

HOW ARE GPSA'S PARTNERS THINKING ABOUT SCALE AND TRYING TO ACHIEVE IT?

This note captures a recent conversation about scale in social accountability with more than 165 of the GPSA's Global Partners. We discovered a range of on-the-ground meanings for scale. We also uncovered that there may be some common challenges and similar pathways that show promise. A big 'Aha!' moment: in practice, our colleagues' experience with scale is rarely directly associated with replication.

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INTRODUCTION

On May 14-15, the [Global Partnership for Social Accountability](#) (GPSA) brought together in Washington, DC more than 165 Global Partners of the GPSA – a diverse array of development agencies, international and national CSOs, and private sector groups from around the world – alongside government representatives and World Bank staff.

The [Global Partners Forum](#) was an occasion to recognize, connect, and share knowledge with many of the most relevant actors in the field of Social Accountability. [“What works in Social Accountability?”](#) was the guiding question of the Forum.

At the Forum, participants reflected on the meaning of scale and how it works (or not) in practice in the social accountability field, among other issues.

This short note picks up on our conversation to encourage collective thinking, research and action.



WHAT DOES SCALE MEAN TO YOU?

In the development field, [“scale up” is one of those terms that almost everyone uses, yet very few people can define.](#) A common way to talk about scale is to copy a program that has worked in one time and place with the expectation that it will work in another context. A recent review of evaluations regarding scale explains that it [“generally involves replication of successful pilot interventions in order to benefit more people and create lasting change.”](#)

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To access the complete Notes series, go to www.thegpsa.org and <http://gpsaknowledge.org>

Scaling ideas in [South Africa](#), among other places, via [Making All Voices Count's](#) scale window.

If scaling is to reach more people, this [thought-provoking article](#) contrasts mechanisms of scale associated to expanding geographically (going big) quickly and cheaply with the experience of an Indian civil society organization in the education sector. [Ubuntu Education Fund's](#) idea of scale is to focus deeper on concrete communities, doing it through small, prudent steps to achieve measurable **outcomes**.

This example starts to challenge the very idea that we should think about scale in terms of size or reach. Instead, we should concentrate on impact because “growing impact does not necessarily require organizational growth or the wholesale replication of programs — it may instead require expanding an idea or innovation, technology or skill, advocacy or policy change”.

How we go about scale should be contingent on the system we are working in and with (keep reading for more examples). Table 1 below proposes different ways to think about scale as impact depending on what it is that we are trying to scale (a program, idea, technology, public **policy**).

Is scaling up in development like rolling a new product line across an existing series of shops or like building a series of separate businesses from scratch, each in a different market?
Owen Barder argues it is the latter.

Do you think that development is like business when it comes to scale? Always? Under what conditions?

If you are interested in adaptive learning you may find it useful to think about how the move from scale as reach to scale as impact relates to efforts to move from mimicry to results.

Table 1: Approaches to Scale

What is scaled?	Definition of Scale	Scaling Mechanisms	Relevant Theory/ Literature	Variables Influencing Outcomes
Program				
A system of projects or services that meets a need for individuals or communities	Copying a program that research has shown to be effective, with the expectation that it can or will produce the same	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Replication • Adaptation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Program Theory • Theory of Change 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reliability of Implementation • Potential for generalization • Adaptability

What is scaled?	Definition of Scale	Scaling Mechanisms	Relevant Theory/ Literature	Variables Influencing Outcomes
Program				
	results in different places. Scaled programs often allow for flexibility in implementation to best adapt to the local context.			
Idea or Innovation				
A new way of thinking about or doing something; new solutions to problems	Spreading an idea among individuals or organizations within a certain area or system (geographic, organizational, professional); ideas can be adapted to fit different purposes or contexts.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communication • Marketing • Dissemination 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Diffusion of Innovation • Tipping Point • Communications Theory 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relative Advantage • Compatibility • Complexity • Observability
Technology or Skill				
Products, tools, techniques, or practices.	Increasing the number of people or places that use or apply a technology, practice, or approach.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Marketing • Distribution • Training • Granting 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knowledge Transfer • Technology Transfer • Learning Theory 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relative Advantage • Compatibility • Complexity • Observability
Policy				
Codified statements that define plans or a course of action	Ensuring that ideas expressed as policy are transformed into behaviour throughout a place or jurisdiction (e.g., city, county, state, region, country).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implementation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agenda Setting • Policy Implementation Theory 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Socio-political Factors • Governance • Enforcement • Accountability • Resources

Adapted from Ottoson, J. M., & Hawe, P. (2009). Knowledge utilization, diffusion, implementation, transfer, and translation: Implications for evaluation. *New Directions for Evaluation*, 124, 1–108.

