

HOW TO COLLABORATE FOR IMPACT

A practical guide to building
and managing successful
public-private partnerships

Insights from 10+ years of TRANSFORM

A cross-sector collaboration helping impact enterprises
to test and scale new market-based solutions



10+ Years



**UK International
Development**

Partnership | Progress | Prosperity



This playbook captures our experience across over a decade of collaboration

It aims to help innovation leads and programme managers within various organisations – governments, corporates, non-profits, enterprise support bodies and research institutes – to create and manage successful public-private partnerships that scale social innovation.

TRANSFORM is an impact accelerator led by **Unilever**, the **UK Government's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO)** and **EY**. Together, we tested and scaled market-based solutions that build inclusive, sustainable economies, empower marginalised communities and drive climate-resilient growth.

TRANSFORM ran as a joint initiative from 2015 to 2026.

Navigating this playbook:

Click on the tabs at the top of each page to take you to the different chapters within this playbook.



"The TRANSFORM programme has been truly transformative for us. Not only did they believe in us as an early-stage enterprise, they also contributed to us developing the world's first recycled shampoo bottle from shampoo sachets. We will never forget this!"

Anish Malpani, Founder of WITHOUT® (India)

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Introducing TRANSFORM

TRANSFORM: 10+ years of cross-sector collaboration for positive impact. [Page 10](#)

1. Make the case for innovative, multi-stakeholder partnerships

To meet today's environmental and social challenges, we need radical collaboration at speed and scale. Partnering across sectors and silos can drive social innovation that in turn helps change systems, benefiting everyone.

Get equipped with the data and the business case to get your stakeholders – internal and external – on board. [Page 12](#)

▼ LAYING THE GROUNDWORK

2. Create the foundations of a strong partnership

Collaboration isn't rocket science, but it does take time, planning and attention. From identifying the right partners, to defining a common vision, to measuring progress, we've distilled eight partnership principles that stand the test of time.

Find your new teammates, prepare for a long game – then set up for success. [Page 21](#)

3. Understand what support entrepreneurs need and define your selection criteria

Impact entrepreneurs are solving the world's biggest problems – but they often need support to fulfil their potential. The good news: thoughtful partnerships can help with capital, expertise, networks and more. But which enterprises align with your partnership goals, and which ones would most benefit from your support?

Check that your organisation is well-placed to support impact enterprises and decide which ones to work with. [Page 34](#)

▼ BUILDING YOUR PORTFOLIO

4. Source with care: activate local leadership

Consider how to make your sourcing and selection as inclusive as possible. For global programmes, that's likely to involve giving meaningful roles and responsibilities to in-country stakeholders.

Get clear on the benefits of local leadership, and follow our step-by-step guide to shifting from global to local ownership. [Page 46](#)

5. Provide enterprises with hands-on business support

Providing targeted business support such as coaching and mentoring, while engaging with enterprises as true partners, brings concrete benefits for both parties. Done well, it's a springboard for enterprise growth and true scaling of solutions.

Deploy each partner's core skills to provide holistic support, for benefits that go two ways. [Page 55](#)

6. Bring enterprises into supply chains

Securing a major buyer can be transformational for an impact enterprise – and it's good for the buyer too. But there are lots of barriers. How can partnerships overcome these?

Start buying from impact enterprises – and help them to get ready for other buyers. [Page 67](#)

▼ IMPROVING AND EVOLVING

7. Proactively manage your portfolio

Being proactive ensures the partnership responds as the context shifts – and helps you to achieve the most impact you can.

Stay relevant and raise the bar: a checklist for proactive partnerships. [Page 78](#)

8. Share lessons learned

Share what's working well and why. Amplify your impact with powerful storytelling. And find ways to pass on lessons learned – during the partnership, and when it comes to an end.

Prepare to share key insights and consider key communications decisions for your partnership. [Page 88](#)



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF INSIGHTS

Read this chapter for a summary of everything we've covered in the playbook and for tips on next steps.



Summary of insights

True to its name, TRANSFORM has been genuinely transformative for the core partners – Unilever, the UK Government’s Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) and EY. It has also changed lives across Africa and Asia: we are proud to have reached over 21 million people. Below is a summary of insights gleaned across our 10+ years of collaboration.

1 The case for innovative, multi-stakeholder partnerships

As drivers of innovation, impact enterprises are key players. Partners who support these enterprises to thrive are strengthening a critical component of the future economy, while investing in their own long-term success. Governments, NGOs and corporates are each uniquely placed to contribute to partnerships that invest in impact enterprises – but they each stand to gain, too. Reaching new populations, testing innovations, meeting organisational targets, gaining credibility and standing out from competitors are just some of the benefits we have seen.

Organisations today are responding to tighter budgets, greater scrutiny, changing regulations, and technology that is radically changing how we live and work. Planning for the future has become planning for uncertainty. In this context, public-private partnerships offer a proven way to pool risk and resources, achieve more with less, and align purpose with performance.

2

How to create the foundations of a strong partnership

Collaboration takes significant planning and attention. We recommend eight tried-and-tested partnership principles:

1. Check your own organisation has the resource and capacity to commit to a partnership – and that you've got senior-level buy-in.
2. Identify the right partners: look for aligned values, natural teammates and complementary "give and get". Use windows of opportunity to kickstart a new initiative.
3. Define a common purpose that's both broad and specific enough to be durable.
4. Start small. Keep things manageable as you find your feet, allowing for growth later.
5. Create the right governance, structures and ways of working. This can take many months, but it's worth getting it right: set up your core team, define your theory of change and agree on how decisions will be made.
6. Stick to your purpose, but seek new partners where they can fill gaps and bring complementary skills and resources.

7. Understand and manage the risks – these will vary greatly depending on the partnership. Clarify each partner's appetite for risk and any red lines.

8. Set up systems to measure what's working. Form a dedicated impact measurement and management team, whether that's in-house or outsourced. Stay flexible: adapt targets if they're no longer relevant.

"In our experience, the partnerships that last are built to move the needle on a clearly defined shared challenge, one that both partners recognise they can address better together. Above all, they are deeply human. They invest in trust early, are grounded in mutual respect, and are driven by genuine co-creation of the objective, strategy and definition of success. They create space for candour, clarity and hard conversations, and they build relationships beyond a single champion on either side. They balance long-term outcomes with mutual value, and they build in the flexibility to adjust as context, priorities and people change."

**Zahid Torres-Rahman, Co-founder and CEO,
Business Fights Poverty**



3

Understand enterprise needs and define your selection criteria

Impact enterprises face some common challenges. That's because they're not only creating new products or services – in many cases, they are also creating entirely new markets, systems and consumer behaviours. Partners can help them by providing patient capital, offering expertise, opening up their networks, enabling innovation and building the wider ecosystem. And it's when all these things are provided in tandem – and at the right stage of an enterprise' growth – that the support really makes a difference, which is why partnerships are so powerful in helping impact enterprises to scale.

As partners you'll need to agree what's inside and outside of scope, and then set out your selection criteria. Some concepts (like additionality or innovation) may need to be spelled out explicitly so that everyone is on the same page.

4

Activate local leadership in sourcing and selection

When people closer to the enterprises themselves take ownership, it allows for deeper contextual understanding, leading to better selection decisions and stronger candidates, including those who may have been overlooked by more distant selection panels. Transferring ownership might mean handing over key responsibilities from global headquarters to in-country teams or partners – a process TRANSFORM undertook in 2023. This shift isn't always straightforward, but we found that it resulted in different selection decisions and stronger, more lasting relationships between the funders and the enterprises.

For those following a similar process, we recommend the following eight steps:

1. Define the mandate, scope and objectives.
2. Engage in-country colleagues.
3. Identify additional partners where needed, for example to help with enterprise sourcing, sector expertise or programme coordination.
4. Locally source applications, balancing efficiency with inclusion.

5. Locally shortlist grantees, again balancing efficiency and inclusion.
6. Invite and assess pitches, either online or in person, and select.
7. Conduct due diligence and finalise contracts – with extra consideration for small and early-stage enterprises.
8. Maintain relationships with funded enterprises.





5

Pair flexible funding with hands-on business support

Money matters, but it needs to be the right kind. Provide patient, flexible capital where possible, define the optimum grant size for the enterprises you support, and consider reinvesting in successful former grantees. Design a business support package that emphasises a partnership of equals – for example, treating pro-bono offers as seriously as any paid-for service, and facilitating peer learning alongside workshops provided by outside experts. Tap into the benefits of this support for your own organisation, too: engage your employees as coaches or mentors to strengthen professional development and boost employee engagement, for example.

Stay focused on the ultimate goal of your partnership. If it's about equipping your impact enterprises for growth and scale, set them up for success by providing additional scaling and fundraising support and deploying the partners' networks and convening power.

6

Bring enterprises into partners' value chains

Seeking out suppliers that prioritise people and planet alongside profit is a powerful way to demonstrate your values, while reducing risks and increasing your positive impact without additional cost. For an impact enterprise, securing a major buyer is one of the most powerful ways to develop an innovation and expand its reach. But it's often difficult for them to start selling to a large corporate or public body. Public-private partnerships can break the deadlock by providing some of the upfront financing to enterprises, helping them to understand what large organisations expect, and connecting them to the right buyers. Look at how your partnership can support value chain integration at each stage of your work – from programme design, to enterprise selection, to project phase and beyond.

Even with dedicated support, integrating enterprises into the value chains of a large organisation is not easy. But early explorations and discussions can still provide valuable experience: enterprises get a better sense of quality, volume and pricing expectations, and become better positioned to work with large buyers in the future.

7 Proactively manage your portfolio

Context changes quickly and what worked last year might not be fit for purpose today. How you manage your portfolio needs to reflect that.

A proactive approach might involve seeking a greater mix of business models, geographies and approaches so that you can tap into innovation from new places. It might involve responding to external events. Sometimes it's about pre-empting the evolving priorities of the core partner organisations.

We recommend:

1. Building in flexibility from the outset
2. Regularly reviewing your partnership's purpose, priorities and governance
3. Using your portfolio to respond to windows of opportunity
4. Continuing to learn and pursue best practice.

8 Share lessons learned

One simple way to maximise the impact of your work is to make sure your peers (and competitors!) know about it. Setting out what you've done can inspire others to replicate your success and build on it, and ensure they learn from what didn't work.

