

Going to Scale: A Case Study of an Indian Educational NGO

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Abstract Effective programmes introduced by NGOs in developing countries have the potential to benefit a large number of people if they are scaled up, but instances of successful scaling-up are relatively rare. This paper uses a case study of an Indian educational NGO that has scaled up rapidly and effectively in order to explore the reasons for choice of scaling-up strategy, the particular barriers to scaling-up in the education sector, and how these barriers can be overcome. It finds that, while a high-functioning NGO can successfully overcome many of the internal organisational challenges posed by scaling-up, external barriers such as the difficulty of building relationships with key stakeholders like government officials and school teachers pose significant challenges. While these difficulties could in principle be mitigated by moving from an expansion-based to collaboration-based model of scaling-up, low accountability and governance of the NGO sector make it difficult to detect the quality of potential partners. The case also shows that India's recent law mandating CSR has increased funding availability for scaling-up, but its requirement for corporate donors to preferentially support local projects has also created some challenges by constraining NGO ability to harness economies of scale during scaling.

Keywords NGO · Scaling-up · Education · India · Corporate social responsibility · CSR

Introduction

That effective interventions of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in developing countries do not scale up often has been an enduring observation in the literature. Korten lamented in 1980 that "...few of the many village based development efforts which do achieve fit on a local basis ever develop into capacities for sustained action on a significant scale" (Korten 1980). Writing almost thirty years later, Steele et al. (2008, p. xx) cautioned that "local 'pilot' projects need to expand beyond their cocoon if they are to be taken seriously... There are many NGOs that have targeted poverty reduction programmes, but these remain isolated islands of success". However, given the scale of the development challenges that yet remain unsolved, constraints on the capacity of national governments to bring about change (Hajer et al. 2015), and trends towards greater outsourcing of government services (Werker and Ahmed 2008), it is important that effective and innovative NGO programmes go to scale in order to reach more people in need of their services (Edwards and Hulme 2002; Uvin et al. 2000; Hodson 1992).

The challenges of scaling up NGO impact have been examined in such diverse areas as HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment (Binswanger 2000), natural resource management (Carter and Currie-Alder 2006), disaster response (Lister 2001), microfinance (Chahine and Tannir 2010), and land rights (Igoe 2003), among others. However, while a sizeable literature on NGO scaling-up exists, there is an imbalance in the attention that various sectors have received within it. Certain sectors such as health, community-driven development, and governance have dominated the discussion, while other sectors have lagged behind (Hartmann and Linn 2008; Brass et al. 2018). One such sector is education, where there is a paucity of

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systematic evidence on scaling-up of educational initiatives in the developing world (Samoff et al. 2003). Jowett and Dyer (2012, p. 733), for instance, note that “Scaling-up their initiatives successfully and sustainably can be an efficient and cost effective way for NGOs to increase their impact across a range of developmental outcomes, but relatively little attention has been paid in the education sector to how best this may be done and debates appear to have stalled”. This represents a significant gap in the literature since the education sector continues to pose significant challenges for the developing world. While enrolment rates in primary education have increased to over 90% worldwide, 57 million children of primary school age are still out of school, and the quality of educational outcomes for many of those who are in school is worryingly low (UN 2018).

For instance, in India (where this research is set), only 43% of rural children in Grade III can read a Grade I level text in their local language, and only 28% of them can do two-digit subtraction (ASER 2016). There is therefore a strong case for drawing lessons from NGOs that are successfully scaling up educational programmes in developing countries, as well as examining which barriers they find difficult to overcome and may require some form of policy intervention. This article examines one such Indian NGO (henceforth referred to by the pseudonym ABC), using a descriptive case study approach (Yin 1984). Since ABC’s scaling process has occurred against the backdrop of corporate social responsibility (CSR) regulation in India (which was introduced in 2014 and mandates all companies above a certain size threshold to spend at least 2% of their net profits on CSR), the case also allows us to observe the impacts of the regulation on ABC’s scaling-up.

The prior literature on scaling-up has developed typologies of how NGOs scale up, and identified the major constraints they commonly face as they do so. One strand of the literature indicates the variety of mechanisms via which NGOs try to expand their impact, which may include expanding the scope of their operations to cover more beneficiaries, branching out into new service areas, or education and advocacy activities to influence policy direction (Uvin and Miller 1994; Uvin et al. 2000). Moreover, each of these broad strategies encompasses multiple pathways. For instance, expanding the regional scope of operations in order to achieve greater coverage of beneficiaries is certainly possible via organisational replication to new locations, but this is not the only option. In principle, the NGO could also achieve enhanced impact via transfer of project materials and implementation guidelines to a network of local collaborating NGOs (Jowett and Dyer 2012).

Another strand of the literature examines the constraints or barriers to effective scaling-up. These can be

characterised as internal or external barriers, depending on whether they emerge within or outside the boundaries of the organisation. Internal barriers include reduced flexibility and speed of innovation as the organisation expands (Edwards and Hulme 1995; Fyvie and Ager 1999), reduced focus on organisational learning (Power et al. 2002), loss of staff motivation stemming from the introduction of more formalised management structures (Ahmad 2003), and overly centralised leadership (Edwards 1999). External barriers include a reduced ability to connect with the local community, or change in the nature of the relationship with the local community (Miraftab 1997; Hailey 2000), language or cultural barriers (Fyvie and Ager 1999; Edwards 1999), lack of support from key stakeholders, financial or human capital constraints, goal deflection stemming from dependence on donor funding (Ebrahim 2003; Bebbington 1997), and increased competition with other NGOs for funding (Ebdon 1995).

Bringing these two strands of the literature together can yield useful insights into the issue of choice of scaling-up strategy: knowing which barriers are particularly significant, and the extent to which they can be effectively mitigated, can help to inform the choice of scaling-up pathway. It can also provide insights into the potential role of policy in mitigating systemic barriers. Accordingly, this article uses ABC in India as a case study to answer the following questions: (i) what factors influence the choice of NGO scaling-up strategy in the education domain? (ii) what barriers are particularly significant to scaling-up in this domain? (iii) what strategies are used to overcome these barriers? It uses mixed methods in order to answer these questions, using qualitative interviews with ABC staff as well as statistical analysis of employee data.