To be candid, as we prepared for the Global Forum's conversation about scale, we feared that with a large set of partners that work across the world, in different sectors, from different places in state and society, we were bound to get lost in translation. We had read how 600+ projects in the social accountability field approached scale and one of us had spent time discussing with the 20 partners selected to implement GPSA projects how they would go about scale in their work. As you can read [here](#), we had identified a number of approaches and tensions ahead of the meeting especially in linking abstract words about scale and feasible action regarding scale in the social accountability field. So, we considered two options to kick off the conversation:

- **Defining what we meant by scale, picking one of many possible definitions. The definition would set clear boundaries to the conversation and we could go deeper; or**
- **Scoping what Global Partners understood by scale. We would gain a broader, richer understanding from social accountability practitioners. In giving up control, the risk was that we were not sure we were going to get anywhere meaningful or productive.**

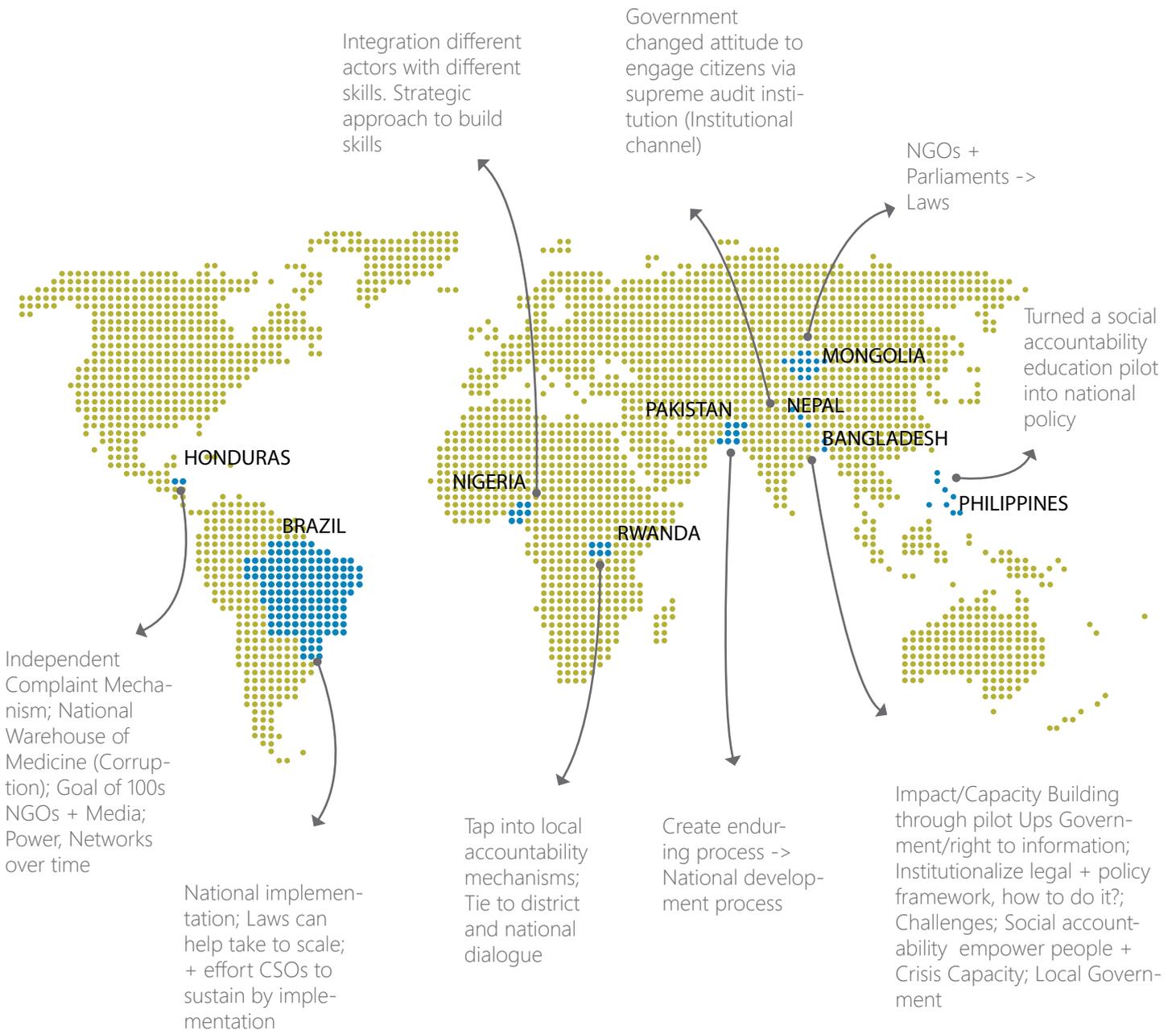
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LINKING WORDS TO ACTIONS

You, like us, are probably wondering what these words mean in practice. Participants in the GPSA Global Partners Forum enlightened us with a series of 1-2 sentence examples of scale at work in social accountability. Here's a glimpse of scale in social accountability practitioners' experiences across the world:



BRIDGING SCALE'S CONTEXTS AND EXPERIENCES

We also uncovered that there may be some common challenges and similar pathways that show promise on the ground – trying to bridge experiences across the world. We are zeroing in on a small number of insights that seemed to be relevant for multiple colleagues:

Challenge 1 - Appropriateness: Scale, are you sure?