It's tempting to delay thinking about communication until your programme is well under way. But making some key decisions early on will make things much smoother – and allow you to capitalise on timely opportunities to spread the word. Untangle disagreements, assign responsibilities, and create a clear plan. Use storytelling principles to engage new audiences and bring abstract concepts to life. Don't forget about internal communication across each of the partner organisations.

Finally, plan in good time for the natural close of your collaboration: make sure any research and insight you've produced doesn't disappear when the funding stops.

How to get started

We hope this playbook helps you to learn from the TRANSFORM experience, and encourages you to replicate and build on our model.

For questions or further information about TRANSFORM, please contact EY Ripples Markets eyripplesmarkets@ey.com.

If you do use lessons from this playbook and TRANSFORM's model, we would appreciate acknowledgement. We recommend the following wording:

This work draws on insights from TRANSFORM, a unique joint initiative between Unilever, the UK's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, and EY. Learn more here: [TRANSFORM Playbook \(linked\)](#).

TRANSFORM: 10+ years of cross-sector collaboration for positive impact

Our founding principle:

For-purpose and for-profit, market-driven impact solutions are an essential tool to build a fairer and more resilient world.

Our core partners:

Unilever – Brings expertise in marketing, distribution and behaviour change, the opportunity to test innovations in their value chain and flexible funding.

UK Government's Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO) – Brings flexible grant funding and vast expertise in international development.

EY – Brings technical experience and networks in innovation, business advisory and entrepreneurship scaling.

Our six focus areas:



Reduce **plastic waste** through recycling & refill



Protect & regenerate **nature**



Improve **water, sanitation & hygiene**



Improve **health** through digital solutions



Support **livelihoods** for farmers & retailers



Ensure **decent work** for young people & the informal sector

"TRANSFORM feels special in that it's given us good insights on how to genuinely spark transformational change. We've learned a lot about that together."

David Woolnough, Deputy Director Research, Tech & Innovation, FCDO

"TRANSFORM shows what becomes possible when we combine public and private sector strengths to support market-driven solutions. By backing impact entrepreneurs with real capital, real expertise and real routes to scale, collaborations like this can change systems and shape a better future for all."

Gillian Hinde, EY Global Corporate Responsibility Leader

92,000+

tonnes of waste
diverted from landfill
(since 2022)



£88.3m

provided in grant
funding and
business support



7,000+

direct jobs created
through supported
enterprises (since 2022)



160+

enterprise and research
projects supported in
19 countries

**10+
Years**
2015-2026

750+

employees from EY
and Unilever shared
their skills



Over
£66.4m

in further investment
secured



**3 core
organisations
and over £15m**

deployed through
additional partners
since 2016, including
SAP, Gates Foundation,
Microsoft and Vodafone



Over
21m

lives reached:
business owners, workers,
customers and people
in the wider community

1

MAKE THE CASE FOR INNOVATIVE, MULTI-STAKEHOLDER PARTNERSHIPS

This chapter is for you if you're excited about the potential of a public-private partnership for social innovation, but you need to bring others – including internal and external stakeholders – on board.



Planning for uncertainty

The past decade has brought turmoil in many forms: severe climate-related disasters, conflict, the Covid-19 pandemic, supply chain disruptions, unprecedented inflation and rising populism.

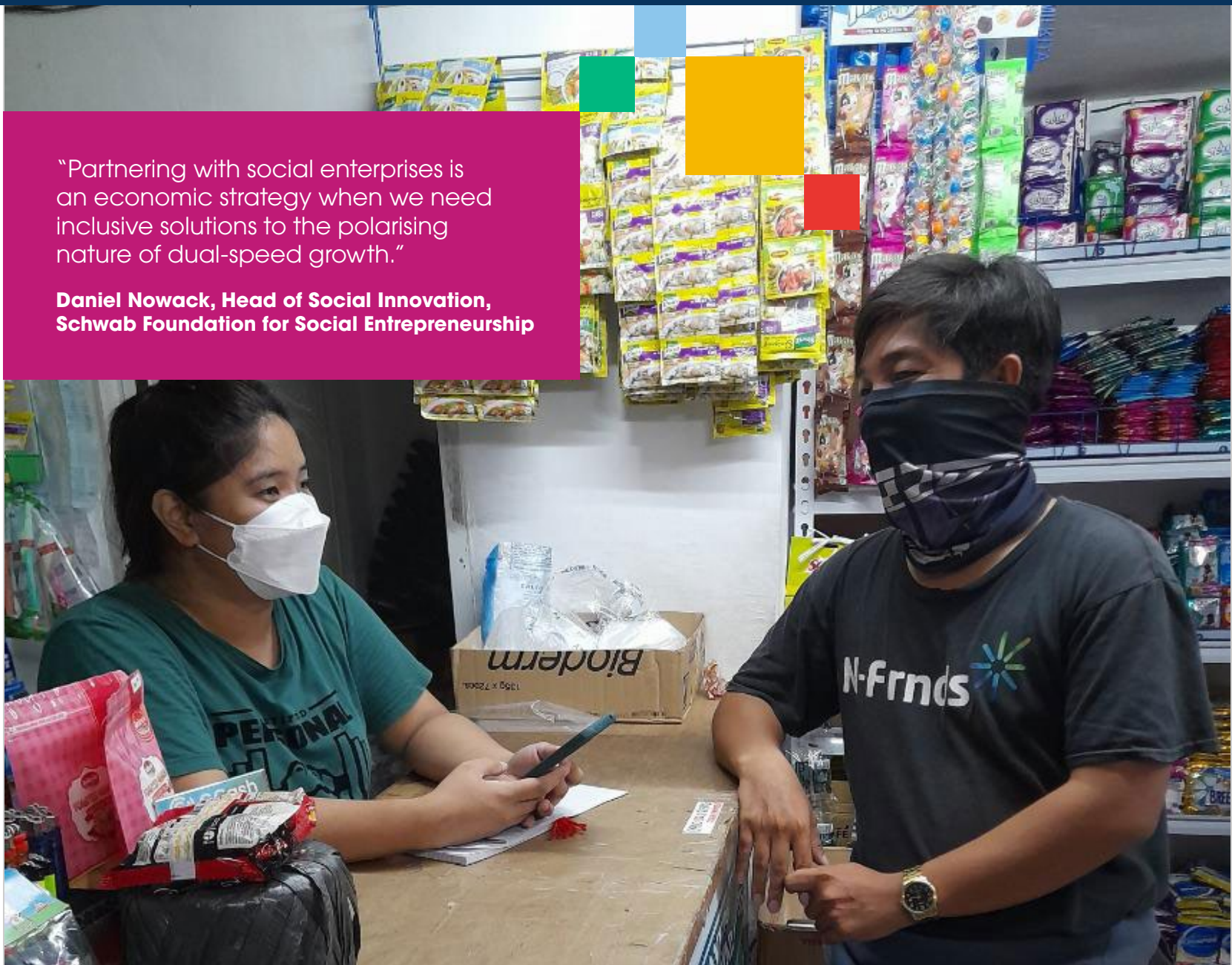
These forces have reshaped how organisations of all kinds operate – whether they are governments, private sector firms, or non-governmental organisations.

We're dealing with tighter budgets, greater scrutiny, changing regulations, and technology that is transforming everything. Governments are expected to deliver more with fewer resources. Corporates need to innovate, de-risk supply chains, and meet stringent sustainability rules while satisfying shareholders and customers. NGOs and intermediaries compete for scarce funding and in some cases fight for their survival, even as the need for their work grows. Planning for the future, for all of us, has become planning for uncertainty.

Meanwhile, many of the issues we're all grappling with – from the effects of climate change to economic instability – cut across national and institutional boundaries. No single entity controls all the levers needed to address them. **How do we respond?**

"Partnering with social enterprises is an economic strategy when we need inclusive solutions to the polarising nature of dual-speed growth."

**Daniel Nowack, Head of Social Innovation,
Schwab Foundation for Social Entrepreneurship**



Public-private partnerships: a proven way to align purpose with performance

Well-designed public-private partnerships bring the mix of tools needed to address complex social and environmental problems. Partners combine their assets – capital, policy influence, market access, technical expertise, local insight and delivery capability – to solve problems, but also to benefit themselves.

Partnerships allow organisations to share risk, reduce the cost of experimentation, and react to new opportunities. They can create structured ways to test new business models, technologies or delivery approaches, without exposing the core organisations to disproportionate financial or reputational risk.

Many leaders still articulate the moral responsibility to invest in emerging markets and underserved communities. That remains relevant. But alongside, the business case for partnership is increasingly clear: resource-efficiency, stronger performance and greater ability to succeed in complex, high-risk environments.

When commercial firms work alongside public bodies, start-ups and civil society organisations, they gain insight into emerging regulation, access to new markets, and exposure to breakthrough ideas. Public sector and non-governmental organisations, meanwhile, can draw on the creativity and resources of their private sector partners.

Social innovation

is the process of developing and deploying effective solutions to challenging and often systemic social and environmental issues in support of social progress, as defined by the Center for Social Innovation, Stanford Business School.

Impact enterprises

are organisations that use business models to achieve social and/or environmental impact, often while generating profit. Many are for-profit, but the term includes a range of organisational forms. Given the focus of TRANSFORM on market-based solutions, we define an impact enterprise as a for-profit organisation that focuses on a social and/or environmental purpose. Others use the term social enterprise.



A key partner in market-led innovation: impact enterprises

There's one kind of partner that deserves particular attention.

Around the world, millions of impact enterprises – which we define as for-profit entities that focus on a social and/or environmental purpose – contribute to GDP, create jobs and find new solutions to age-old problems. These entities bring ingenuity, agility and highly specific expertise to a partnership, ultimately contributing to the success of all the partners.

Since impact enterprises are driven by people with deep understanding of their context and their customers, they connect strategies developed in distant boardrooms with on-the-ground realities. This locally rooted innovation increases the likelihood that investments will translate into durable commercial and social value.

At TRANSFORM, we see these impact-led, market-driven solutions as essential components in any effort towards a more resilient, just world. Partners who can help these enterprises to thrive are strengthening a key part of the future economy, while setting their own organisation up for long-term success.



“Investing in social innovation is a proven way to solve persistent societal challenges while strengthening business resilience and performance. The Corporate Social Innovation Compass – a 2024 report by the Schwab Foundation and its Global Alliance for Social Entrepreneurship – shows that partnerships with social enterprises accelerate innovation (about 50% report more innovative approaches), unlock new markets, and deliver both financial and social returns. These collaborations also improve talent outcomes, with up to 80% of leaders noting benefits for attraction and retention, as well as enhance brand value and support sustainability goals.”