The case shows that ABC relies on a strategy of expansion, or organisational replication in new locations, to scale up impact. It deliberately avoids strategies that rely on collaborating or partnering with other NGOs, attributing this to the problems associated with detecting the quality of potential partners. Through a combination of good leadership, commitment to a decentralised organisational structure, employee empowerment, and attention to employee recruitment and training, it is able to overcome many of the internal and external barriers to scaling-up. Some external barriers such as the difficulty of building relationships with key stakeholders like government officials, school teachers, and corporate donors, however, continue to pose significant challenges for the organisation.

This article makes two contributions to the literature on NGO scaling-up in developing countries. The first is to highlight how low regulation (or self-regulation) of the NGO sector limits the strategy space for scaling-up. While over-regulation, or the wrong kind of regulation, is certainly counter-productive (Batley 2006), too little

regulation may also be undesirable from a scaling-up perspective as it makes it more difficult for initiating NGOs to identify the quality of potential partners, limiting the use of collaboration-based scaling strategies. While the potential contribution of effective regulation to legitimising the role of NGOs, improving their professional standards, and ensuring public accountability have been previously noted in the literature (Abbey 2008), its role in enabling scaling-up of successful NGO interventions has not been adequately highlighted so far.

The second contribution is to illustrate how policy interventions to relax some of the barriers to scaling-up can create new, and presumably unintended, consequences in the form of new barriers. An illustration of this is provided by India's recent CSR law. While it has the potential to relax financial constraints on NGO scaling-up by increasing the availability of corporate funding, the localism clause of the law—which requires corporate donors to give preference to projects near their area of operations—has also created some unique challenges. By taking the choice of location for scaling-up out of the NGO's control, it poses a risk that NGO efforts will not be directed into areas of greatest need. It also constrains NGO ability to harness economies of scale by focusing on a particular region, instead encouraging a tendency for piecemeal growth which is inefficient and potentially unsustainable.

The article is structured as follows. The next section presents the conceptual and analytical frameworks used in the study. Next, the data and methodology are described. The following section focuses on the research findings. The final section discusses the key insights from the study and concludes.

Conceptual Framework

This section presents a review of the scaling-up literature, with a particular focus on educational NGOs. An overview of scaling-up typologies is followed by a summary of the main internal and external barriers to scaling-up. Finally, implications for the choice of scaling-up strategy are discussed.

How Do NGOs Scale Up?

Scaling-up can be defined as “expanding, adapting, and sustaining successful projects, programs, or policies over time for greater development impact” (Hartmann and Linn 2008, p. 2). A few caveats are in order at the outset. First, not all NGO interventions can or should be scaled up; possible reasons for keeping an intervention small in scale include the existence of physical or environmental limits (Lovell et al. 2002), diseconomies of scale (Bos and

Millone 2015), quality–quantity tradeoffs (Mangham and Hanson 2010), and lack of robust evidence on the effectiveness of the intervention (Duflo 2004). Second, critics warn that an overemphasis on scaling-up can lead to a shift in accountability from local beneficiaries to funders (Edwards and Hulme 1995; Banks and Hulme 2012), and a change in the nature of NGOs from mission-driven organisations with transformative agendas to service providers or government subcontractors (Ambegaokar and Lush 2004; Ahmed 2000). While acknowledging these misgivings, this article focuses on understanding the constraints to scaling-up in a context where the NGO is motivated to do so, and where there seem to be no obvious reasons why scaling-up would be counter-productive and in fact many reasons to think it would be socially desirable.

There are various typologies in the literature of the ways in which NGO scaling-up can be achieved (e.g. Edwards and Hulme 1992; Gillespie 2004; ExpandNet 2010). Figure 1 presents a modified version based on the typologies developed by Uvin and Miller (1994) and Uvin et al. (2000).

It is probably fair to say that quantitative scaling-up—the first category depicted in Fig. 1—is the most obvious and common way in which NGOs attempt to scale up their impact, and what most people visualise when thinking about scaling-up. Accordingly, this article focuses on it. The key feature of quantitative scaling-up is that the NGO extends its reach to cover more people, while performing the same activity or function as before. However, as Fig. 1 illustrates, quantitative scaling-up is only one of several alternative pathways; there are different routes to expanding impact. With functional scaling-up, for instance, the NGO takes on more activities or functions, even though the size of the target group itself does not increase. Moreover, these alternative pathways can be extremely influential. Indirect scaling-up, for instance, is extremely powerful as it can help to change the socio-economic, political, and institutional environment that underlies the very problems that NGOs are trying to tackle.

Quantitative Scaling-Up

Quantitative scaling-up itself can also be achieved in various ways. Figure 2 presents a typology of quantitative scaling-up, which is based on combining elements of Uvin and Miller's (1994) typology of the alternative pathways for quantitative scaling-up with Jowett and Dyer's (2012) typology, which was developed in the context of educational NGOs in particular.

Expansion is the most commonly used notion of scaling-up (Uvin 1995). The NGO expands into new areas in order to serve new target groups, getting bigger in size as it does so.

Fig. 1 Types of scaling-up.
 Source: Uvin and Miller (1994) and Uvin et al. (2000)

