

The first set of pathways focuses on spreading solutions by equipping other organizations and systems or by creating direct public access. Depending on their specific strategy, organizations may need to ask: Is the effort scaling fast enough and reaching the right populations? Is it still having the kind of impact it did when the organization did all its own work? Are we working with the right implementation partners and in the right geographies to maximize impact?

HealthySteps has asked these questions continuously as it supports sites to implement its model across the United States. Briggs acknowledges the tensions inherent in spreading its solution with quality. "We've had to make hard decisions about small sites, rural sites. These can require a lot of effort. But these kinds of sites are often critical to keeping equity front and center. We can't focus only on big systems." Balancing these priorities has led HealthySteps to exit some sites not consistently able to implement its solution with fidelity, while continuing to pursue implementation partners in more unique and hard-to-reach geographies to maximize the benefits for young children in more underserved communities.

Another set of pathways is focused on **changing enabling conditions**. Here, it is especially important to understand changes and respond to uncertainty in the larger system in which the organization is working—key forces, stakeholders, barriers, and opportunities. Major shifts in national policy may have a particularly large impact on strategic choices.

For example, when the US Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade*, there was sudden momentum in some conservative states to do more for children. "Some people understood that there may be a lot more unprepared young parents. For example, for the first time, Arkansas now pays for childhood development screening," says Briggs. This shift created new momentum for HealthySteps to advance its broader public-sector advocacy and unlock additional public funding for its model of pediatric primary care.

Surianarain of Harambee emphasizes, "You're not going to have the certainty overnight of knowing what the system needs." So, it puts a premium on continuing to learn about the needs and challenges of those with whom it works. "There is a lot of political complexity," says Surianarain, "so the journey has been far from a straight line." It seeks to understand and adapt to the specific working styles and needs of the different government departments with which it works, and to local conditions in the various municipalities and states where it has partnerships. "We need to have a really strong understanding of what matters at different levels of government and to different institutions within government."

Both Harambee and HealthySteps also demonstrate the benefits of working in multiple geographies and with different levels of government or parts of the private sector. When opportunities in one area narrow—perhaps due to a change in government or economic conditions—new opportunities for progress may open in another area.

A third set of pathways involves **cultivating coordinated action**—through coalitions, movements, and communities, or by providing shared tools or infrastructure. Here, it is vital not only to adapt to changing conditions but also to engage partners in a way that is responsive and maintains trust over the long term. As the leaders of one African-based organization coordinating efforts in early childhood explain, "We have to exercise patience.

And sometimes that means continuing to knock on the door of our partners to build a common understanding. Even if we disagree on tactics, we at least show a common vision as to where we want to go." Indeed, many leaders we talked to who are working to solve complex problems emphasize that humility in collaboration is a critical asset—not chasing credit or focusing on short-term wins for the organization, but playing the long game toward a common goal.

Across all types of pathways, organizations also should consider the possibility of pursuing an entirely new pathway over time, in service of advancing impact on the problems they seek to solve. Global Fishing Watch's pathway for impact has been to **provide shared tools and infrastructure** by aggregating and sharing knowledge about human activity at sea to enable fair and sustainable use of our oceans. It has had considerable success—providing an open data platform that anyone can use to monitor fishing vessels and analyze suspicious activity, such as "dark vessels" that do not publicly broadcast their location or vessels that may be involved in forced labor at sea. But the organization is now increasingly **influencing public-sector actors**—advocating directly with governments and institutions to make informed policy choices that support greater transparency and the use of technology and open data to ensure the long-term sustainability of marine environments and the communities they support. CEO Tony Long explains, "We started very much grounded in technology, but today, that technology serves as the catalyst for our work with partners to reform ocean governance policies and practices."

Global Fishing Watch is hardly alone in continuing to evolve its highest-impact role. At the same time, like other organizations, its core mission and goal remain constant. Husain of Educate Girls says, "Seventeen years of staying with the same issue can be tough. Donor interests change, lots of things change. But for us, we know that we can't have any mission creep. You have to stay true to what you're trying to achieve."