**Daniel Nowack, Head of Social Innovation,
Schwab Foundation for Social Entrepreneurship**

“Women in East Africa face massive hurdles getting the health and self-care products, information and services they need. We saw the opportunity, so we just started to build it.”

**Joanna Bichsel, Founder and CEO,
Kasha (Africa)**



INSIGHT

Problem-solvers, job-creators, innovators: the case for supporting impact enterprises

Impact enterprises are drivers of innovation. They prove new business models where grant-dependent initiatives may have failed, and before large institutions can catch up. They're led by, and attract, out-of-the-box thinkers and creative risk-takers. They respond to real-world needs, reframing problems as business opportunities. And, because they often serve paying customers, they must meet high expectations with every product or service they sell.

Worldwide there are around 10 million social enterprises – defined as businesses that put people and the planet first – according to research by the World Economic Forum and the Schwab Foundation.

These enterprises:

- Make up more than 3% of all businesses.
- Generate around over \$2 trillion in revenue each year.
- Account for around 2% of global GDP – twice the contribution of the advertising industry.
- Support nearly 200 million jobs.
- Bridge the gender gap: one in two impact enterprises worldwide is led by women, compared to one in five for conventional enterprises.

Regional data reinforces this scale. Africa is home to an estimated **2.18 million social enterprises**, contributing **\$96 billion in annual revenue** and supporting **12 million jobs**. Many reinvest the majority of profits into their social or environmental mission and operate in sectors such as health, agriculture, clean energy and financial services.

Source: *The State of Social Enterprise: A Review of Global Data 2013–2023* (Schwab Foundation / World Economic Forum 2024); *The State of Social Enterprise: Unlocking Inclusive Growth, Jobs and Development in Africa* (Schwab Foundation / World Economic Forum 2025)

TRANSFORM's experience: how the core partners benefited



UNILEVER is one of the world's oldest and largest multinational fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) companies. Since its creation in the 1890s, Unilever's expansion in consumer goods has been closely linked with efforts to improve everyday health and welfare, including handwashing.

Gives:

- Flexible funding, allowing enterprises to test, learn and pivot.
- Dedicated Project Leads (Unilever staff members) to provide expertise and industry connections, and act as the enterprise's 'champion' over 12-18 months.
- Access to test innovations in a real corporate value chain.
- Guidance on testing product and market fit, establishing price points and reaching consumers.
- Insight on and support to access a portfolio of hundreds of brands, where relevant; guidance on corporate procurement more broadly.

Gets:

- Partnerships that help us to achieve strategic goals. **Example:** Unilever launched the Lifebuoy soap brand in Rwanda through TRANSFORM enterprise Kasha.
- Access to new markets and consumers. **Example:** Ethiopian enterprise Kidame Mart distributed Unilever products to rural households, boosting sanitation and hygiene while testing new products in a rural market.
- Access to test innovations in a real corporate value chain. **Example:** piloting manual refill stations for Unilever products in Indonesia with Alner.
- Achieving social/environmental targets through supply chains. **Example:** sourcing recycled plastic through Hindustan Unilever's local supply chain from Hasiru Dala Innovations in India, contributing to the Sunsilk brand's recycled plastic packaging ambition.
- Enhanced employee engagement and commitment to Unilever's sustainability goals through direct involvement with enterprises. See chapter, 5 [page 65](#).

"Through TRANSFORM, we have not only helped impact enterprises to grow but also built meaningful partnerships with businesses working on our sustainability priorities – climate, plastics, nature and livelihoods. These relationships are helping us to accelerate new business models, test breakthrough ideas within our supply chain, and unlock scalable solutions that improve lives in new markets for us."

Rianne Buter, VP of Sustainability, Unilever





Partnership | Progress | Prosperity

Through its UK aid-funded innovation programmes, the **FCDO** seeks to uncover, test and scale inclusive and high-potential solutions to global development challenges, while producing and sharing evidence on what works best.

Gives:

- Flexible grant funding, allowing enterprises to test, learn and pivot.
- Expertise in international development.

Gets:

- New evidence of what works when supporting innovation in low-income countries. **Example:** TRANSFORM and partners published research on encouraging recycling behaviours in the Global South.
- Support from like-minded partners to achieve development targets. **Example:** In India, TRANSFORM helped reach52 to expand its network of health entrepreneurs, providing hygiene and nutrition education to 120,000 people.



“As a major development partner, we know we cannot succeed alone: we need the expertise and innovation of progressive public-private partnerships. By pooling our resources, networks and expertise with committed private sector allies, TRANSFORM has allowed us to support impact enterprises tackling complex challenges across Africa and Asia. And we’ve seen that when sectors work together over the long term, they can genuinely change millions of lives – a powerful lesson for anyone considering similar collaborations.”

**David Woolnough, Deputy Director
Research, Tech & Innovation, FCDO**



Shape the future
with confidence

EY is a global professional services organisation providing leading assurance, consulting, strategy and transactions, and tax services. EY sees impact entrepreneurs as key to unlocking its global social impact ambition of positively impacting one billion lives.

Through EY Ripples, the organisation's global social impact programme, EY extends the value of its knowledge, skills, experience and networks, on an in-kind basis, to help these enterprises achieve true scale and significance.

Gives:

Technical assistance to enterprises to test and scale their business models, through in-kind support including:

- **EY Professional Services:** EY professionals work with TRANSFORM entrepreneurs in-person or virtually for up to 12 weeks, helping to improve businesses resilience, productivity and capacity to scale sustainably.
- **Skills development workshops:** intensive skills training for groups of TRANSFORM entrepreneurs (a combination of practical training, peer discussion and group mentoring on common barriers to growth).
- **Coaching:** EY professionals support TRANSFORM founders through dedicated one-to-one coaching, providing a sounding board and helping to overcome business' challenges.

Gets:

- Alignment with strategic impact objectives.
Example: Over 21 million people reached through the full TRANSFORM programme.
- Growing EY capabilities. Through hands-on engagement with TRANSFORM enterprises, EY people expand their capabilities, networks and expertise in cutting-edge sustainability innovation, building our professional expertise in key future growth markets.
- Enhanced employee experience through skills-based volunteering initiatives. Staff who volunteer with TRANSFORM enterprises are more likely to stay with EY and significantly more likely to recommend it as a great place to work.

"My experience of working with TakaTaka Ni Mali, an impact enterprise in Kenya, helped me to become a more well-rounded professional and find further purpose through my work. The project created the sort of impact I've always wanted to be involved in and I'm very proud of what we have achieved together." - Sukky Agbomeji, Senior Manager, EY



"We are immensely proud of the impact TRANSFORM has created — not only in the lives reached, but in demonstrating how long-term, trusted collaborations can unlock scale and systems-level impact across complex sustainable development challenges. For EY, this joint initiative shows the unique value we can bring by applying our skills, networks and convening power, alongside our clients, to help inspiring impact enterprises scale. We hope TRANSFORM inspires many more bold, cross-sector collaborations in the years ahead."

Richard Taylor, EY UK&I Consumer Sector Leader

Investing in innovation through public-private partnerships: a win for all

Our experience at TRANSFORM shows that many kinds of organisations can benefit from a similar partnership.

So how can you make the case for getting involved?

GOVERNMENTS AND INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT FUNDERS

This kind of partnership can help you to:

- Leverage limited financing to achieve greater impact
- Reach new populations
- Draw on private sector creativity and expertise
- Test innovations in real corporate value chains and access other corporate resources
- Build the evidence base of what works
- Demonstrate adaptability and innovation
- Meet development targets.

LOCAL NONPROFITS AND NGOS

This kind of partnership can help you to:

- Leverage financial resources
- Draw on private sector creativity
- Contribute expertise
- Advocate for marginalised or underrepresented groups within innovation
- Extend reach and impact
- Gain credibility and visibility.

CORPORATES

This kind of partnership can help you to:

- Bring sustainable or inclusive businesses into the supply chain
- Open new routes to market
- Incubate innovation
- Develop new business models for the future
- Attract, upskill and retain staff
- Meet strategic impact and business targets
- Stand out among competitors
- Strengthen the social license to operate by demonstrating that the company is supporting local communities in its area of operation
- Strengthen existing client or partner relationships through collaborating for impact.

2

CREATE THE FOUNDATIONS OF A STRONG PARTNERSHIP

This chapter is for you if you're ready to find and engage partners, and to set up the systems and structures for long-term collaboration in support of impact enterprises.



Collaboration takes time and attention

From identifying the right partners, to defining a common vision, to measuring progress, this chapter distils eight tried-and-tested principles for partnerships that support impact enterprises, drawn from a decade together at TRANSFORM.

1 Check you have the resource and capacity to partner

Ensure your organisation can assign an operational staff member at manager level as partnership lead who can dedicate 50-80% of their time to the nuts and bolts of setting up the partnership. This work is likely to include:

- Developing the business case and risk assessment.
- Nurturing contacts within your organisation (to clarify internal priorities) and at partner organisations (to better understand resources and potential opportunities they bring).
- Coordinating and driving forward meetings.
- Identifying and bringing in experts where needed, for example for legal aspects or financial mechanisms.
- Continuing to champion the partnership internally, keeping senior stakeholders informed and ensuring relevant buy-in across departments.

A director or other senior-level colleague will also need to commit time to attend meetings and to review and oversee decisions and agreements. An executive-level colleague (e.g. a vice-president, CEO or senior civil servant/government minister) will need to attend occasional meetings and be involved in any partnership launch as its sponsor.

“It’s not rocket science. It feels quite personal, it’s relational, it’s driven by operational staff, while also needing to be championed by those setting the strategy, the senior leaders. You need both to be on board to make for a successful – and long lasting – partnership.”

David Woolnough, Deputy Director Research, Tech & Innovation, FCDO



“The partnerships that endure are those that align early and honestly – not only on ambition, but also on risk. They bring together complementary strengths, rather than duplicating effort, and are supported by patient, flexible capital that allows them to learn and adapt over time. What we see consistently is that lasting collaboration depends on trust, clear roles, and a shared understanding of what success looks like. It also requires strong intermediaries and thoughtful governance from the outset. Systems change is not a time-bound project – it is a long-term commitment to working together across sectors.”

