Scaling Social Innovation: How Can Government–NGO Partnerships Succeed?

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Abstract

Government-NGO partnerships present a promising avenue for scaling social innovations, combining the agility and creativity of NGOs with the resources and reach of government agencies. However, achieving successful collaboration is no easy feat and requires overcoming multiple operational and cultural barriers. Drawing from the experience of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (the Joint) and the Government of Israel, the article presents a three-step model—Design, Nurture, Accelerate (DNA)—that has demonstrated a 70% success rate in incubating and scaling social innovations. Using three scale-ups as examples, the article encapsulates key insights for successful government-NGO partnerships and offers practical guidance for stakeholders.

Introduction

Scaling up is perhaps the greatest social innovation challenge. Much has been written on the difficulty of growing an innovation beyond a few hundred or thousand individuals so that it can seriously tackle the problem it set out to solve.

NGO-government partnerships seem like an ideal solution to this challenge. NGOs bring a direct connection to the field, freedom from bureaucracy, creativity, risk-taking, and agility – essential for innovation; while government brings national scope, large-scale funding, and long-term stability – critical for wide-scale implementation.

But creating successful government-NGO partnerships is not easy.

There are multiple cultural and operational barriers to public-nonprofit collaboration. Government bureaucracies are designed to avoid and mitigate risk. They work slowly through rigorously regulated channels and procedures. The more innovative a solution is, the harder it is to implement, the longer it takes, and the more people need to be involved. We would like to share insights from a model developed by the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (the Joint) and the Government of Israel to incubate and scale solutions to challenges faced by vulnerable populations. We have applied the three-step model called DNA (Design, Nurture, Accelerate) hundreds of times over decades, with a 70% success rate.

We examine three program scale-ups, highlighting factors that led to their success. While the long-term partnership of the Joint and the Government of Israel may be unique, the factors described below are relevant both to government agencies looking to partner with NGOs to

develop innovations and for nonprofits seeking to scale their solutions through the government.

Design Phase:

Most social innovation models begin with a pilot. The DNA model begins long before, with the birth of an idea and the plan to implement it. We contend that getting the design 'right' is a major factor in successful acceleration years later.

The design phase includes:

- o An in-depth analysis of the problem
- o Learning from best practices locally and internationally
- o Identifying and engaging key government partners
- o Creating a program model together with partners, including a 'business plan' for implementation

*The **Community Courts** program pilot, launched in November 2014, is an alternative to short prison sentences and aims to reduce recidivism. Based on a problem-solving court model developed in the United States, the program turns the court into a rehabilitation system that offers minor offenders a community-based rehabilitation process and oversees their progress. The pilot succeeded in significantly reducing recidivism rates, leading to its expansion to all judicial districts in Israel. In 2021, the Israeli Parliament mandated the establishment of Community Courts in over half of Israel's courts.*

Design Phase Insights:

- **Develop solutions for issues where there is a clear, pressing need (current or future) that the government cannot ignore**. *While recidivism is a global problem, the overcrowding of Israeli prisons and a major backlog of court cases made finding solutions for recidivism both a pressing need and a government priority. This heightened the government's interest and willingness to invest in the program.*

- **Identify a government partner who can assume responsibility for acceleration; involve the partner from the start**. If a government partner is expected to adopt and scale a program, they must assume ownership from the beginning. Not just buy-in or sense of ownership, but genuine ownership. *To scale this program, the Israeli Court System had to change the way it works both internally and with other agencies (such as the Attorney General and the police). The Joint spent two years introducing key decision makers to the program model and its effectiveness in other countries and did not launch the pilot until a partnership with all relevant stakeholders was in place. The pilot was designed together with all partners, with the Israeli Courts System assuming responsibility from the start.*

- **Design with integration and scale in mind right from the get-go**. The 'business plan' should include solutions for acceleration, including long-term funding and oversight mechanisms that are 'digestible' to the government. *Even before the first pilot, discussions were held, and agreements were reached on the budgets and staffing*

necessary to scale the program, as well as policies, processes, and procedures the Court System would have to amend to implement it.

