

We can't scale responsibly on our own

Report on Responsible Scaling for Food Systems Transformation event



On Tuesday February 13th, a NL-CGIAR breakfast meeting on [Scaling Readiness](#): CGIARs novel approach to evidence-based management of innovation and scaling investment portfolios took place. Central to the meeting was CGIAR's Scaling Readiness approach: an evidence-based management of innovation and scaling investment portfolios. This approach was explored with examples from CGIAR and RVO's LAND-at-scale programme. In this report we share with you the key insights from the presentations and the lively discussions during the event.

The need for scaling

Achieving Sustainable Development Goal 2 (SDG2) is still an enormous challenge. There is no single solution that can adequately address the multifaceted issues of food insecurity and malnutrition and the scale of impact needs to increase significantly to meet this challenge. It is clear that to make the required impact we need to work towards impact at scale. In her opening remarks, Wilma van Esch's (head food and nutrition security at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs) underscored that in order to get there we need a collective effort. She explained that demand-driven solutions highlight the need for collaboration to tailor innovations to the diverse knowledge and needs of communities as well as connect to the established Food System Transformation Pathways. The need to move quickly to accelerate impact through scaling innovations was later also stressed by Timmo Gaasbeek: "we do not

have time to take 30 years to have a big impact". In this context, scaling innovations becomes a key priority. But how do we actually make that happen?

Learning about the intricacies of scaling

To get an understanding of scaling from a systems perspective, Cees Leeuwis (professor of collaborative research, communication and change at Wageningen University and Research) shared some of the key elements with the participants. He mentioned that innovations are not a stand-alone concept, arguing for better understanding the interdependencies between innovations and social change in a complex environment. He brought up relevant questions to think about when designing a scaling strategy, such as: "how far is the innovation already embedded in the society?" or "is it only in the mind of the partners that are involved in the creation of the innovation?". Cees also stressed the need for responsible scaling, particularly mentioning the need to ensure the process does not exclude certain groups or harm the environment. Cees further explained that all the above-mentioned elements regarding scaling innovations need the formation of partnerships and coalitions to align partners, perspectives, and visions. The complexity of the science of scaling that Cees put on the table does not exactly make scaling easy, but it does inform organisations to think critically about their scaling strategies.

Can Scaling Readiness offer a solution?

Marc Schut (Senior Innovation Portfolio Management Advisor at CGIAR and Senior Scientist at Wageningen University) provided an introduction to how CGIAR is using the [Scaling Readiness approach](#) to manage its innovation portfolio in an evidence-based way towards impact. Scaling Readiness was developed by CGIAR and Wageningen University. CGIAR has embraced the approach and is mainstreaming it across its Initiative portfolio. On the role CGIAR takes within scaling, he explained that the strength of CGIAR lies within the development of science-based innovations. CGIAR works closely together with government, public and private sector organizations who do the actual scaling of innovations itself. "The private sector, and others, can scale more efficiently and cheaper than CGIAR can", he emphasised. Scaling is very much about partnerships. Another interesting takeaway Marc shared on what they have learned at CGIAR is that: "pilots never fail, pilots never scale". He explained that organisations are not actively reporting on their failures, while failures are an inherent part of innovation processes. He therefore argues that we have to better understand the failures of past scaling interventions and translate those lessons into more impactful scaling approaches moving forward. The Scaling Readiness approach is used to manage the big CGIAR innovation portfolio more efficiently. In the process of moving from 1000 innovations to 100 innovation packages to 10 full scaling strategies, Marc emphasises that a multistakeholder approach is crucial to overcome the bottlenecks the innovation faces. This process is also reflected on [CGIAR Results Dashboard](#), the public interface used for making all the innovation data available. The [Ukama](#)

[Ustawi Scaling Fund](#), focused on supporting innovation scaling to transform agrifood systems in East and Southern Africa, is one of the examples shared on how CGIAR implements this approach with partners.

So how does this work in practice?