Angela Wiebeck, CEO, Impact Europe

2 Identify the right partners

This sounds obvious, but it can be surprisingly difficult. In the early stages of enthusiasm, it can be tempting to skip past a thorough consideration of whether you’re really suited to work together.

- Aligned values and objectives are non-negotiable. That applies at an overarching organisational level, but potentially also in terms of the department or team you’re talking to. In TRANSFORM’s case, the original partnership saw Unilever’s open innovation team join forces with the climate, energy and water team (now Research and Technology Department) at the FCDO – a natural fit given their similar outlook and openness to exploring new ideas.
- Similar organisational cultures, geography or language can make it easier to get onto the same page (but note that a variety of perspectives brings other benefits).
- New partnerships don’t always mean starting from scratch. Look for natural teammates across your existing areas of work. At TRANSFORM, all three core partners were already working in related fields and regularly crossed paths.
- Once you’ve identified a possible partner, consider the ‘give and get’ (see chapter 1). What would each of you give, and what would you get from the partnership? (If the answer is payment, it’s a supplier, not a partner.) How would the partners complement each other?
- Don’t neglect the basics. Can a prospective partner dedicate the time needed to sustain the partnership? If they aren’t communicative at this stage, it’s unlikely to improve later.
- Remember it comes down to people just as much as organisations. Could you work together closely? Do you get on well with each other?

CASE STUDY**Windows of opportunity: lessons from the launch of TRANSFORM**

Timing and context matter – as we discovered. In 2015 there was a wave of optimism and energy around the newly unveiled UN Sustainable Development Goals. SDG 17 called on all partners to “strengthen the means of implementation and revitalise the global partnership for sustainable development” – a clearer impetus than ever before for ambitious collaboration. At the same time, the UK’s Department for International Development (DfID), as it was called before becoming the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO), was experimenting within its Research and Technology Department, and beginning to work with the private sector in new ways. Meanwhile Unilever’s R&D team had been incubating new businesses in-house for several years, and wanted to support SMEs with high innovation potential. A collaboration seemed like the natural next step.

**Key insight**

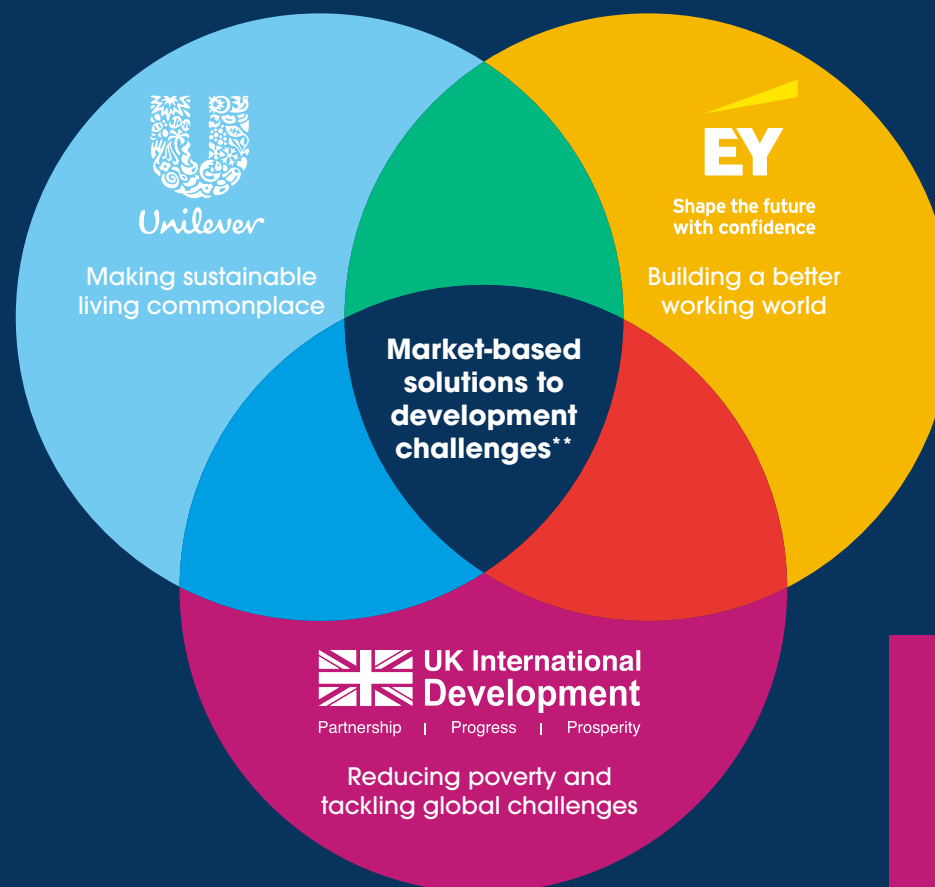
Keep an eye on external factors and be ready to get going when the timing is right. Engage on both leadership and operational levels, securing senior buy-in while enabling collaboration between implementing leads.

3 Define a common purpose

What are you working towards? Clarify this before you get any further. Misunderstandings can easily arise through different understandings of terminology, so keep asking questions.

- Set out your purpose. A Venn diagram (see example on the right) can help to identify where each core partner's purpose connects with that of the other partners. This will inform your theory of change. And it should be reviewed periodically.
- Ensure the purpose is both broad enough and specific enough to stand the test of time. TRANSFORM's relatively narrow focus on helping low-income consumers to meet their household needs kept it relevant to Unilever, while allowing for shifts within that space.
- Clarify non-negotiables and red lines early on – but be aware that sometimes these only emerge later. At the same time, embrace difference: this brings value to the partnership.
- Test your proposed purpose by discussing real-life, potential grantees. At TRANSFORM, this helped us to rule out potential partners that had previously seemed a good fit, but didn't align enough when it came to specific enterprises.

TRANSFORM: Three organisational goals, one common purpose*



“Be really honest. You can’t force a partnership if the partners are a bit too different.”

**David Woolnough, Deputy Director
Research, Tech & Innovation, FCDO**

*These were the goals of the organisations in 2015.

**Helping low-income consumers to meet their household needs.

FOR CONSIDERATION

Meeting partners' needs through your portfolio: two options

How will you balance the partners' needs and priorities as you select enterprises together? We saw two options – what's important is that you agree on an approach early on.

A Meet the combined expectations of the partners at the overall portfolio level

This allows for a mix: some enterprises are more aligned to one partner's objectives, some are more aligned to another partner's objectives, and some may be aligned to particular objectives of the overall programme – all meet the fundamental criteria.

For example, TRANSFORM supported some innovative sanitation projects that would help address important human development issues, but would not reach a large number of Unilever customers during the project period. TRANSFORM balanced the portfolio by understanding which kinds of business had the potential to reach more people (in our case, digital health) and proactively recruited more of these enterprises into the portfolio.

This approach widens the partnership's scope and requires a review of the total portfolio when making any enterprise funding decisions.

B Meet every partner's needs through each selected enterprise

This can be more difficult than the portfolio approach (Option A), as it requires a nuanced understanding of one another's objectives. It can also be frustrating, as it limits the number of enterprises you can consider (and potentially means many rejected applications and time wasted). It can, however, work if there is a broad enough alignment between partners. TRANSFORM moved to this approach later and found it worked well when local stakeholders – who had a closer and shared understanding of the context – were making decisions.

4 Start small

Creating a whole new partnership is hard, and it takes time. So, start small with something manageable and build from there.

- Even starting with two or three core partners is time-intensive – each organisation has its own requirements and processes to accommodate. Stick with a small number of core partners, while allowing for growth later. Once the core partnership is established, you can look to bring others in, for example via a launch event.
- Your work together can be incremental too: start by co-creating something where there's a natural fit rather than forming something more ambitious that requires extensive paperwork.
- Think carefully about where to begin: where might you be able to demonstrate early success? Then use this to help secure funding for a more long-term, ambitious partnership.

5

Create the right governance, structures and ways of working

Now that you've found your partner(s), agreed on a common purpose and dipped a toe into the actual work, you can start setting up the structures you need for long-term collaboration.

Be warned: this stage can take many months. But investing the time at this stage is worth it. It means your work together is much more likely to run smoothly once it starts.

- Form a core management team – the operational heart of the programme – comprised of representatives of each partner organisation. They should have the power to make decisions on behalf of the programme.
- Agree on overarching targets as part of your theory of change: these should be ambitious, yet achievable. Decide on the outputs and outcomes that are most likely to lead to this impact, and agree on indicators you'll measure to track your progress.
- Consider that legal documentation and agreements may need to be created from scratch. Managing finances is a particularly important aspect: partners may have restrictions in terms of where any funds can flow.

- Establish decision-making authority between organisations early on. That might mean different approaches for different decisions. In TRANSFORM's case, consensus was needed for any core programme changes, but we agreed that when it came to selecting specific enterprises, EY would act as an advisor while Unilever and the FCDO would vote because they were the cash-contributing partners.
- Ensure programme knowledge and ways of working are embedded as far as possible to smooth over future staff changes. Use standard operating procedures or similar documents to guide the processes and allow plenty of time for onboarding and handovers.
- Make regular time together for the core management team a key principle. This can allow a shared, cross-organisational culture to emerge (see [page 29](#)).

INSIGHT

Create your theory of change

A theory of change sets out how change is expected to happen and the assumptions or risks associated with it. It ensures all those involved are clear on the objectives and outcomes, and that they understand how their individual contribution fits in. It also helps you to communicate your approach to potential partners or funders. And, by tracking progress on the indicators you've identified, it helps you to figure out if you're moving towards the desired impact, or if you need to adjust.

TRANSFORM's theory of change is shown on the following page.

The TRANSFORM theory of change

Inputs

TRANSFORM provides grant funding, in-kind support and access to an ecosystem of organisations in order to scale business models in the 'validate' and 'prepare' stages (see page 39). Business models may be situated in SMEs or larger well-established businesses. Funding will be prioritised for models that deliver basic services and essential products to Bottom of the Pyramid (BoP) consumers.

Outputs

Grantees develop improved business models in order to scale commercial operations. Businesses strengthen their performance in existing markets.