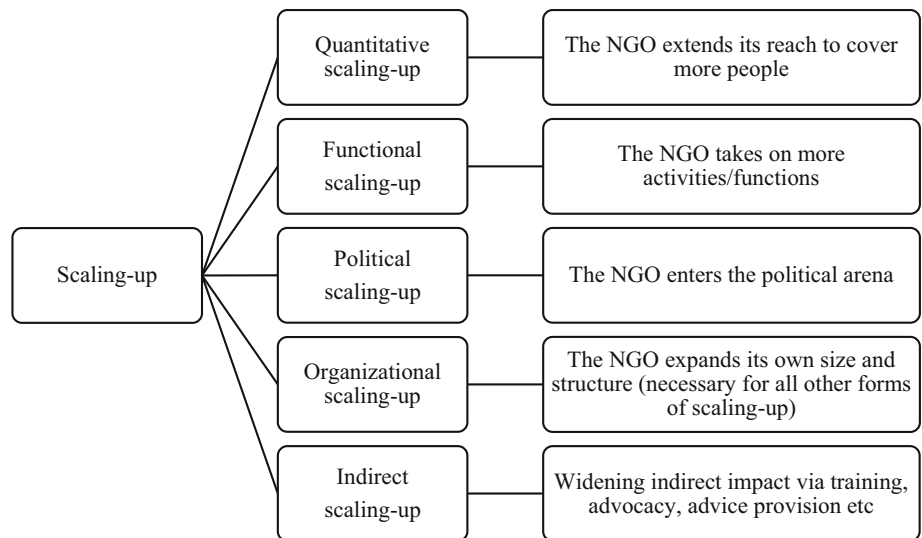
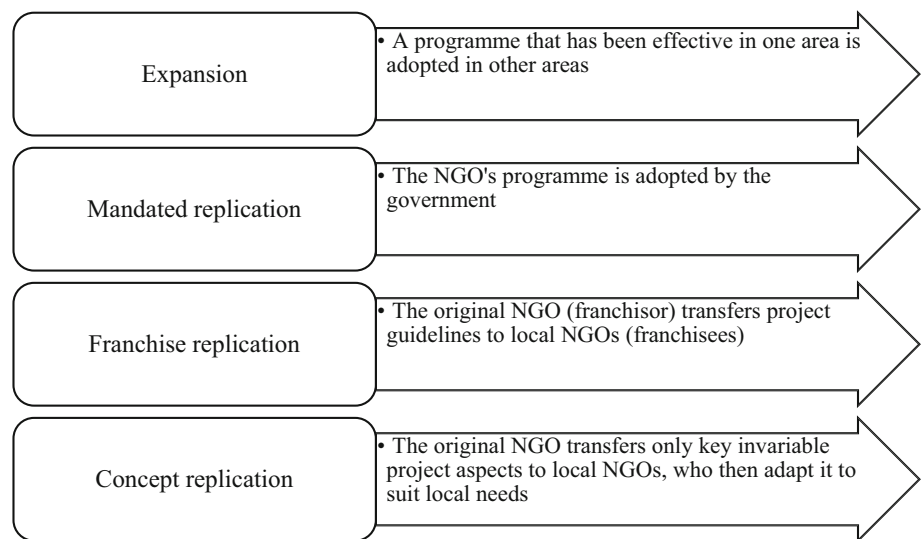


Fig. 2 Types of quantitative scaling-up for educational NGOs. Source: Uvin and Miller (1994) and Jowett and Dyer (2012)



In mandated replication, the NGO develops a product or process that is then adopted by the government. In the context of educational NGOs, this could be, for instance, a new curriculum or pedagogy that is taken up in government schools. Although mandated replication is potentially a powerful way of reaching very high numbers of children, it is not entirely within the NGO’s control, as the government plays the crucial role in deciding whether or not to introduce new initiatives into the state education system. Additionally, the effectiveness of the intervention itself may change once the government gets involved in implementation. For instance, a contract teacher programme implemented at scale in Kenya exhibited a positive treatment effect only when it was implemented by an NGO but not when it was implemented by the government (Bold et al. 2013). Speculating about possible causes, the authors noted resistance from the national teachers’ union when the

programme was implemented at scale, as well as nepotism and local capture in the government-led programme.

In franchise replication, the original NGO acts as a franchisor, providing detailed information on the programme to NGOs working in other geographical areas (franchisees), who implement the programme and agree to comply with certain performance standards. The flow of knowledge and information is typically one way, i.e. from the franchisor to the franchisee. Consistency between sites is prioritised.

In concept replication, the original NGO transfers only the key, invariable aspects of the programme to local NGOs, who then modify and tailor it to fit their local context. The local NGOs take full ownership, and there are no official lines of communication between the parent and local NGO. Unlike in franchise replication, consistency between sites is not prioritised.

Each of these strategies for quantitative scaling-up has its own advantages and disadvantages. Any NGO considering quantitative scaling-up will therefore need to make an informed choice between the alternatives. What factors influence this choice? Before we attempt to answer this question, it is useful to first examine the barriers to effective scaling-up that have been identified in the literature.

Barriers to Effective Scaling-Up

The literature has identified various characteristics of NGOs that make them more effective than the state as a provider of development programmes, at least in a micro context. These include:

- Proximity to the target population, and ability to connect effectively with stakeholders: Edwards and Fowler (2002) point out that, unlike the government, NGOs cannot rely on the strong arm of the law to maintain their influence; their influence and effectiveness stems from the social capital they develop through close links to their stakeholders.
- Flexibility to innovate, and speed of adaptation: NGOs' proximity to local communities gives them a good understanding of the local context and enables them to develop context-appropriate solutions (Cernea 1988). In addition, by nature, NGOs tend to be flatter, more democratic, and more decentralised than private enterprises or the government (Lewis 2003). These characteristics are expected to promote greater flexibility and adaptability, although the empirical evidence on this is rather mixed (Edwards and Hulme 1996; Lewis and Opoku-Mensah 2006).
- Self-motivated staff: People who choose to work in the non-profit sector are less likely to be motivated by financial rewards and more by normative, philanthropic, and prosocial motivations (Benz 2005; Serra et al. 2011).
- Greater focus on development objectives as opposed to internal objectives: This is related to the previous point. NGOs see their primary role as one of creating social impact as value-driven organisations (Lewis 2003), rather than growing in size or reputation, overtaking competitors, providing job security for employees, etc.

However, the same characteristics that serve NGOs well at the micro level may work against them as they attempt to grow at the macro level. For instance, as the NGO expands into new areas, it will have to serve new and unfamiliar communities. The staff may also face language or cultural barriers. These factors may limit the NGO's ability to connect effectively with stakeholders.

As it grows in size, the NGO will probably find it necessary to introduce more formal decision making and

management structures and processes. This may not be easy for organisations that tend to emphasise a “culture of action” and downplay management issues (Lewis 2001). More formalised structures and processes may also impede the NGO's flexibility to innovate and adapt, especially if it leads to the formation of too many layers between the field staff and top management.

