

Stakeholder Ecosystems: Unlocking Sustainable Impact at Scale

By Jasmine Lam, Nathaniel Foote, Andrew Bollington, James Radner, and the Saving Brains Platform Team
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This is an introduction to the Saving Brains Learning Platform’s Stakeholder Ecosystem workshop, a forum for developing and sharing innovators’ insights and experiences on working with stakeholders to build the impact, reach and sustainability of their programs. Below we briefly describe a series of concepts that innovators have found useful in this work: “win-win-win” stakeholder engagement; valuing socially undervalued stakeholders; identifying “pivotal” stakeholders; and making success visible. You can find additional resources related to this material (and referenced at various points below) here:

- **Thematic Brief on Stakeholders: Eco-system Builders:**
<https://www.savingbrainslearning.com/scaling-eco-system-builders>
- **Case Study: Community Empowerment Lab:**
<https://www.savingbrainslearning.com/stakeholders-cel>
- **Case Study: Madrasati Initiative:**
<https://www.savingbrainslearning.com/stakeholders-madrasati>

Introduction: Successful social innovations involve complex networks of stakeholders who have an important role to play in realizing a program’s potential for sustainable impact at scale. To identify ways to energize stakeholders for this purpose, innovators have found it helpful to review stakeholders’ motivations and to consider their relationships with one another from a whole-system perspective.

Usually, the social innovators we work with already bring a strong intuitive sense about engaging stakeholders in their communities. With in-depth knowledge about the evolving perspectives, motivations and priorities of those stakeholders, innovators at the community level can align relevant actors in a way that both supports successful delivery of the innovation – assuring benefits for families served – and builds engagement and commitment all round – enhancing sustainability for the long term. However, as an innovation scales it generally moves away from the innovator’s sphere of familiarity. As a result, there is a risk that the intimate knowledge and responsive engagement of stakeholders that supported the original community work cannot be sustained across new and larger-scale contexts, with resulting reductions in program effectiveness. We work with innovators to address this risk by

making explicit and systematic what they already do implicitly and intuitively in smaller settings for application in wider contexts.

Through the Saving Brains Learning Platform, we have collaborated with a wide variety of innovators seeking to achieve sustainable impact at scale in child development work, generally in low- and middle-income countries. Along the way, we have heard repeatedly from innovators that they see stakeholders as vital to this effort. In 2020 we developed a thematic brief on stakeholder engagement, *Eco-system Builders*, that draws on innovators' reported experiences and synthesizes their reflections by offering five perspectives on stakeholder relationships:

- seeing the ecosystem from the eyes of others;
- appreciating that the innovation is usually not at the centre of the ecosystem;
- responding to the true motivation of stakeholders;
- finding approaches that simultaneously benefit many stakeholders to the point where they are eager for more engagement (“win-win-win”); and
- engaging socially undervalued stakeholders in ways that enhance dignity, agency, and ambition.

Since the release of the thematic brief, the Learning Platform has deepened our stakeholder engagement work with innovators, including a new, dedicated workshop on this topic. Below, we would like to share additional highlights of what we have learned from innovators on ways to take an explicit, structured approach with stakeholders on the path to sustainable impact at scale.

What does “Win-Win-Win” Mean? We call an activity, relationship or system *win-win-win* if everyone experiences benefits, in a way that people are eager to engage more. In a win-win-win system, benefits multiply as the innovation scales, and more and more stakeholders are motivated to put energy into making the innovation work.

To take a structured approach to cultivating a win-win-win stakeholder system, innovators can reflect on what motivates stakeholders, examine how existing relationships among stakeholders fit together in ways that already create, or could create, benefits for them, and look for specific strategies to build such benefits and energize the whole system. We have found the concepts outlined below to be helpful for identifying such strategies:

- a) “Win-Win-Win” at the Unit and Scaling Level
- b) Socially Undervalued Stakeholders
- c) Pivotal Stakeholders

d) Making Dignity and Success Visible

a) “Win-Win-Win” at the Unit and Scaling Level: Innovators have found it valuable to look for win-win-win opportunities at two levels: 1) the unit level, and 2) the scaling level. The *unit* level involves a locality where an innovation is being implemented. Stakeholders at the unit level are closest to the individual beneficiaries and can most directly improve the quality of the innovation. Those stakeholders – e.g., those involved with a local school, or a community health clinic – themselves form a small system which can be examined for win-win-win potential. If win-win-win benefits are achieved at the unit level, the result can be more demand for the innovation, more support, and greater impact.

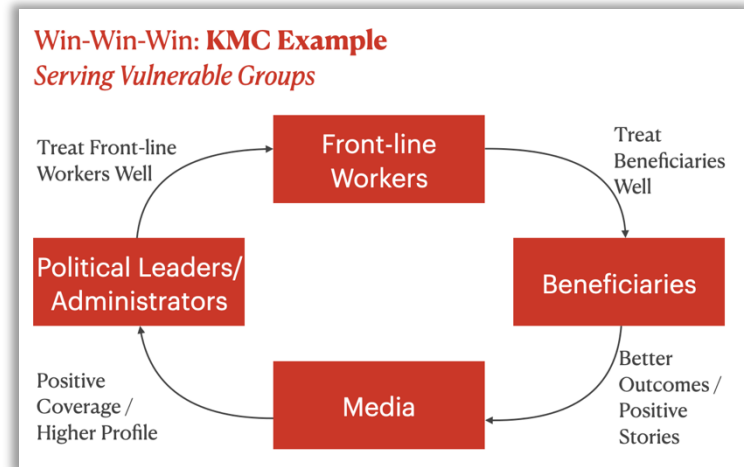
The *scaling* level comprises a wider system involving, for example, national institutions supporting or overseeing unit level operations across a country. The scaling level often includes stakeholders who make major decisions on resource allocation, so win-win-win benefits at this level that can dramatically affect the innovation’s reach and sustainability.

