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Title

Going to scale: The challenge of expanding NGO impact in Indian primary education

Abstract

Effective programs introduced by educational NGOs in developing countries have the potential to benefit a large number of people if they are scaled-up. However, such scaling-up does not occur as often as it should. Potential reasons include both internal and external barriers. Internal barriers include reduced flexibility and speed of innovation as the organisation expands, loss of staff motivation stemming from the introduction of more formalised management structures, and overly centralised leadership, while external barriers include a reduced ability to connect with the local community, language or cultural barriers, lack of support from key stakeholders, and financial or human capital constraints.

Knowing which barriers are particularly significant, and the extent to which they can be effectively mitigated, can help to determine the choice of scaling-up pathway. Expanding to new locations and communities is perhaps what most people understand by the term ‘scaling-up’, but it is not the only option, and relies on overcoming both external and internal barriers. In principle, the NGO could also achieve enhanced impact via transfer of project materials and implementation guidelines to a network of local collaborating NGOs, which would enable it to by-pass external barriers such as establishing relationships with local stakeholders.

It is therefore useful to examine the barriers that constrain NGO scaling-up in the education sector, and strategies to overcome them. This paper examines these issues by analysing qualitative and quantitative data from an Indian educational NGO that has scaled up rapidly and effectively over the last decade. Qualitative semi-structured interviews explore what barriers to scaling-up are particularly pertinent to NGOs working in the education sector in India. The quantitative analysis
uses a skills inventory dataset from the same organisation to test for differences in average human capital levels between the core and scaled-up parts of the organisation.

The results indicate that high-functioning NGOs can successfully overcome many of the internal barriers to scaling-up. The NGO studied in this paper, for instance, has invested heavily in developing and training a layer of middle management as it has grown, kept staff motivation high by creating opportunities for career progression, and retained key organisational attributes such as flexibility and innovativeness by giving staff considerable autonomy to experiment and avoiding too many layers of management and oversight.

However, external barriers such as the difficulty of building relationships with key stakeholders like government officials and schoolteachers pose significant challenges. Managing relationships with donor agencies, too, is found to be problematic: the qualitative responses illustrate how reliance on corporate funding poses challenges for operational continuity and management, and at times threatens the key values of the organisation. Finally, the study highlights that – given low regulation and governance of the NGO sector generally – locating reliable organisations to partner with is also challenging in developing countries.

**Keyword**

NGO, scaling-up, education, internal barriers, external barriers