More structured and hierarchical management systems may not sit well with staff who are motivated by values of democracy and equity, leading to conflict and loss of staff motivation (Billis and MacKeith 1992). For instance, Dichter (1989, p. 2) stated that “many NGOs still have cultural predispositions to non-hierarchical structures, and are often anti-management”. Financial constraints are a key challenge; the NGO will need adequate finances in order for its scaling-up efforts to be financially sustainable. How these finances are generated, and the conditions attached to financing, is also important; NGOs that become reliant on financing from official aid agencies or national governments may find themselves turning into public service contractors over time (Edwards and Hulme 2002), undermining their potentially transformative role in society (Banks et al. 2015).

Human capital constraints are another key challenge. These can be external, as when the NGO runs into the difficulty of recruiting personnel with the requisite technical and professional expertise as it expands. The scarcity of skilled human capital is an issue in many developing countries, and the difficulty associated with finding high-quality teachers to staff educational NGOs in India has been documented (CII 2013). Internal staff capacity constraints may also emerge if existing NGO staff are not well positioned to take on the new challenges that emerge during scaling-up due to a lack of internal capacity building (Heyns 1996; Billis and MacKeith 1992).

Wils (1995) observes that leadership is often an issue; an NGO's efforts at the micro level are often driven by the leadership of a committed and charismatic leader, but this cannot be easily replicated at the macro level. Sometimes there is also a tendency for such leaders to dominate decision making, be reluctant to relinquish control or consider alternative viewpoints, and fail to adapt to changing circumstances (Hailey and James 2004).

The political and institutional climate is also highly relevant (Desai 2007; DeStefano and Crouch 2006). As already noted in the example of the Kenyan contract teacher programme, the same NGO project that is uncontroversial at small scale may attract political opposition once it is scaled up. Even when there is no direct opposition, NGO educational programmes may flounder if they do not obtain the cooperation and support of stakeholders within the state-led education system (Binswanger and Aiyar 2003). Institutional rules and structures for NGO regulation

also matter. While the lack of effective accountability mechanisms can act as a barrier to NGO scaling-up by eroding public and donor confidence (Gibelman and Gelman 2001), adoption of the “wrong” accountability mechanisms—those that are overly rigid, hierarchical or procedural—can also be counter-productive to organisational effectiveness, and in some cases even to organisational survival (Unerman and O’Dwyer 2006).

Government attitudes towards NGO activities are also clearly relevant to the scaling-up issue. While developing country governments of the 1990s were enthusiastic about external injections of development funding routed through NGOs, attitudes have soured over the last two decades, with nearly forty low- and middle-income countries placing restrictions on overseas financing of domestic NGOs (Dupuy et al. 2016). The reasons for this change of heart likely relate to the role of NGOs in providing information about governmental human rights violations (Davis et al. 2012), aiding and abetting popular protests against the government (Murdie and Bhasin 2011), and facilitating collective action likely to mobilise political opposition (Christensen and Weinstein 2013).

India is one of the countries in which restrictions on overseas financing of NGO activities have increased significantly in recent years. Under the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA), NGOs operating in India require a licence to receive foreign funding. While the Act itself dates from 1976, it has been repeatedly amended and tightened, and more vigorously enforced, in recent years. Since 2014, the licences of about 20,000 NGOs, many of them working on rights-based advocacy, have been cancelled (Bhattacharya 2018). Consequently, foreign funding of NGOs has decreased dramatically, by more than 60% in the single year from 2015–2016 to 2016–2017 (ET Bureau 2017). An open letter to the Prime Minister from a number of NGOs in 2015 alleged that “funds are being frozen, intelligence reports are being selectively released to paint NGOs in poor light, disbursement of funds are being subjected to case-by-case clearance, and their activities are reportedly being placed on “watch lists”” (Outlook 2015). While restrictions on foreign funding have increased, however, a recent law has increased the potential availability of domestic funding. Section 135 of the 2013 Companies Act¹ requires that every company with a net worth of Rs 500 crore (approx. US \$77 m) or more, or turnover of Rs 1000 crore (approx. US \$153 m) or more, or a net profit of Rs 5 crore (approx. US \$770,000) or more, should spend at least 2% of its average net profit (before tax) in the three preceding financial years on CSR annually. This makes India one of the first countries in the world to impose a

legislative mandate for CSR (Dharmapala and Khanna 2018).

From the above discussion, it appears that the barriers to quantitative scaling-up can be divided into two categories: external barriers and internal barriers. While a neat separation between the two should not be overemphasised as there are inevitably inter-dependencies, external barriers relate primarily to the NGO’s relationship with its stakeholders and the outside world, while internal barriers relate to its own internal structure, processes, and culture. The external and internal barriers are summarised in Fig. 3.

Explaining the Choice of Scaling-Up Strategy

To what extent does each of the strategies for quantitative scaling-up have to overcome the external and internal barriers? This is conceptualised in Table 1.

As the table indicates, the different strategies have different requirements in terms of the extent to which the external and internal barriers must be overcome. Mandated replication—where it occurs—allows the NGO intervention to reach a vastly greater number of beneficiaries via the state, without any additional expansion or effort on its own part. In franchise and concept replication, the parent NGO is not required to overcome any external barriers, as the actual operation of the programme is carried out by the franchising/partnering local NGOs. However, these strategies do require the parent NGO to overcome internal barriers to some extent, as it must now carry out some additional functions pertaining to recruiting, training, and monitoring franchisees (in the case of franchise replication), or to dissemination (in the case of concept replication). Finally, both external and internal barriers must be overcome when the NGO pursues the expansion strategy.

Conceptualising the choice of scaling-up strategy in this way indicates that the expansion strategy has the most onerous requirements. Why then would any NGO decide to pursue this strategy? This is one of the questions explored through the case study of ABC, which has selected the expansion strategy to scale up its educational programmes.

Data and Methods

ABC delivers science-based education and experiential learning to school-aged children. It has pursued a rapid and aggressive expansion strategy, expanding its range of operations from two to nineteen states of India over the last decade. Its expansion has also been quite successful so far; the quality of its educational programmes and the rapidity of its expansion have been noted in the practitioner literature, although the sources cannot be cited in order to maintain anonymity.