Revisiting Measurement, Evaluation, and Learning as You Pursue New Pathways

As an organization refines its strategy or adds new pathways, it should revisit its approach to measurement and learning itself. For example, an organization skilled at measuring its direct service programs may need to develop new measurement capabilities as it focuses more explicitly on elements of systems change. Here are a few Bridgespan resources on measurement, evaluation, and learning:

- "A Practical Guide to Nonprofit Measurement, Evaluation, and Learning"

- "How Nonprofits and NGOs Can Measure Progress Toward Systems Change"

- "How Nonprofits Can Incorporate Equity into Their Measurement, Evaluation, and Learning"

- "Measurement, Evaluation, and Learning: A Guide for Field Catalysts"

Progress Is Possible

Over the past decade, we have seen a range of organizations across the globe make significant progress toward solving social problems at scale. This article has highlighted some of the most important questions these organizations have asked and the types of decisions they have made to achieve impact.

Across the experiences of many organizations in diverse sectors, it is clear there are no easy answers or simple choices on the big questions about an organization's choice of pathways, capability investments, and adaptation over time. Indeed, what makes these questions so vital for leaders to focus on is that they all involve making trade-offs and managing tensions. Contributing to durable and equitable social change often requires organizations to pursue more than one pathway, yet pursuing too many pathways can introduce too much organizational complexity. It is good to be ambitious in selecting pathways, yet the pace of execution must be balanced with the time needed to build up organizational capabilities and structures. Strong planning at the outset can set organizations up for success, but it can never guarantee success in a dynamic ecosystem that requires continuous adaptation.

Our tone is optimistic because we have seen that progress *is* possible. This is not to minimize the fact that some organizations, despite great efforts, fail to make much progress at all. It is not always evident in the near term whether an organization has made the "right" decisions on these big questions, and sometimes no amount of planning, skill, or adaptability can overcome the bad hand that circumstances may deal.

Yet what unites the most successful organizations is their grit to keep going, sometimes in the face of strong headwinds. Solving social problems at scale is a long-term effort, and perseverance can be an organization's greatest asset. Says Briggs of HealthySteps, "Change happens in the pushing."

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Appendix

The research and guidance offered in this article reflect Bridgespan's latest perspectives on scaling for a nonprofit audience. This topic continues to receive important additional attention and research across the social sector. For readers interested in understanding additional perspectives, we have curated a reading list of recent materials.

- Perspectives from leaders of nonprofit organizations pursuing scale, funded by philanthropic big bets:

  - James Nardella and Maharshi Vaishnav, "Our Best Bet Is a Long Bet," *Stanford Social Innovation Review* (September 4, 2024)

  - Matthew Forti and Claire McGuinness, "Big Bets for the Long Haul," *Stanford Social Innovation Review* (June 3, 2024)

- Perspectives from philanthropic funders and communities of practice supporting nonprofit scaling:

  - Richard Kohl, Johannes Linn, and Larry Cooley, *Mainstreaming Scaling in Funder Organizations: A Policy Brief*, Scaling Community of Practice (June 2024)

  - Skoll Foundation, "The Journey to Transformation," a series in *Stanford Social Innovation Review* (November 2024 and February 2025)

- Reflections and dialogue on the risks of "big bet" investments, as well as mitigating strategies

  - KC Hardin, "How (Not) to Scale a Nonprofit," *Stanford Social Innovation Review* (September 7, 2022)

  - Kimberly Churches, "The Nonprofit World Is Obsessed With Scaling. But Is It Always the Right Choice?" *Chronicle of Philanthropy* (December 13, 2023)

  - Kevin Starr, "Big Bet Bummer," *Stanford Social Innovation Review* (April 25, 2024)

  - Cecilia Conrad, "In Defense of Big Bets," *Stanford Social Innovation Review* (May 2, 2024)

  - Kevin Starr, "Big Bet Bonanza," *Stanford Social Innovation Review* (October 14, 2024)

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