Participants in our conversation pointed out that often they feel increasingly pushed towards scaling up as something that must happen. What we mean about scaling up has different implications for how we react to this environmental pressure. If scale is impact, then perhaps it makes sense to apply scale to social accountability interventions? But is it the same if scale is about reaching more people in a broader geography? And does the answer to these questions make sense for ALL social accountability interventions equally or do we need to think what kind of intervention we are trying to scale up? A number of colleagues at the GPSA Forum seemed to agree that not everything should be scaled up. Certainly, it does not make sense to scale ideas that do not work. They also pushed us to sophisticate our thinking: we need to think about when and where to scale up? Is the context ready or do you need to wait (or take the lead creating) a critical point?

Challenge 2 – Localizing global insights: How do we grow impact while retaining awareness of our context as we scale-up social accountability interventions?

This is perhaps the most salient challenge in talking about scale. We pointed out elsewhere that we had identified a tension in approaches to scale: on the one hand, colleagues consider that they need to pay a lot of attention to context to make projects work

– they do not think of simply replicating best practices from across the world. At best, they want to learn and adapt good ideas to their context. Yet, they are more than willing to make their own projects the best practice that others should import. We cannot but question whether it makes sense to refer to best practices when trying to scale (expanding reach or impact) problem-solving in relation to some of the world's toughest problems. The trick could be to have an open mind to reflect and learn with and from others' experiences and yet keep the eye on local adaptation or as others have called it as you **struggle**.

This review of 11 successful scaling efforts found that programs taken to scale usually involve a well-developed strategy based on documented evidence AND work to make effective use of the ideas to try, learn, fail, and adapt the program to different contexts.



In other words, to scale successfully we may need to resist the temptation to copy-paste across contexts, but the zero-sum game between foreign and local may not be the way to go **either**.



Challenge 3 – Collaborative action: How do we articulate different actors with multiple relevant skills as we scale-up social accountability interventions?

A great insight from Nigeria and the other cases we mapped, for instance in Honduras, is that scale in its different forms is rarely something that a single actor or organization can achieve by going **alone**.

Interested in partnerships & coalitions as a key component of strategic social accountability? Find examples, references and analysis in [GPSA Note 4](#).

No single actor usually has the power and/or the relevant skills to grow the impact of a social accountability intervention, or to expand its reach. Other partners and allies can be crucial to scale it up, despite the difficulties of articulating and integrating distinct skill sets, interests, and viewpoints.

More generally, [this publication found that civil society groups’ impact entails adopting a “mission first” approach to their work by emphasizing collaboration, networks, movement building and advocacy. For funders attempting to grow impact, catalyzing, supporting, and sustaining collective action in addition to \(or instead of\) individual organizations is an emerging practice in their quest for scale.](#)

Challenge 4 - Co-production: how to produce scale through state and civil society constructive engagement?

Look at the map above again. You’ll see that state actors, processes and institutions coupled with civil society work seem to have provided a myriad of pathways to scale across the world.

We heard about the usefulness of national dialogues, statutes, policies, parliaments, and state control institutions. This kind of engagement, and at times co-production, are also associated with more strategic and impactful social **accountability**.

More examples and ideas about state-society engagement and co-production for strategic social accountability: [GPSA Note 3](#) discusses the issue in relation to applications for GPSA funding [GPSA Note 7](#) looks into the GPSA and its projects

So, we think this challenge is associated to a crucial learning agenda for the future: what is the range of mechanisms for civil society and the state to institutionalize scale of social accountability interventions? More importantly, when, where and why does each mechanism make sense?

Challenge 5 – Using knowledge and evaluation: How do we purposively and strategically learn to design and implement social accountability for scale?

We are not learning enough about scale for social accountability, let alone using whatever we learned to inform and adapt social accountability projects (on the broader issue see GPSA Note 5). To paraphrase a useful [GEOFunders’ publication](#): usually there is a gap between what we know and what we need to know to inform the growing impact (scaling) process, but rushing to invest in any kind of evaluation may not be the best way to go. We need to be thoughtful as we invest resources to learn. It pays off to consider what is being scaled, its implementation stage, how results will be used and the kinds of decisions an evaluation is meant to facilitate before committing to a particular course of action, analytic approach and method.

CONCLUSION

Our conversation at the GPSA Global Partners Forum took less than two hours. We barely scratched the surface of the meanings, experiences, and challenges of scale in the social accountability field. We hope, nonetheless, that the conversation opened participants' minds to recognize the diversity of assumptions, implications and practical consequences that coexist on this matter.

In sharing our conversation and some additional resources with you, we trust we have provided additional insights for your own critical thinking and strategic social accountability work. We would very much like to learn how that goes, so please share ideas and experiences and continue the conversation through the [GPSA Knowledge Platform](#).



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