¹ See <http://www.mca.gov.in/Ministry/pdf/CompaniesAct2013.pdf>.

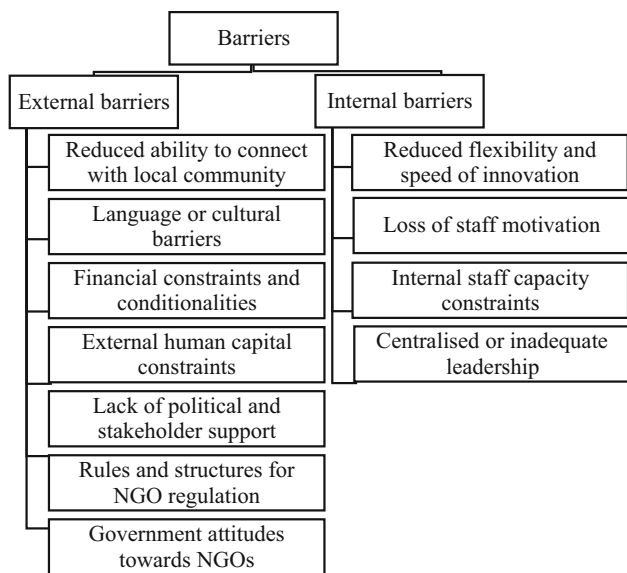


Fig. 3 Barriers to quantitative scaling-up

Table 1 Choice of quantitative scaling-up strategy

Quantitative scaling-up strategy	Has to overcome external barriers?	Has to overcome internal barriers?
Expansion	Yes	Yes
Mandated replication	No	No
Franchise replication	No	Partially
Concept replication	No	Partially

When this research was conducted, ABC had almost 950 employees in total. More than 60% of the employees were instructors and those responsible for developing instructional content, drivers and support staff comprised an additional one-third, while senior managers comprised about 4% of all employees. Additionally, there was a very small layer of top management in the organisation. Internally, the organisation divides its employees (other than drivers and support staff) into three tracks: academic, operations, and programme. The academic track consists of employees who develop instructional content, the operations track consists of instructors, and the programme track consists of coordinators/managers for the various programmes. As instructors form the largest cadre of employees in the NGO, the operations track is the largest of the three tracks. Employees are also divided into three levels, with Level 0 being the most junior level, Level 1 middle management, and Level 2 senior management (with a further small layer of top management). In keeping with a pyramidal management structure, the majority of employees are in Level 0.

A mixed methods approach, combining both qualitative and quantitative techniques, was used to address the following research questions:

1. What factors have influenced ABC’s choice of scaling-up strategy?
2. What barriers has it found to be particularly significant to scaling-up?
3. What strategies has it used to overcome these barriers?

Qualitative Research

The qualitative research was based on semi-structured interviews with nine senior managers from ABC. Collectively, they represented 24% of the senior management in the organisation. Respondents for the qualitative interviews were selected purposively to ensure that (i) all of them had experience of scaling up projects, (ii) at least some of them had worked in other NGOs or the government prior to joining ABC (so that they could draw upon a wider set of experiences), and (iii) at least some of them worked in an area different from their area of origin (so that they had experience of overcoming language or cultural barriers). All the respondents were either responsible for managing a programme nationally or for managing a geographical region. There were six men and three women. Four of the respondents had worked in other NGOs prior to joining ABC, and one had previously worked for the government.

The interviews were conducted in Oct–Nov 2017 using a semi-structured questionnaire. They were conducted on Google Hangouts or Skype and lasted between 30 and 60 min. The interviews explored respondents’ perceptions about the main barriers they encountered in their efforts to scale up, as well as the actions they took to overcome them.

Quantitative Research

The data for the quantitative research were obtained from an online skills inventory survey that ABC administered to its employees in July 2017, in which they were asked to rate themselves on a set of twenty key skills or competencies relevant to their work. The survey asked respondents to rate themselves on a set of twenty key work skills (see Table 3). The ratings were the following:

- 0: This skill is not relevant for my work
- 1: I need to build this skill
- 2: I am working on building this skill
- 3: I have made progress towards building this skill
- 4: I am confident I have this skill

The survey was sent out to just over 600 ABC employees (excluding drivers and support staff). It was voluntary, and a total of 503 employees completed it (response rate of approximately 84%).



The aim of the quantitative research was to examine whether there are any statistically detectable human capital differences between employees in ABC's original and scaled-up operations. The original core of ABC's operations is in two states of South India, while it has more recently scaled up to seventeen other states of India. The survey recorded the location (latitude and longitude) of respondents. This information was used to categorise respondents into two regions: the original/core and scaled-up regions. Table 2 provides descriptive characteristics of the sample.

As Table 2 shows, the overwhelming majority of respondents were from the operations track. Moreover, within the operations track, Level 0 employees accounted for 89% of respondents, while Levels 1 and 2 only accounted for 8% and 3%, respectively. Hence, the subsequent data analysis focuses on Level 0 employees in the operations track only. Of these, 141 employees are from the core region and 227 from the scaled-up region.

Results

The following sections present a thematic narrative of the findings from the qualitative interviews.

Choice of Scaling-Up Strategy

The first key theme that emerged from the qualitative interviews concerned the nature of scaling-up. ABC's programmes have seen a limited extent of mandated replication (i.e. government adoption), with at least one instance of replication of its education model by a state government in southern India. Although respondents recognised that a mandated replication model would enable ABC to reach a vastly higher number of children, and would therefore have greatly welcomed more instances of

it, this seems unlikely to happen at scale in the near future due to low uptake by the government.

While the extent of mandated replication is low, scaling-up strategies such as franchise or concept replication that rely on collaborating or partnering with other NGOs are not used at all. This is a deliberate strategy; one respondent explained that, "*collaboration with NGOs is the most difficult thing to attempt in India ... that collaboration should not be attempted at our level*" (respondent 5, Oct 2017).