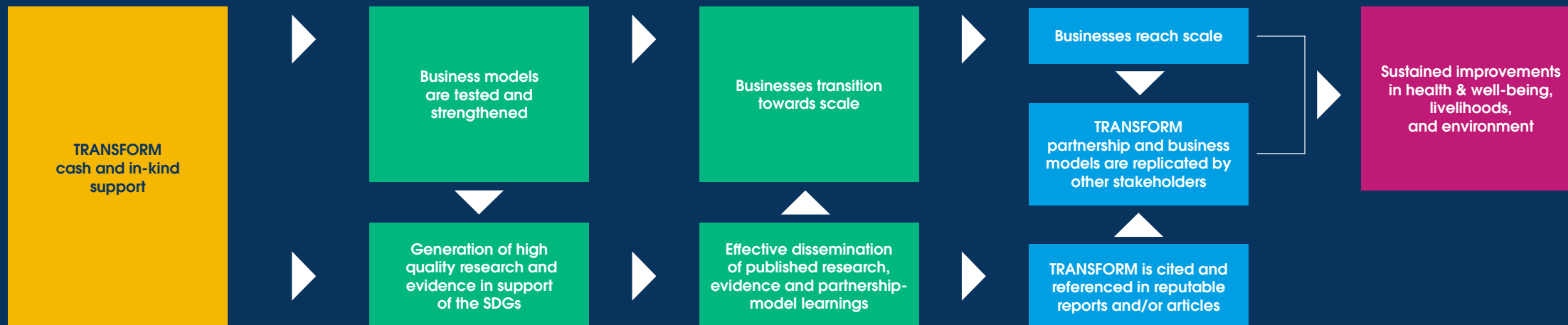
Grantees transition towards scale, increasing revenue and expanding into new markets.

Outcomes

Businesses reach scale and are able to secure capital for scale. Business models are replicated along with TRANSFORM partnership model.

Impact

As businesses grow, low-income customers have better access to basic products and services, they create new and better employment opportunities, and communities benefit from an improved environment.



TRANSFORM provides grant funding to support research studies to help businesses grow and to better understand how behaviour change approaches can be harnessed to improve lives and ensure social businesses reach scale.

Learnings and insight reports are generated through business model testing and externally commissioned research work including landscape analyses and academic research.

Learnings and insight reports are shared through publications, conference presentations and TRANSFORM.global website.

TRANSFORM is cited in academic publications and broader (business/industry level) statements echoing insights and recommendations generated by TRANSFORM.

INSIGHT

How to create a cross-organisational culture

Research by **Tirza Gapp** and **Jennifer Howard-Grenville** from the **University of Cambridge Judge Business School** in 2024 found that the TRANSFORM team “both respected and leveraged their distinct cultures while also generating an inter-organisational culture to support their collaboration for social impact”. In other words, they created an organisational culture that could be put to good use – while still respecting the core of “how things are done” in the different organisations.

The researchers pinpointed four practices that helped to create this culture:

- 1 Sharing for collaboration:** partners continually update each other on their own organisation’s specific interests, priorities and red lines.
- 2 Learning of each other’s culture:** using relationships and joint discussions with those outside the partnership as a way to learn more about those inside the partnership. Paying attention to what a partner highlights about these relationships can indicate what matters to them in ways that they may not think to explicitly bring up.

- 3 Trying new approaches:** adapting the existing culture on how things usually get done as new challenges arise – brainstorming and testing new ways of working together.
- 4 Building a repertoire:** accumulating knowledge and referring back to what has worked in the past – particularly relevant for a long-running partnership.

As Jennifer Howard-Grenville notes: *“Often people blame their organisations’ cultures for what they can – and more typically can’t – do. But when they realise culture is generated, reinforced, and can be altered and changed by what they do in their day-to-day behaviours, a lightbulb often goes off... culture can be a tool for change, while also grounding people in what makes them feel competent and capable as an organisation. When different organisations come together and leverage their combined cultural strengths, even more can happen, as TRANSFORM taught us.”*

Source: Judge Business School at the University of Cambridge: Harnessing culture for effective inter-organisation collaboration. <https://www.jbs.cam.ac.uk/2025/harnessing-culture-for-effective-inter-organisation-collaboration/>; Gapp, T. and Howard-Grenville, J. (2024) “Bringing organizational cultures together for social impact.” *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, 25 November 2024





6 Stick to your purpose, seeking new partners where needed

As you progress, new questions inevitably arise: should you add a new focus area? Bring in a new partner? Always bring it back to the 'why'.

- Keep talking! Revisit your core purpose and theory of change regularly.
- It might help to clarify which partner's priorities or needs are the "limiting factor". Understanding those limits means you can more quickly rule out new directions – saving time for everyone.
- Identify the gaps that you do want to fill. Core partners will never be able to do it all, so proactively reach out to new collaborators.
- Make sure any new partners complement existing ones. EY joined the TRANSFORM collaboration in 2019: as a professional services organisation with cross-sector experience, it was able to support across all of TRANSFORM's priority themes, acting as a neutral facilitator in management decisions, and bringing additional value to the enterprises (see case study on the following page).
- Outsourcing key functions, for example programme management (especially when these functions are not the core expertise of the partners), can allow partners to engage on equal terms, by ensuring equal access to information and decision-making.
- If you're looking to expand your scope and ambition, use your programme's funding target to your advantage – it can be a great impetus to seek out and engage new partners that bring skills and knowledge, not just money.

CASE STUDY

From aligned ambitions to complementary impact: EY joins TRANSFORM

EY officially joined TRANSFORM in 2019, and the integration proved a natural and effective fit, as TRANSFORM's objectives aligned closely with EY Ripples, EY's global social impact programme. EY has a long history of supporting impact entrepreneurship, given the power of market-based, locally rooted innovators to tackle global challenges. And it shared TRANSFORM's conviction that collaboration was key to solving systemic challenges.

What made this collaboration a true success, though, were several complementary forces:

- As a global organisation operating across 150 countries and almost all sectors, EY's interests encompass all of TRANSFORM's impact themes, facilitating a broad and inclusive approach.
- EY, Unilever, and the FCDO are all large, complex global organisations with deep, longstanding business relationships and established ways of working that extend well beyond TRANSFORM. This familiarity meant we intuitively understood each other's capabilities, organisational drivers, and working patterns from the outset – something new collaborations often lack.

This enabled EY to play a valuable, neutral arbitrator role within TRANSFORM's management, acting as an advisor, broker and bridge between Unilever and the FCDO to help navigate collective decisions – a role natural to EY and expected by the other two partners.

- EY contributed distinctive value to TRANSFORM enterprises through skills-based volunteering – pro-bono consulting, coaching, and workshops – that multiplied the value of the support provided by Unilever and the FCDO.

Key insight



Successful collaborations thrive when partners share deeply aligned goals and bring complementary strengths. Take the time early on in the collaboration to map what each partner brings and where gaps remain.

“Faced with urgent and interconnected challenges of climate change and social inequality, we believe businesses must go further, faster, to build a better working world — one that is socially just, economically inclusive and environmentally regenerative by design. Our EY Ripples program embodies our quest to lead EY people and networks to help drive sustainable inclusive growth and empower 1 billion lives through responsible innovation and collaboration.

TRANSFORM exemplifies our shared belief that impact entrepreneurs are coming up with better answers for progress towards systemic global challenges. Through EY Ripples, EY people can use their skills, knowledge, and experience to help these enterprises scale. In turn, they gain exposure to innovative business models and expand their networks. This “win-win” is what's unique about the TRANSFORM model.”

**Gillian Hinde, EY Global Corporate
Responsibility Leader**

7 Understand and manage the risks

Every partnership will incur risk; these vary greatly depending on what you're doing and where you're working. Different organisations also have different levels of risk tolerance: a funder using taxpayers' money will need to be cautious about how money is spent, whereas a family foundation can take more risk if their stakeholders agree. The key step is to proactively discuss the appetite for risk and set up processes to understand and then manage and minimise these risks. For example:

- Working in countries with poor infrastructure or volatile political or economic situations adds risk. This can be managed through due diligence, ongoing monitoring, milestone-linked payments and flexibility to allow for enterprise pivots and delays.
- A thorough selection process that can identify entrepreneurs who have "skin in the game" – those who have a personal stake in the venture and/or direct experience of the issues it is trying to solve – can help limit the risks of working with early-stage enterprises that may evolve in unknown directions.
- There may be risks at the partnership level – what happens if a core partner's overarching strategy changes and the partnership no longer becomes viable? Minimise risk with contracts that commit partners to specific phases and by ensuring commitment to the broader shared vision at senior level.

- Working in social innovation by its nature involves embracing some uncertainty – a very risk-averse programme team would not go far. But you can build staff teams that pair more entrepreneurial types with those who thrive within structure and process and who can ensure that any activity remains within an acceptable scope.

"What works well is a team setup made up of someone with relentless optimism that this will work, alongside a really strong programme manager to keep them grounded. We have a risk assessment, and we review those risks every year, and all of that needs to get cleared by me as a deputy director."

**David Woolnough, Deputy Director Research,
Tech & Innovation, FCDO**

8 Set up systems to measure what's working

With your theory of change in place, you can set up systems to monitor how you're doing on each indicator, and improve or adapt where needed.

- Set up teams to lead impact measurement and management. This can either be dealt with in-house, which may offer more value for money and develops internal expertise, or it can be outsourced to specialists. We chose the latter route at TRANSFORM, which meant we could engage specialists in the same country as the enterprises, ensuring close contact and good contextual understanding.
- It's easy for a busy entrepreneur to forget about data collection, so include this as part of your enterprise funding requirements. But make it as easy as possible for them too: be upfront about expectations, so they're not struggling to keep up later; focus on metrics that are useful to them; and help them get good data management systems in place. (For more on this, see chapters 5 and 7.)
- A theory of change – whether that's for your overall programme or for the specific enterprise – isn't set in stone: adapt what you're measuring if the metrics aren't helping. Monitoring, evaluation and learning is an iterative process.

- Big-picture ambitions may evolve too. When first created, TRANSFORM's focus was on behaviour change. That was hard to measure in a robust way, so we switched to a more measurable target of job creation while retaining our overall vision of transforming the economy. This shift reflects our learning over the course of the programme, but also a wider shift – from the heady days of optimism and huge ambitions in 2015, to a more cautious mood some years later, in which organisations of all kinds are under pressure to demonstrate concrete results.



3

UNDERSTAND WHAT SUPPORT ENTREPRENEURS NEED AND DEFINE YOUR SELECTION CRITERIA

This chapter is for you if you're considering which enterprises to work with. First, let's understand what impact enterprises really need. Then, we can decide which ones you'll help.

What do enterprises need?