Nurture Phase:

Often called the pilot phase, the nurture phase focuses on demonstrating the effectiveness of the model and its potential for impact. It includes:

- o Launching a joint NGO-government pilot
- o Rigorously monitoring and evaluating to establish effectiveness
- o Continually refining the model
- o Laying the groundwork for wide-scale implementation.

Supportive Communities *are a cluster of services offered to older adults that enable them to "age in place": live at home safely, independently, and comfortably, regardless of age or income. They offer members an emergency hotline, medical services, social activities, and a new kind of professional, called a community parent, to check up on them, providing a friendly ear and practical assistance (like changing a light bulb, calling and supervising the plumber, organizing volunteers to help after a hospital stay).*

The pilot was launched in 1994. After testing it in 36 communities, the Israeli Ministry of Welfare fully adopted the program and, together with the Joint, accelerated it across the country. Today, 7% of Israel's elderly are members of more than 260 active communities.

Nurture Phase Insights:

- **Verify, using rigorous evaluation models, the program's effectiveness, efficiency, and adaptability**. Pilots are often conducted in conditions that afford a high chance of success (e.g., above-average staff and willing participants). To successfully scale, however, the model needs to be tested and shown to be effective in all types of circumstances. *The program was piloted in cities and rural areas and for different population groups. In addition to ongoing monitoring and evaluation, cost-benefit analyses were also conducted.*

- **Crystalize what program components are 'nice to have' and what are essential and account for most of the impact**. Pilots are often too expensive for wide-scale dissemination. Identifying the most critical components can bring down the cost and make implementation more feasible. *The initial program model included additional services that were later discarded after evaluation, showing that the community parent, the emergency hotline, and medical services were the core components that made Supportive Communities both valuable and cost-effective.*

- **Lay the groundwork for wide-scale implementation, including standards of service, guidelines, professional materials, and training** for the staff who will deliver the service at scale. This is a critical but often overlooked component of the nurture phase. *The Joint created a handbook detailing how to launch and manage a Supportive Community. It also created a new profession – "community parent" – and provided the necessary training and support for hundreds of professionals.*

Acceleration Phase

"Passing the baton" to the government is the most delicate and complex phase of the program development model.

In a relay race, the two runners involved in the baton handover run together for 20 meters – before and after passing the baton. Similarly, handing over a program to the government is a gradual process in which both the government and the NGO need to 'run together' until all 'bumps' of the transition have been ironed out – and there will always be bumps. In the acceleration phase, financial and operational responsibility are gradually transferred to the government agencies that will replicate and sustain nationally. Throughout this phase, it is critical for the NGO to continue providing oversight, training, and guidance.

After ten years of piloting, in 2019, the Joint handed over its **Employment Centers for Israel's Minority Populations** *to the Israeli Ministry of Labor. The program is now a national network of 20 centers serving all Arab society communities in Israel, helping over 15,000 clients find employment annually.*

Acceleration Phase Insights:

- **Government partners need to ensure that the funding, staffing, policies, processes, and procedures are in place to take responsibility for the program**. As these are rarely in place simultaneously, the government should continue partnering with the NGO to provide the missing components as the mechanisms are put in place. *The Acceleration phase of the program began two years before the handover. During that time, the Joint helped the government establish mechanisms for management and oversight, including preparing the government tender for the agencies that would operate the program following the handover.*

- **The NGO must be willing to provide professional support even after the government has officially taken over the program.** *Following the handover, the Joint continued providing professional support for two years. This included allocating staff and resources towards mentoring employment center directors, training all employment center staff, and overseeing monitoring and evaluation.*

- **Acceleration demands a different kind of leadership than entrepreneurship**. For the NGO, it requires a willingness to step aside and let others make decisions about the program. It is the deep and sometimes frustrating understanding that not getting credit is perhaps the most significant indicator of a successful implementation process. *Today, almost all employment center clients and even most professionals working at the centers do not know the Joint's role in establishing them.*

Scaling social innovations is not easy, and neither are government-NGO partnerships. Both require hard work, the ability to think outside the box, and a willingness to compromise. But when they succeed, the benefits far outweigh the effort. The insights described above may significantly increase the chances of success.