Why does ABC perceive collaborative strategies for scaling-up to be so difficult? The reasons appear to be rooted in the presence of quality heterogeneity and information asymmetries in the NGO sector. There has been an explosion in the number of NGOs in India; estimates go as high as 2 million (Bornstein and Sharma 2016) to over 3 million (Guidestar 2009), which means that there is one NGO per 400 to 600 people. Moreover, the sector is effectively unregulated; there is no uniform accounting policy or reporting framework that applies to all NGOs (Guidestar 2009). CII (2013, p. 15) notes that "The vast majority of the 40,000 NGOs who submitted income tax returns in 2010...operate without governance and accountability". Although many NGOs do register with the state so that they can access funding from the central and state governments (Jalali 2008), there is a confusing array of Acts under which they can be registered, so that it is difficult to even accurately estimate total numbers (VANI 2013). While there have been welcome moves towards voluntary self-regulation since the late 1990s (Sidel 2010), the number of NGOs involved in these initiatives is unfortunately miniscule. For instance, the Credibility Alliance, the aim of which is to develop a set of minimum quality norms for the sector, only counts about 450 NGOs among its members. For these reasons, finding reliable and reputable partners to collaborate with is likely to be challenging.

This leaves the expansion strategy, and the bulk of ABC's scaling-up effort has indeed been focused on

Table 2 Descriptive characteristics of skills inventory sample

Characteristic	Average for core region	Average for scaled-up region	Total sample average
Average duration of tenure with ABC	2.4 years	3.4 years	2.8 years
Percentage of women	21.3%	18.1%	20%
Percentage with bachelor's or master's degree	89%	86.4%	87.9%
Percentage in 21–34 age group	84.6%	78.9%	82.2%
<i>Sample composition by track</i>			
Academic track	7.3%	5.1%	6.4%
Operations track	87.1%	75.5%	82.1%
Programme track	1.1%	7.4%	3.8%
Other/missing	4.5%	12%	7.8%

expansion. The scale of this expansion has been rapid in recent years. In the state of Maharashtra, for instance, ABC has grown from 20–30 projects and 60–70 staff members to 80 projects and 175 staff members in the last year and a half alone.

External Barriers to Scaling-Up

Some of the external barriers identified earlier do not appear to have posed significant challenges for ABC as it has expanded. For instance, language and cultural barriers do not seem to be a major issue, as the organisation depends largely on local recruitment when it scales up to a new location. Similarly, forming relationships with the local community is not a huge barrier, as the NGO does most of its work with children, who it reaches via the school system. The fact that education is a relatively uncontroversial subject helps, as does the fact that ABC mainly targets children who are already in school, thereby bypassing contentious issues around the opportunity cost of time of children who are engaged in work inside or outside the home.

However, other external barriers turned out to be very significant. These are described in the following sections.

Lack of Suitable Candidates

The external human capital constraint appears to be the single biggest external barrier to scaling-up. As the NGO sector generally offers significantly lower wages than the private sector, attracting and retaining talent is very challenging. Staff turnover at junior levels is very high; one respondent estimated attrition in his area to be about 55–60%.

Relatedly, the quality of human capital on offer is low. Often, candidates for instructor positions with science or maths degrees do not appear to understand scientific concepts or be able to relate them to day-to-day examples. And many lack the motivation and enthusiasm that the organisation sees as vital to the instructor role.

What strategies does ABC use to mitigate this constraint? The first strategy, employed at selection stage, is to hire preferentially from certain groups. One respondent indicated that he tries to hire rural rather than urban candidates whenever possible, as urban candidates tend to have access to a higher number of outside opportunities. Another mentioned giving preference to candidates with a degree in education, as their choice of degree reveals a real interest in teaching. A third prefers candidates who want to join the government sector in the long run, as the process of applying for and obtaining a government job can take years (while getting a job in the private sector tends to be much faster).

The second strategy, employed post-selection, is to put the new recruits through an intensive immersion programme. New recruits stay with their field teams in guest houses, which allows for 24/7 rather than 9–5 exposure and training. In order to ensure communal living, one respondent makes it a practice to give new recruits jobs in areas different from their home area for the first six months. Even after training ends, frequent team activities such as listening to inspirational talks and videos together, and daily team meetings, help to foster the employees' connection with the organisation. All these actions help to transfer the organisation's core values such as commitment, service orientation, creativity, and innovation to new recruits and ensure that they do not think of their work as "just another job".

The third and final strategy is an organisational preference to recruit for higher levels from within, rather than selecting external candidates. This reassures new recruits that there is a growth path within the organisation and consequently helps to reduce attrition. Additionally, it has an important advantage that the people who are promoted understand the programmes, value, and ethos of the organisation. However, this strategy also gives rise to some problems, which are discussed in the section on internal barriers later.

To summarise, the difficulty of finding suitable employees with the right skills is one of the main challenges that ABC managers perceive to effective scaling-up. In response, the organisation takes measures to carefully screen and train new recruits in order to overcome skills deficits. To the extent that these measures are not entirely successful, we would expect to see a decrease in overall human capital levels as the NGO scales up, putting the effectiveness of the scaled-up programme at risk.

It is therefore useful to examine whether there are any detectable differences in human capital levels of employees in the core and scaled-up locations of the organisation. This is done through analysis of the skills inventory data. Differences in average skill levels are investigated by estimating the following regression for each skill:

$$\text{Skill rating}_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{Core}_i + \beta_2 \text{Tenure}_i + \beta_3 \text{Yrposition}_i + \beta_4 \text{Gender}_i + \beta_5 \text{Education}_i + \varepsilon_i,$$

where Skill rating_i represents respondent i 's self-rating on each of the twenty skills; Core_i is a dummy variable that takes the value 1 if the respondent is located in ABC's core region, and 0 otherwise; Tenure_i represents the respondent's total duration of tenure in ABC; Yrposition_i represents the respondent's duration of tenure in his or her current position; and Gender_i and Education_i represent the respondent's gender and education level.