We've established the many benefits of joining forces with impact enterprises (see chapter 1). But what do they need from a partnership, and what kind of impact enterprises are you best placed to support?

Impact enterprises vary hugely, operating in almost every sector and around the world. Yet they face some common challenges. That's because they're not only creating new products or services – in many cases, they are also creating entirely new markets, systems and consumer behaviours.

- Success may first require a change in customer behaviour or overcoming long-held cultural norms.
- As pioneers, they may face a “first-mover disadvantage” – for example, pushing for new policies or regulations that make it easier for competitors to emerge.
- They're often challenging the status quo – competing with business models that have become well-established and deeply ingrained over decades. For example, introducing a refillable handwash might mean competing with a highly optimised system in which it's cheap and convenient to simply buy new bottles and discard empties.
- They may employ people who are new to the workforce, lack the right skills or require a new skillset.

- They may be selling to ‘last-mile’ customers, while relying on volatile supply chains and distributor networks.
- They may be operating on lower than usual volumes to ensure accessibility to all income groups.
- Most importantly, they're balancing profit and impact motives – they can't cut corners or chase efficiency as their purely commercial peers can do.
- And they're doing all this while also trying to pay their staff, grow their customer base, and plan for the next stage of growth.

The good news: organisations like yours can help to solve these problems.

We define an **impact enterprise** as a for-profit organisation that focuses on a social and/or environmental purpose.



“Impact enterprises need catalytic support that goes beyond capital – they need access to networks, markets and resources that unlock growth. Funding alone rarely scales a business – it is the combination of investment, talent, the right partnerships and visibility.

What entrepreneurs need now more than ever is an ecosystem that treats them not as beneficiaries, but as the high-growth businesses they are and can be. The next decade of impact enterprise will be defined by how well we can remove the barriers that high potential founders still face.”

**Tom Lytton-Dickie, Founder and CEO,
Meaningful Business**

“Many programmes offer mentorship without funding. This creates a practical constraint: strong ideas emerge, but without capital they cannot be implemented, resulting in a stalemate over who will finance them.”

Lisa Hawkes, Global Sustainability Senior Manager, Unilever



A CHECKLIST FOR IMPACT ENTERPRISE SUPPORT

If your organisation can do one or more of the following, you're likely to be a valuable partner:

- ✓ **Provide flexible, patient capital, such as grants:** this allows space to experiment and helps bridge the gap to the next stage.
- ✓ **Offer expertise:** this can be operational or strategic; sector-specific or more general business support.
- ✓ **Open up your networks:** introduce entrepreneurs to potential investors, partners, clients or policymakers.
- ✓ **Create an innovation sandbox:** allow entrepreneurs to test and refine their ideas in a realistic but patient environment.
- ✓ **Build a wider ecosystem:** support change in other areas, for example by influencing policy, which benefits all those operating within this space.

It's when all these things are provided in tandem that the support really makes a difference. A holistic package that takes into account the whole operating context is significantly more likely to bear fruit than one single intervention. That's why partnerships are so powerful in helping impact enterprises to scale (see also chapter 5).

CASE STUDY

Deploying each partner's strengths: Boost

Boost is a B2B commerce platform that provides easy-to-use technology for suppliers to better serve convenience store retailers. For example, its system is integrated with WhatsApp, enabling retailers to place product orders through a familiar platform. It also helps distributors and small retailer customers with embedded working capital.

Through TRANSFORM, Boost received grant funding to build functionality into its digital ordering platform for promotions. Using Unilever's connections, the tech startup was matched with the biggest distributor in Nairobi. And it got professional advice from an EY team to refine its pricing structure – critical when pitching to work with Unilever outside of TRANSFORM.

Boost went on to sign commercial agreements with Unilever in four African countries (Kenya, Ghana, Nigeria and Egypt). Through these deals, small retailers could buy products at the lowest available prices from approved distributors. This often also includes delivery, meaning they no longer needed to close their shops to pick up new stock.

By streamlining stock ordering, Boost gave micro-retailers access to a wider range of products, reducing stock outages and allowing shopkeepers to focus on running their businesses. For FMCG manufacturers and distributors, Boost provided a direct channel to previously hard-to-reach retailers, expanding their market coverage by 20% and increasing sales opportunities.

Key insight



Enterprise support has the greatest impact when it comes as a coordinated package from multiple partners with varied experience, rather than in isolated parts. Corporate networks, technical expertise, data support, targeted training and catalytic/innovation grants each played a role – but it was their combination that unlocked real momentum, positioning the enterprise for its next steps.



From blueprint to scale: how to identify the right moment to step in

Enterprise needs vary significantly at different stages. For example, advice on organisational structure or financial planning might not help early-stage enterprises that are still figuring out their offer.

The four stages of pioneer firm development, created by Acumen (shown on the following page), can help you to understand the needs at each stage, which can then inform your selection criteria for enterprises. The graphic below illustrates the funnel most ventures go through from blueprint to the scale that they, and we, are seeking. (Note that the four stages apply to equity-backed ventures – the framework is less relevant to other kinds of companies.)

How do you decide which stage to focus on? You might want to consider how much you as a partner want to shape the enterprises' approach (engaging earlier would allow for this); to what extent integrating startups into your supply chain is important (a later stage is more appropriate), or how important financial returns are (again, a later stage makes more sense). Consider, too, what the pipeline is like: you may want to support later-stage enterprises in a particular sector and geography but find that these are few and far between. In that case your support is more valuable in getting early-stage ideas off the ground.

"The four stages of pioneer firm development always take longer than you think they should. External shocks – weather events, currency fluctuations – can make it harder to isolate signal from noise, and even when you've found product-market fit, it's not unusual for that product to be structurally unprofitable."

Daniel Waldron, Director of Insights, Acumen



*Drawing on Acumen's 'Blueprint to Scale' model

The four stages of pioneer firm development* 	1. BLUEPRINT Developing the blueprint for the future business	2. VALIDATE Testing and refining the business model	3. PREPARE Enhancing the conditions required for scaling	4. SCALE Rolling out the model to reach large numbers of customers and/or suppliers
Key activities	• Understand customer needs • Develop initial customer proposition • Develop business plan • Develop core technologies and/or product prototypes	• Conduct market trials • Test business model assumptions • Refine business model, technologies and/or product as required	• Stimulate customer awareness and demand • Develop supply chains, upstream and downstream • Build organisational capability to scale: systems, talent, plant, etc.	• Move into new geographies and segments • Invest in assets and talent • Enhance systems and processes • Exploit scale efficiencies • Respond to competitors
Key needs	• Innovation capability • Strategy development and business planning • Talent networks • Seed funding	• Operationalising the model • Focus on cost, value and pricing • Learning orientation and flexibility • Innovation capability • Funds to facilitate market trials and refinement	• Marketing strategy and execution • Supply chain design and implementation • Systems and processes • Talent and networks • Funds for marketing, supply chain, fixed assets, inventory, etc.	• Competitive strategy • Realising scale efficiencies • Risk management • Formalisation of impact standards and expectations • Stakeholder management • Funds to support expansion
End milestones	• Compelling initial business plan • Demonstrated core technologies and/or product prototype	• Refined business model, technologies, product • Validation of viability and scalability • Indication of customer demand	• Strong customer awareness and demand • Effective supply chains • Organisational systems, talent, assets in place to support scaling	• Sustainably reaching all Bottom of the Pyramid (BoP) customers and/or suppliers
Role of partners		Unilever: Tests product and market fit, finds ways to reach consumers, agrees price points. Offers access to supply chain and brand portfolio. EY: Provides technical assistance and coaching to test and fine tune business models, helping define roadmap to commercial viability FCDO: Provides flexible funding to produce insights and learnings and de-risks private sector investment.		
Partner considerations for support	More opportunity to shape the enterprises' approach More opportunity to build pipeline where this does not yet exist		More opportunity to integrate into supply chain More opportunity for financial return	

Mass uptake of business model through:

1. Enterprise expansion, e.g. IPO
2. Corporate adoption
3. Government adoption
4. Replication or open sourcing

Operating in the 'Validate' stage

TRANSFORM mostly worked with impact enterprises at the stage of maximum risk for a new venture: the validate stage. At this stage, the enterprise owner needs to work out if customers are willing to pay for a product or service and – most importantly – whether they’re willing to pay the right price for it, to ensure profitability.

Often, when customers are neither willing nor able to pay it's not always because they don't need or want what the enterprise offers – but because the market just isn't established. Figuring out the answers to these key questions is an iterative process, requiring a lot of testing. The greater the degree of model innovation involved, the more time and resources need to be invested. That's why the support of large partner organisations to test and pivot, helping to absorb some of this risk, is so useful.



CASE STUDY

Wecyclers: How multi-pronged support helped a pioneering waste programme to grow

Nigeria's **Wecyclers** is a rewards-for-recycling programme that incentivises people in low-income communities to exchange recyclable waste – collected by cargo bike – initially for essential goods, and later for cash. Thanks to support from TRANSFORM and others, Wecyclers now operates in 14 Nigerian states. It has created over 400 jobs, and incentives worth over US\$1.5 million have been paid to more than 35,000 people in exchange for plastic waste.

Support provided:

- A TRANSFORM grant in 2019 enabled Wecyclers to test a new direction: a franchise model, also funding some of the technology/equipment that franchisees needed to get started.
- A successful pilot with one franchisee prompted Wecyclers' founders to "think much bigger", and they began plans to develop their own recycling plant.
- Founders also highlighted as particularly valuable: dedicated one-to-one coaching from senior EY and Unilever leaders for the CEO; reporting on various milestones (for example, targets for involving women in franchises); and help to get essential policies in place (required for future investors).

- Wecyclers had already worked with Unilever Nigeria prior to TRANSFORM, but this embedded their collaboration more deeply. Wecyclers is seen as a major partner of Unilever Nigeria.

Later, Wecyclers went on to innovate with a different group of partners:

- In 2023, Unilever Nigeria, Bridges Outcomes Partnerships and French investment bank Societe Generale created a US\$2million 'development impact bond' to support Wecyclers' further expansion. The enterprise also secured a US\$2million convertible loan from Norfund to establish a new PET-bottle recycling plant.

Key insight



Enterprise growth involves many moving parts – business support alongside grant funding and creating strong foundations for future investment maximises the chances of success. Consider different routes to scale: franchising allows entrepreneurs to spread the model more widely while giving other entrepreneurial people opportunities to own a business.