The practical implementation of the Scaling Readiness approach was further demonstrated through the experience of a pilot in RVO's [LAND-at-scale](#) programme. This is a land governance support programme for developing countries which aims to contribute to fair and just tenure security, access to land and natural resources for all. Lisette Meij, Program Advisor LAND-at-scale at RVO, explained that the systems approach to scaling resonated with RVO, as scaling within the LAND-at-scale program is notably also more than 'simply increasing the numbers'. To reach true scale and ensure sustainability of interventions, the whole food system and the enabling environment around it must be taken into consideration. The objective of RVO to pilot the Scaling Readiness approach in this programme was to increase the effectiveness and efficiency by more systematically reassessing bottlenecks and opportunities to scale the programme's interventions. Although LAND-at-scale is not only about technical innovations, but also seeks policy and social changes for example, she still saw a benefit from using CGIAR's approach. She elaborated about the pilot they organised for Scaling Readiness in Burundi. They organised a scaling packaging workshop with local stakeholders and the national and local government representatives. The participants thought the experience was positive, though there are elements to learn from and take forward to adapt the Scaling Readiness approach around land governance interventions. Positive take-aways were how this localised approach not only helps surface bottlenecks and opportunities quickly and efficiently, but it also facilitates collective buy-in for the approach, and helps to (re-)align with ongoing processes and what other stakeholders are doing. The pilot in Burundi also showed some elements where it was challenging to adapt the Scaling Readiness approach as used by CGIAR on the RVO programme. For example, identifying the core innovation amongst a broad package of intervention strategy was challenging. Lisette mentioned that there is a need to further explore how the Scaling Readiness approach translates into governance-type interventions. With these lessons in mind, RVO is now considering using the Scaling Readiness approach as a monitoring tool in project implementation in the LAND-at-scale program, and possibly other programs as well. This could help ensure the buy-in from local stakeholders is not gathered once at the start of a project, but is a continuous process, and it also helps systematically monitor an ever-changing context, and facilitate adaptive programming this way.

What do we need to do next?

In the final part of the event, participants from organisations such as Cordaid, KIT, Mercy Corps and Agritererra shared their reflections on the insights shared and where they still have space to learn with

each other to improve scaling approaches. Here we share three key themes that we found central to the discussion:

1. Working in a changing enabling environment

Aligning with ongoing processes and partners, especially the intended users of the innovation, as well as dealing with power dynamics, was mentioned frequently in the discussion as something that still raises a lot of questions. It was shared that it should be avoided to think in terms of only one solution and that the scaling readiness approach is exactly there to strategically design a process in which the key bottlenecks to reach scale come to the surface by working with partners who can bring such insights to the table. Marc shared that it is important for each bottleneck to understand who in a partnership could be working on it to move the scaling process forward in a responsible way.

2. Matching timelines

Concerns were shared about the fact that taking into account the enabling environment and power dynamics takes time and does not happen overnight. In addition, the discussion highlighted that the timeline of investment for innovations to make impact often does not align with the process of agricultural research. Marc emphasised that the Scaling Readiness approach can show that you are moving forward on the right path but that this approach can also help in deciding what should stop. One of the participants mentioned it as part of building your [innovation] story. Subsequently, it was also reflected upon that the scaling strategy in itself benefits from a systematic approach and long-term engagement that sets its ambitions from the start.

3. The aspect of failure

Lastly, the discussion touched upon the aspect of failure and learning. Questions were asked about where to put the threshold to call something a failure, who decided if something has failed and how we can also strategically bring together success stories to improve shared learning. Mark Schut mentioned the learning aspect is very much about becoming good at failing forward. Failing is how you learn and “the road seems to be paved with a lot of failed pilot projects”. Cees added that this does not necessarily reflect a linear path, but that scaling readiness moves in circles where you continuously adapt with your partners.

What comes next?

The Scaling Readiness event highlights the necessity of collaboration for scaling agricultural innovations effectively. By adopting the Scaling Readiness approach, we can strategically overcome scaling challenges, ensuring our efforts contribute significantly to sustainable food system transformation. Using adaptable approaches and embracing failure as a stepping stone and learning

opportunity are crucial in this journey. We welcome all stakeholders to engage with the Scaling Readiness approach and explore further resources to enhance our collective impact on global food systems and make it truly transformational.

Learn from the insights shared by three of the participants of the event

- [Boudy van Schagen, KIT Royal Tropical Institute](#)
- [Jinke van Dam, Tropenbos International](#)
- [Loet Rummenie, Startlife](#)

Suggested reading

- <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0308521X19314477>
- <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1057/s41287-023-00586-w>
- <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0308521X24000167>