Table 3 Coefficient and *p* value of Core dummy

Skill	Coefficient (<i>p</i> value)
Planning and organisation of events	0.025 (0.861)
Mentoring my subordinates	0.026 (0.857)
Building trust with my subordinates	– 0.266* (0.067)
Identifying the right talent needed among my subordinates	0.022 (0.885)
Managing performance for my subordinates	0.109 (0.444)
Inspiring and connecting my subordinates to the vision and mission of parent organisation	0.057 (0.686)
Working in a matrix structure	0.142 (0.351)
Fluency in languages spoken by people I need to interact with	– 0.213 (0.130)
Presenting to an audience	– 0.006 (0.965)
Rapidly acquiring new skills and ways of doing things	– 0.288** (0.029)
Delegating responsibility to my subordinates where appropriate	0.002 (0.985)
Networking and collaboration across organisational and departmental boundaries	– 0.001 (0.996)
Knowing in depth at least two school subjects (in order to teach them)	0.014 (0.912)
Creating new instructional content as necessary	– 0.069 (0.598)
Understanding child psychology	0.164 (0.216)
Using computers effectively for my job	0.141 (0.359)
Encouraging and engaging in “out-of-the-box” thinking and innovation	0.023 (0.851)
Building a vision for the project I am responsible for	0.012 (0.917)
Scheduling, meeting deadlines, and coordination	0.004 (0.974)
Communicating with colleagues	0.040 (0.668)

Coefficients for other independent variables are not reported here as the Core dummy is the main variable of interest

*Significant at 10% level, **significant at 5% level

Therefore, the regressions control for differences in employees' work experience and education levels. Gender is also included as a control variable in order to allow for the possibility of systematic differences in self-perceptions by gender (Hargittai and Shafer 2006).

T-statistics and *p* values for the Core dummy from the regressions are reported in Table 3. They indicate that, for the most part, after controlling for differences in education, work experience, and gender, there are very few statistically significant differences in skill levels in the core and scaled-up locations of the organisation (and where differences do exist, they are not in the expected direction). While preliminary, these results suggest that the actions that ABC is taking to overcome perceived human capital deficits as it scales up are effective. More robust evidence on this issue could be generated in future by supplementing self-reported data with more objective measures of work performance and/or manager-reported data and extending the analysis to employees in other management levels and occupational tracks.

Handling Relationships with Donors

According to ABC managers, the CSR law has been instrumental in increasing the financing of ABC's scale-up

efforts via the greater availability of corporate funding. However, it has also created certain issues for the organisation. One of the requirements of the law is that companies should give preference to the local area around their area of operation when disbursing funds.² This is the reason why the organisation has seen rapid growth around the cities of Gurgaon and Pune in particular, as these cities have high concentrations of manufacturing, financial, and IT companies. Unfortunately, the localism clause has also meant that ABC's expansion has tended to be somewhat scattered. Staff struggle with the resultant piecemeal quality of the growth. Having geographically dispersed projects makes it challenging to oversee them properly, and finding the right people in dispersed locations at short notice is difficult. It also makes it difficult for the organisation to harness potential economies of scale.

Another challenge is interference from local CSR coordinators. At the central decision-making level, ABC offers donors the flexibility to choose from a menu of potential projects, but draws a firm line around how the selected project will be implemented. However, even after

² Section 135 of the Companies Act 2013 states that “the company shall give preference to the local area and areas around it where it operates, for spending the amount earmarked for Corporate Social Responsibility activities”.

agreement is achieved at the central level, there is often interference from the donor at the local level of project implementation. For instance, “*Someone will explain to you, how good to have individual data [test scores, percentages] of all children. You then need to take a call, why [ABC] is looking at impact indicators on different parameters, not only the percentage. And then you have to communicate that, see, confidence is also important, curiosity is also important*” (respondent 8, Nov 2017).

The interference is often a result of poor communication within the donor organisation, as one respondent explained: “*And then you figure out that there is a lot of communication gap between the donor’s headquarters and the local office. The reason is, in the local office you do not have someone who is dedicated to CSR. Someone in HR or IR, they have been given an additional job*” (respondent 7, Oct 2017).

Obtaining Political Support

The efficacy of ABC’s work depends heavily on support from government officials and schools. When this works well, as it does in the vicinity of its original location, local government officials recognise and support its efforts. One respondent from the original location pointed out that the local Education Officer directs local government schools to cooperate with ABC programmes, and the organisation relies on government school teachers and principals to provide day-to-day oversight of some of its projects.

However, as the organisation scales up to new areas, these relationships with government officials and schools need to be developed from scratch, which can be challenging. The process of obtaining official permission from government officials prior to project implementation is a slow process, and the consequent delays do not sit well with donors. Moreover, as corporate donor-funded projects are agreed piecemeal, the process of obtaining permissions needs to be repeated for each new set of projects. As one respondent pointed out, although it would be vastly more efficient to sign a MoU with the state government in one go, such a solution is not workable in ABC’s current context of scaling-up.

Why is the process of obtaining permission so slow? Sometimes, it is because ABC does not yet have an established reputation in the area, so may be regarded with scepticism. Sometimes, government officials feel that the programmes they have designed and implemented are superior; ABC has faced this to some extent with the external teacher training programme, as the last 2–3 years have seen a surge in teacher training provided by the government across India. Mostly, it appears to be a result of bureaucratic delays.

Although respondents were aware of the need to network and build relationships with the local education authorities to mitigate this constraint, there was also an awareness that they were not spending enough time on it. One respondent explained, “*We go for one permission, but we are not able to be part of different committees of government, or going and doing regular presentations and sharing reports. That should be done from our side... but we are lagging behind in that*” (respondent 8, Nov 2017).

Internal Barriers to Scaling-Up

ABC is a high-functioning NGO which does not face some of the internal barriers to scaling-up identified in the literature. Staff motivation and leadership quality appear to be high. Several respondents also mentioned that the ability to stay flexible and innovative as the organisation scales up is one of ABC’s key strengths, and credited senior management with creating a culture that allows these attributes to flourish.

How does senior management create such a culture? Answers included: giving staff the space and freedom to experiment; prioritising practicality, action, and implementation over complete precision; and celebrating successes when experiments work and avoiding a culture of assigning blame when they do not. As one respondent explained, “*X [ABC founder] could have told me that unless and until you pilot it and come up with a complete project proposal, don’t do. He never says this. He says, it’s not rocket science we are doing. No hundred percent precision is required*” (respondent 5, Oct 2017).