"There's no way I can talk about Wecyclers' success without talking about the TRANSFORM grant."

Esther Fagbo, former Head of Partnerships and HR, Wecyclers

CASE STUDY

Sequencing support through different programmes

The Blueprint to Scale model shows that enterprise needs evolve significantly as they grow, and that no single intervention is sufficient on its own.

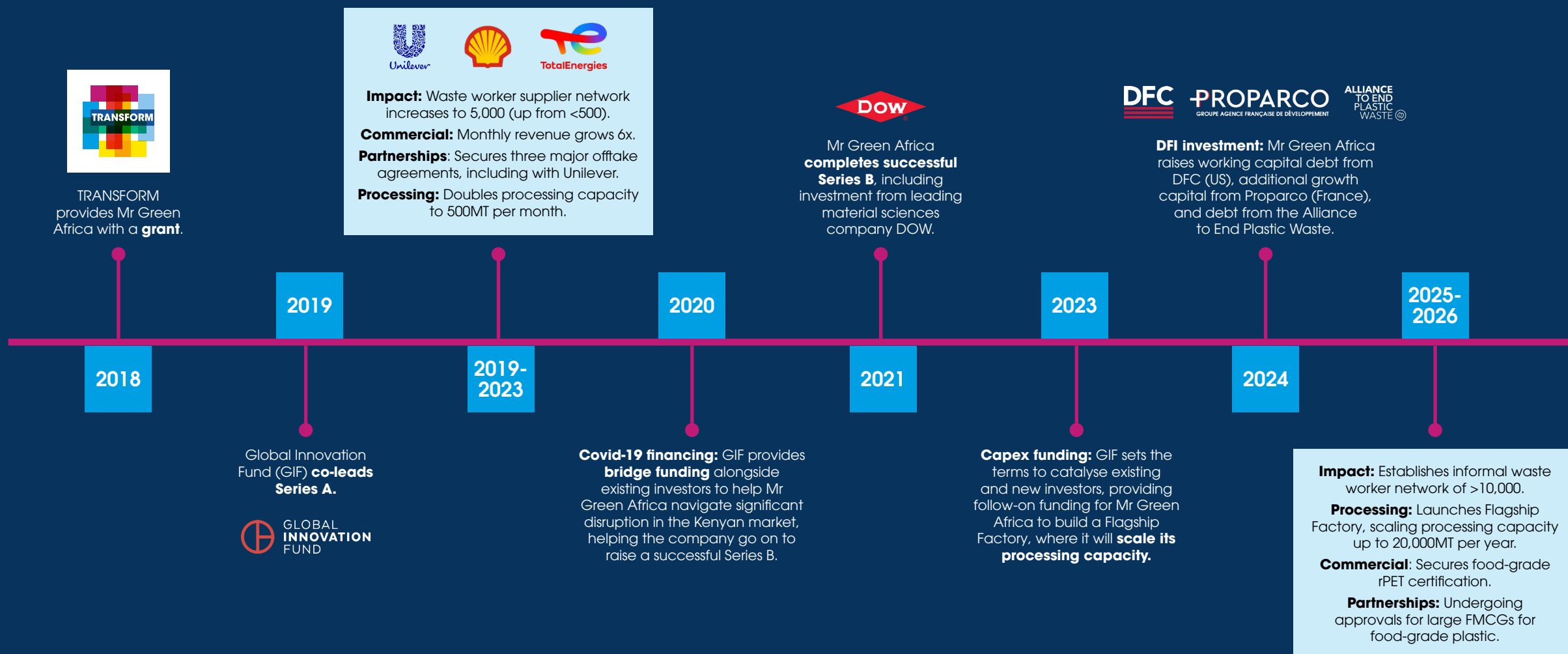
This highlights the value of a coordinated approach, where different programmes support the same enterprise at different stages, each designed to address the distinct needs, risks and constraints in the enterprise's journey.

Mr Green Africa illustrates how this works in practice, moving from early-stage support through TRANSFORM to later-stage catalytic finance and scaling support through GIF (alongside other FCDO-backed programmes).



Mr Green Africa: a scale journey

Mr Green Africa (Kenya) buys plastic waste from informal waste workers, and turns this into recycled plastic pellets for onward sale to FMCG companies to displace virgin plastic resin in their packaging.





Defining your selection criteria for enterprises

With a clear view on enterprise needs from blueprint to scale, and recognising where you are best placed to support, you can now turn those insights into practical selection criteria.

Making it clear what's inside and outside of scope makes for the most efficient application and selection process, saving time for everyone. Firming up these criteria together can also surface previously unforeseen misunderstandings between partners. It's a useful exercise in further confirming your shared vision and approach.

At TRANSFORM, we came up with the following selection criteria:

1 Alignment with our impact priorities

- Thematic priorities – Reduce plastic waste through recycling and refill; Protect and regenerate nature; Improve water, sanitation and hygiene; Improve health through digital solutions; Support livelihoods for farmers and retailers; Ensure decent work for young people and the informal sector.
- Geographic priorities – Africa and Asia.
- Enterprises also had to demonstrate at least one of the following:
 - female ownership
 - local ownership (i.e. when an owner's nationality matches the region or country of project operations, and resides in the operating country for the majority of the year)

- a focus on the very poor or marginalised (i.e. people and communities who experience the greatest and most persistent forms of poverty and exclusion, and who are systematically underserved by markets, services, and institutions)
- an intention to expand to fragile contexts (including those caused by climate change).

2 Innovative approach to tackling social problems – a new technology, business model or approach (which could also mean taking a proven business model to a new market).

3 Market-based solutions with the potential to reach operational sustainability.

4 Strong leadership and networks – including a commercially savvy CEO and/or leadership team who demonstrates personal commitment to the project.

5 Clear value-add from partnering with us, beyond just the money.

6 Additionality – projects must be additional to what Unilever and EY would have invested in within their business as usual.

How did we define an INNOVATIVE approach or solution?

For TRANSFORM, a solution was considered innovative if it met at least one of the following criteria.

- The project is testing a completely new technology, approach or methodology that has not been deployed before.
- The project is validating an emerging technology, approach or methodology that is still in early stages of development and has not been deployed in the proposed context.
- The project is applying a proven / validated technology, approach or methodology in a more challenging geographical, cultural, or sectoral context with the potential for significant learnings on the diffusion of innovation.
- The project is tailoring a technology, approach or methodology to the specific needs and preferences of a new low-income community with the potential for significant learnings on the diffusion of innovation.
- The project is integrating combinations of technologies, approaches or methodologies that have not been tested together before and will create a novel solution.
- The project removes barriers to scale for a proven innovative technology, approach or technology that has been validated (with early evidence that it works) but requires support to scale.

What does ADDITIONALITY mean – and why does it matter?

For TRANSFORM, backing projects outside of our business-as-usual – those with additionality – was a core point of our partnership, since it enabled the combination of corporate involvement and government funding. **It's a delicate balance: it means we looked to back enterprises that were relevant – but not too relevant!**

We defined additionality as projects that:

- Specifically reach low-income consumers not currently served through business-as-usual activity
- Apply in new geographies, with no current business plans / business case
- Experience a first mover disadvantage
- Have payback periods longer than normal commercial business cases
- Have higher-than-normal risk profiles
- Contribute to wider systems change beyond Unilever's value chain, with potential for uptake by other corporates.

Setting this out clearly was vital for the core partners – as it provided clear guidelines for everyone involved – and for enterprises considering applying for support.

These criteria stood the test of time for TRANSFORM: they barely evolved over our decade of selecting enterprises.



We did, however, find that we needed to spell some things out – concepts like 'innovation' and 'additionality' – more clearly, so that everyone was on the same page. Sometimes, what seems self-evident to one party can be interpreted in a different way by another. That's even more the case when a programme gets handed over to others to lead – as you'll find in the next chapter.



4

ACTIVATE LOCAL LEADERSHIP IN SOURCING AND SELECTION

Have you considered local ownership of your public-private partnership? Read on for the many benefits of shifting agency to local leaders and counterparts to help you make the case, and follow our step-by-step guide for how to make it happen.

Defining clear enterprise selection criteria for your programme at a central level is crucial

But the work doesn't end there. You might want to consider how you pass on ownership to those closest to the enterprises themselves, to ensure better selection decisions through the contextual knowledge of your teams on the ground. That might mean handing over key responsibilities from global headquarters to in-country teams or partners.

TRANSFORM did exactly this from 2023 onwards – moving from gathering the input of our counterparts in Asia and Africa, to actually handing over responsibilities to them. In practice, this meant our in-country colleagues co-developed challenge briefs (i.e. open calls for enterprises) with the London-based teams of Unilever, the FCDO and EY, and led on sourcing and selecting enterprises. This required a careful balance: allowing as much freedom as possible to make decisions, applying our criteria with flexibility, and even taking risks – while ensuring that any activity remained within TRANSFORM's remit and that all expenditure complied with rules on spending public money.

"TRANSFORM's regional approach is critical because – let's face it, a country like India is big, complex and growing. This enables us to customise our strategy for India and ensure that we are in alignment both with India's development goals and Unilever's priorities in the country."

**Prashanth Venkatesh, Sustainability Director,
Hindustan Unilever**



The many benefits of local leadership

As three UK-headquartered organisations working in international development, we knew it was our responsibility to actively shift power away from high-income countries and towards the communities we wanted to support.

But, regardless of where your programme is headquartered, there are multiple benefits to localising your programme. Here's what we found:

- Our country offices **brought new partners into TRANSFORM**. Unilever Indonesia secured a new partnership with the Ministry of National Development Planning who brought their local expertise, connections to startups and a technology platform, all of which improved the enterprise sourcing and selection process. In South Africa, South African Technology and Innovation Agency supported the process by promoting the funding opportunity to their networks and through expertise during selection.
- A local lens helped us to look beyond the easiest-to-reach candidates (for example those proficient in English, experienced in writing funding applications and having already benefited from international support) to consider other, **equally promising but less visible** candidates.
- Leveraging in-country networks and knowledge helped us to select enterprises that are **truly locally rooted in the context**: 88% of enterprises selected by our local panels had at least one local founder, compared with 53% of those selected by a global panel. Meanwhile, enterprises benefited from the **expertise and networks of local partners**.
- Working at the country level helped **with integrating startups into Unilever's supply chain**, because this process normally happens with a Unilever operating company rather than at Unilever global HQ.
- Championing local leadership **created new relationships between Unilever, EY and the FCDO at a country level**, laying the groundwork for further positive collaboration and involvement in things like external communications and events.
- The programme and relationships between funders and enterprises can continue after the global HQ has stepped away – this is important for **longevity and real, long-term impact**.