While it is useful to consider each of the unit and scaling levels in turn, they can also interact in mutually reinforcing ways. If the innovation is thriving at the unit level, increases in demand and impact there can sway policymakers at the scaling level; conversely, national commitment to large-scale implementation can make available new resources and new opportunities to use evidence to discover better strategies, leading to improved impact at the unit level.

b) Socially Undervalued Stakeholders: Innovators we have engaged with nearly always serve people from vulnerated, marginalized, and traditionally undervalued groups in society. At the core of the work is the dignity of those people. Innovators have observed that there is special value in broadening this emphasis on human dignity to include not only end beneficiaries of the project (clients and their families), but also other “socially undervalued stakeholders,” such as front-line service providers and community members. Engaging with each of them (not only the end beneficiary) with dignity and respect is not only an essential aspect of the work itself; it can also be a pathway to powerful benefits across the stakeholder system. As each stakeholder feels more respected and recognized, they are motivated to engage further, and to treat others with similar respect. This can in turn attract other stakeholders who want to be part of the inspiring work that is being done, and the system builds sustainable impact.

We saw this exemplified in the work of the Community Empowerment Lab (CEL) to scale Kangaroo Mother Care (KMC) for newborns across public hospitals in Uttar Pradesh, India. (For more details about how CEL approached their stakeholder ecosystem, please read their in-depth case study here: <https://www.savingbrainslearning.com/stakeholders-cel>). At the

core of KMC is respect: respect for mothers, their babies, and their families, who are traditionally marginalized; and respect for those who serve them on the front line, such as nurses, who are too often under-recognized as well. CEL flipped the traditional paradigm by ensuring that mothers are treated like VIPs in hospitals, in a dedicated “KMC Lounge.” They developed



interactive, respectful support systems for the nurses who served those mothers (in the same special lounges), and assured that their contributions were recognized by their hospitals and communities. CEL documented stories of success and made them available to media outlets in an environment of shared credit. In the resulting press reports, all stakeholders appeared in a good light, including political leaders and hospital administrators who had helped make the program happen. With boosts like these, CEL has seen increasing enthusiasm for KMC at both the unit (hospital) and scaling (state) levels.

c) Pivotal Stakeholders: As innovators analyzed their stakeholder ecosystems, they often identified a stakeholder group that is under-engaged, but that could become a key link for successful spread. We call these *pivotal* stakeholders for the innovation’s scaling strategy. For example, within a large organization - such as a Ministry - it is often mid-level or regional staff members who, if suitably engaged, can productively connect with both the front line and the senior decision-making levels in support of a program. If innovators can in turn work effectively with those mid-level staff members, win-win-win benefits can result. We have found that viewing an organization or institution not as a single entity, but rather as consisting of people who interact based on their distinctive motivations and perspectives, can reveal opportunities for engagement with pivotal stakeholders.

The strategy adopted by the Madrasati Initiative illustrates this idea. (For more details about how Madrasati approached their stakeholder ecosystem, please read their in-depth case study here: <https://www.savingbrainslearning.com/stakeholders-madrasati>). Their innovation, the Masahati Students’ Clubs program, works with the public schools in Jordan to develop

extracurricular clubs for teachers and students to explore a wide range of mutual interests. As the Madrasati team analyzed the dynamics of the national public school system in Jordan, they realized that the Ministry of Education’s Field Directorates could serve as pivotal stakeholders. Each of the 42 Field Directorates is directly involved with a group of schools where the Masahati Students’ Clubs may operate. The Field Directorates in turn report on school results to central staff at the Ministry of Education, where relevant national decisions are made. The Ministry is a large institution, inherently challenging for a relatively small organization like Madrasati to engage. The Madrasati team realized that they could work directly with the Field Directorates by collaborating on data, monitoring and evaluation, which play a central role in the Field Directorates’ work. Madrasati is hoping one outcome of this collaboration will be recognition of their program as a school improvement initiative, and Ministry support for scale-up.

d) Making Dignity and Success Visible: Finally, we observed that innovators saw value in making visible the benefits their stakeholders were collectively creating. For example, the CEL team designed a physical space in the hospital—the KMC lounges—where mothers can practice KMC alongside nurses in a room that’s clean comfortable and specially painted and furnished. People entering the room – or seeing a photograph – immediately grasp the respect and dignity that lie at the heart of the KMC program. Before KMC, mothers wanted to leave the hospital straightaway; now, mothers want to stay. The value of the lounges is intuitive to all stakeholders, and the idea is spreading: the Uttar Pradesh Ministry of Health has funded expanded installation of KMC lounges in hospitals across the state.

The Madrasati team is using collaboration around data as a visible foundation for engagement. They are co-developing a data dashboard with local schools; they plan to work with Field Directorates and central Ministry administrative units to make relevant data more accessible to decision makers there. Madrasati can thus provide an important service to school leaders and policymakers and build valuable relationships based on a core value of their organization – the importance of evidence. Meanwhile, the collaborative work with data can enable stakeholders to improve school programming while making successes clear to all.

Conclusion: While effective stakeholder engagement is already intuitive to experienced innovators, they can benefit from taking an analytical approach to their stakeholder systems, especially as they scale up their work. When all stakeholders see benefit from an innovation, and when people then want to engage more, a “win-win-win” dynamic can emerge that supports both improved impact at the local level and sustainable scaling across larger populations.

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We extend a thank you to the **Community Empowerment Lab** and the **Madrasati Initiative** for sharing their stories.



- For more information about the Community Empowerment Lab, please visit their website:

<https://www.community.org.in/>



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- For more information about the Madrasati Initiative, please visit their website: <https://www.madrasati.jo/>