Internal Staff Capacity Constraints

Internal staff capacity constraints were identified as the main internal barrier to scaling-up. As mentioned above, ABC follows a policy of recruiting to higher roles from within whenever possible. While this creates career progression opportunities for new joiners and motivates them to stay longer with the organisation, it also creates a very steep learning curve for junior staff who are promoted to middle management ranks, as they do not necessarily have the requisite skill set for their new role. Heavy investment is required to build their capacity.

The ability to manage people and relationships appears to be the main challenge. A person promoted from the rank of instructor to area incharge, for instance, is expected to deal with junior staff, government officials, and donors. While the consequent richness and diversity of the work experience is valued by staff, it also poses significant challenges. Another respondent explained the challenges in this way: “*For many of our instructors, it’s a first job. So*

you can understand their confidence, their ability to deal, their skill set" (respondent 7, Oct 2017).

Discussion and Conclusion

This paper examined the case of ABC, an Indian educational NGO that has scaled up its operations rapidly and effectively, in order to understand (i) what factors influenced its choice of scaling-up strategy, (ii) what barriers it found to be particularly significant to scaling-up, and (iii) what strategies it used to overcome these barriers. The primary mode of information gathering was through qualitative interviews with senior managers, but quantitative analysis of employee skills ratings was also used to check for human capital differentials between core and scaled-up locations.

ABC has relied almost exclusively on a strategy of expansion in order to scale up impact. On the one hand, mandated replication is not entirely within its choice set; while it would welcome more uptake of its programmes by the government, it cannot rely on this happening, and the extent of government adoption so far has been low. On the other hand, it has deliberately avoided strategies that rely on collaborating or partnering with other NGOs, preferring instead to replicate itself in new locations.

Any NGO using the expansion strategy can expect to face a number of internal and external barriers to scaling-up, and ABC is no exception. However, its experience shows that many of the internal barriers to scaling-up can be overcome through a combination of good leadership, commitment to a decentralised organisational structure, employee empowerment, and close attention to employee recruitment and training. ABC has, for instance, 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.

Similarly, ABC's experience shows that it is possible to overcome key external barriers to scaling-up. While managers repeatedly mentioned the difficulty of recruiting suitable candidates in new locations, quantitative analysis did not detect significant differences in skill levels between employees in its core and scaled-up areas of operation. This suggests that, although the organisation may struggle with attracting the right talent, it has been effective at providing the right training and development to new recruits in order to overcome possible skills deficits. Other external barriers such as the difficulty of building relationships with key stakeholders like government officials,

school teachers, and corporate donors, however, continue to pose significant challenges for the organisation.

This article produces two insights pertaining to the role of the wider political, legal, and institutional context on NGO scaling-up in developing countries. First, lack of regulation (or self-regulation) in the NGO sector may make it more difficult for NGOs aiming to scale up their operations to utilise the full range of scaling strategies. ABC's choice of expansion as its preferred scaling-up strategy can be viewed as a rational response to the weak regulation of the sector; although the NGO sector in India is very large, low governance and oversight means that it is difficult to make an accurate estimation of quality, which constrains the development of effective collaboration. NGOs aiming to scale up their programmes are unwilling to undermine their own reputation, and the quality of their service, by collaborating with unreliable partners. In the absence of good signals of quality, collaborative scaling-up strategies such as franchise and concept replication become unviable, leaving expansion as the only viable option.

A tendency towards rapid growth in the number of NGOs coupled with little or no governance can be observed in many developing countries, meaning that reports of low-functioning or even fraudulent NGOs are unfortunately quite common (Bryant 2002; Lloyd 2005). The academic literature has already recognised some of the dangers inherent in this state of affairs, e.g. that all NGOs, including legitimate ones, suffer reputational damage from the activities of sham or fraudulent NGOs (Barr et al. 2005; Prakash and Gugerty 2010); that it paves the way for politically motivated attacks on NGOs, using general weaknesses in NGO accountability to silence particular dissenting voices (Edwards 2008); and that NGOs, acting individually, find it difficult and expensive to access specialist services (Moore and Stewart 1998). To this, we can add the risk that scaling-up of effective NGO programmes may be constrained until institutions emerge to detect and maintain quality. While the preferred solution is likely to lie in increased self-regulation rather than government regulation (Moore and Stewart 1998), there are collective action challenges that need to be resolved in order for self-regulation to be widespread and effective (Gugerty 2008). On the plus side, there is a promising trend towards increasing self-regulation in both developed and developing countries (Lloyd 2005; Sidel 2010).

The second insight is that policy interventions to relax some of the contextual constraints to scaling-up can create unintended consequences in the form of new constraints. The specific illustration of this highlighted by the ABC case is that of the CSR law in India. The intention behind the law was to harness corporate sector funds on a mandatory basis for social development, and indications are that this is indeed happening (Dharmapala and Khanna

2018; Gatti et al. 2018), although there is also some evidence of under-spending (KPMG 2017). While this has the potential to relax the financial constraints on NGOs for the scaling-up of their activities, the localism clause of the law has also created some unique challenges. The clause requires corporate donors to provide preferential support to projects near their area of operations, and has previously been subject to sharp criticism on other grounds, with Afsharipour and Rana (2014) suggesting that it may “render CSR activities as simple window-dressing”. With regard to scaling-up, the problem it poses is that the choice of location for scaling-up is increasingly taken out of the NGO’s control, which in turn creates the risk that NGO efforts will not be directed into areas of greatest need. The scattered nature of the expansion also makes it difficult for NGOs to harness economies of scale in financial costs (such as fixed capital and overhead costs) as well as time costs (such as the time taken to secure agreement from government officials, as such agreements can no longer be negotiated en bloc).

This suggests that examining the role of government policy in CSR-driven scaling-up of NGO programmes may be an interesting and fruitful direction for future research. Although India’s decision to mandate specified levels of CSR spending is exceptional, governments in many other countries are increasingly playing a more interventionist role in encouraging, promoting, and regulating CSR (Gond et al. 2011), which in turn is making NGO-business partnerships increasingly common (Jamali and Keshishian 2009). Relating variations in the extent and nature of government intervention to variations in the effectiveness of NGO scaling-up would enable us to draw useful lessons for shaping future government policy on CSR. This article has provided one specific instance of how CSR policy can generate unintended consequences.

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