“Through this process we ended up supporting two Ghana-owned companies. The two applications we funded probably wouldn't have got through a London panel because we wouldn't have understood the ecosystem in which those companies work, some of the personalities and some of the challenges they were facing. I felt like the local panel brought in so much more insight.”

Tristan Eagling, Climate, Nature and Food Security Adviser, FCDO Ghana (TRANSFORM selection panel in West Africa)

“The local TRANSFORM team was well connected to the government ecosystems within India, so they could open a lot of doors. I was supporting a healthtech company with a proposal. FCDO India helped align the project with the Government of India's Department of Health priorities, ensuring the initiative was strategically relevant for the nation.”

Ravi Durwas, former South Asia Lead, TRANSFORM, Hindustan Unilever (TRANSFORM selection panel in South Asia)



CASE STUDY

Local panels, different outcomes

Once TRANSFORM's local colleagues had taken over the process in six countries or regions (Kenya/Uganda/Ethiopia, Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Ghana/Nigeria and South Africa/Zambia), the overall makeup of our portfolio changed. Because local panels had a closer understanding of community priorities, the fit with community needs was often more apparent to them. As a result, they were more open to backing earlier-stage enterprises. They were also able to fund more entrepreneurs as they provided smaller grants (£100,000 on average, compared with £250,000 for global panels), recognising that this amount could still be game-changing in their context.

Sometimes country-level panels were more lenient on the 'polish' of applications than their London-based counterparts – local teams had more on the ground insight to draw on and could meet the enterprise in person, to make an informed decision. In several panels, the pitches and applications were in the local language. Sometimes it was thanks to their extensive network, meaning previously unknown enterprises had been invited to apply. We saw these different outcomes as a sign that our efforts to shift agency to local leaders were working.

For example, some years ago **African Reclaimers Organisation**, a South African startup that integrates informal waste workers into the formal waste management system, applied to TRANSFORM through its global panel but did not get accepted. Then in 2024, it applied to TRANSFORM's South Africa panel – and was successful.

Analysis commissioned by TRANSFORM of the enterprises selected before and after we shifted to local selection panels confirmed that the design of the selection mechanism has a material influence on who gets funded.

Key insight



Make sure that all those involved in selection are aware that different outcomes are not only likely, they're also expected and encouraged. Concerns can be alleviated by building in strong due diligence processes and by allowing global panels to inform local decision-makers of any relevant context (for example, if they had previously funded a similar innovation that had not met its targets).

The challenges of transferring power

Like any effort to transfer power, this isn't a straightforward process. You might face the following challenges:

- All core partners need to be on board with this change.
- Those handing over decision-making power may feel nervous about the consequences: what if they select projects we don't like? Understand global stakeholders' requirements and set clear processes in place to ensure they are met – such as enhanced due diligence.
- Meanwhile, bringing newcomers into the process – whether they're from the same or a different organisation – can be challenging, as they may question or want to revisit past decisions. Allow time for this as it will help them understand the criteria better, and it can be helpful by bringing in new perspectives.
- If core partners do not already have a footprint in the target country, you'll need to work hard to build these and potentially bring in new partners. We were lucky that we had on the ground colleagues to support.
- Working with new teammates (and particularly across cultures and geographies) can spark misunderstandings and requires extra efforts to communicate clearly. At TRANSFORM we found that our principle of “additionality” – ensuring that any enterprise we invest in is outside the scope of our business as usual – was well understood by our core partners at HQ level, but needed to be spelled out clearly with examples when we involved country colleagues.

“There's a fundamental power imbalance within many global programmes: when two visions meet on a playing field, the one with the money tends to win. I don't believe we need to fully localise decision-making: you do need a back-and-forth. But few programmes have the governance structures in place that consistently empower local decision-makers.”

Daniel Waldron, Director of Insights, Acumen



Eight steps to help localise a global programme

An evolution in ownership takes time, but once completed in one region or country, it can easily be replicated elsewhere. We recommend the following eight steps.

1 Define the mandate, scope and objectives

- a. Thematic priorities and selection criteria – clarify any restrictions, and where there’s flexibility to adapt.
- b. Partnership principles – for example, equal representation and decision-making power of all core partners.
- c. Division of roles and responsibilities – at TRANSFORM, we agreed that country teams would take on end-to-end responsibility of selecting a new cohort of projects; the global team was then responsible for contracts, due diligence and project completion.

2 Engage in-country colleagues

- a. Establish collaboration principles clearly – co-creation rather than outsourcing.
- b. Select key staff – look for genuine interest in impact enterprises rather than focusing only on the “right” job title. Ensure they have capacity alongside existing roles.
- c. Maintain regular communication and make it as easy as possible for local colleagues to remain involved.

“The local selection process allowed us to tap directly into EY India’s networks, and the response from local innovators was incredibly encouraging — we were excited to see a wave of inspiring, locally rooted innovators step forward. EY’s role was to connect this local entrepreneurial energy with global partnership ambition, helping solutions that are truly fit for context and ready to scale. We’re excited to see the Ripple effects from this collaboration, and realising transformations across the plastic waste and agriculture sectors.”

Pragyal Singh, Partner, Ernst & Young LLP
(TRANSFORM selection panel in South Asia)

3 Identify additional local partners where needed

- a. In-country colleagues can lead this outreach to potential partners, tapping into their own networks, with support from the global team (e.g. providing template emails, briefing documents, slides). Communicate clearly: what's in it for them?
- b. Look for complementarity (see chapter 2). In India, Hindustan Unilever brought in Social Alpha, a venture development platform for science and technology start-ups. In Bangladesh, we worked with SAJIDA Foundation and British Asian Trust. These specialist organisations extended our networks and complemented the strengths of our core partners.
- c. Consider outsourcing coordination to the local partner, so that in-country colleagues are not juggling this with their day jobs.

4 Locally source applications, balancing efficiency with inclusion

- a. Open calls, referrals from impact enterprise support organisations, or referrals from core partner staff members are all possible but each has benefits and drawbacks (see box to the right). Find a balance that works for your capacity and context.
- b. We recommend offering mentoring or support to promising applicants that have limited experience of international funding, for example, at longlisting stage.

"Supporting TRANSFORM to launch the TRANSFORM Climate Challenge in Bangladesh was an insightful experience. As the programme's pipeline curation partner, SAJIDA was intentional about reaching beyond established networks - organising roadshows across multiple districts, engaging more than 320 participants, and ensuring access to pre-application support that addressed barriers around language and documentation, so that grassroots enterprises had a genuine opportunity to participate. SAJIDA's Climate Innovation Fund also provided a broader pipeline to surface high-potential candidates who would benefit from TRANSFORM's accelerated support.

Working with TRANSFORM validated SAJIDA's conviction that climate-focused enterprises represent a genuinely high-impact, investable category in Bangladesh - and deepened our understanding of how best to support innovators in this space."

Sarah Iqbal, Head of Impact Partners, SAJIDA Foundation

FOR CONSIDERATION

Inclusive sourcing: weighing up the benefits and drawbacks

Open calls

- + a greater number and wider range of applicants
- + can raise visibility of the programme among public, media, etc.
- very time-consuming to review
- more low-quality applicants

Referrals from impact enterprise support organisations (e.g. accelerators, funders, incubators)

- + prompts good quality applications
- less inclusive: may entrench existing closed networks

Referrals from core partner staff members

- + ensures applications are more aligned to your priorities
- limits reach to staff networks

5

Locally shortlist grantees – again, balancing efficiency and inclusion

- a. Consider different approaches to shortlisting, weighing up the benefits and drawbacks (see box to the right).
- b. Sourcing can be time-intensive, so consider bringing in additional staff. But ensure this doesn't skew decision-making in favour of one partner.
- c. Consult relevant internal teams. For instance, where proposed projects involved testing ideas with Unilever suppliers, procurement colleagues and the suppliers were both consulted to provide feedback on if this was possible.
- d. Find the tools that suit your selection team. TRANSFORM initially used Word documents to receive applications but later preferred online survey tools. We generally used simple, shared Excel sheets to gather scores and feedback.

FOR CONSIDERATION

Shortlisting approaches: benefits and drawbacks

Independent selection

Each local partner shortlists a set number of applicants to present at a final pitch, according to their preferred sourcing approach. This can be more time-efficient than joint processes, but risks each partner being attached to "their" candidates.

Joint sourcing and selection

All partner organisations review and score every application at every stage, and meet to compare scores and together decide which applicants to take forward to the next stage. This is a more equal and robust process, but much more time-intensive, and can delay the whole process if one partner is delayed.

A combination is also possible

Independent sourcing for a first-round selection, then jointly reviewing detailed applications. This two-phase process worked well for TRANSFORM: first, a short concept note to check eligibility and general fit, then a full proposal.

6

Invite pitches and select

- a. Again, consider the trade-offs when designing pitching processes. Online pitches can be more inclusive and cost effective, but rely on enterprises having access to good WiFi and so, can also be fraught with technical issues. TRANSFORM moved to in-person pitches and paid for enterprises to attend because the quality of the interaction was much better. More pitches in one day means seeing a greater number of possible candidates, but fewer is less tiring for judging panels and therefore potentially more robust and effective.
- b. A facilitator who is not also involved in selection, but who has been involved in the process, is required to run the pitch day and judging process.

"During the TRANSFORM East Africa challenge, we saw many applications from across the region that are coming up with creative, innovative and inspiring solutions towards creating a more sustainable world – and we look forward to harnessing this ecosystem to create a better future for everyone, together."

Hadijah Nannyomo, Partner, Ernst & Young LLP Kenya (TRANSFORM selection panel in East Africa)

7

Conduct due diligence and finalise contracts

With extra consideration for small and early-stage enterprises:

- a. Ensure sufficient capacity for due diligence, especially when earlier stage enterprises are selected. Use global teams for oversight and frameworks. Organise in-person site visits by local staff or third party consultants.
- b. Expect extra handholding during this stage: we found it useful to regularly check in with entrepreneurs via email and WhatsApp to clarify understanding of contracts and help move things forward.
- c. Consider providing extra support to small enterprises to help them get the formal policies and processes in place.

8

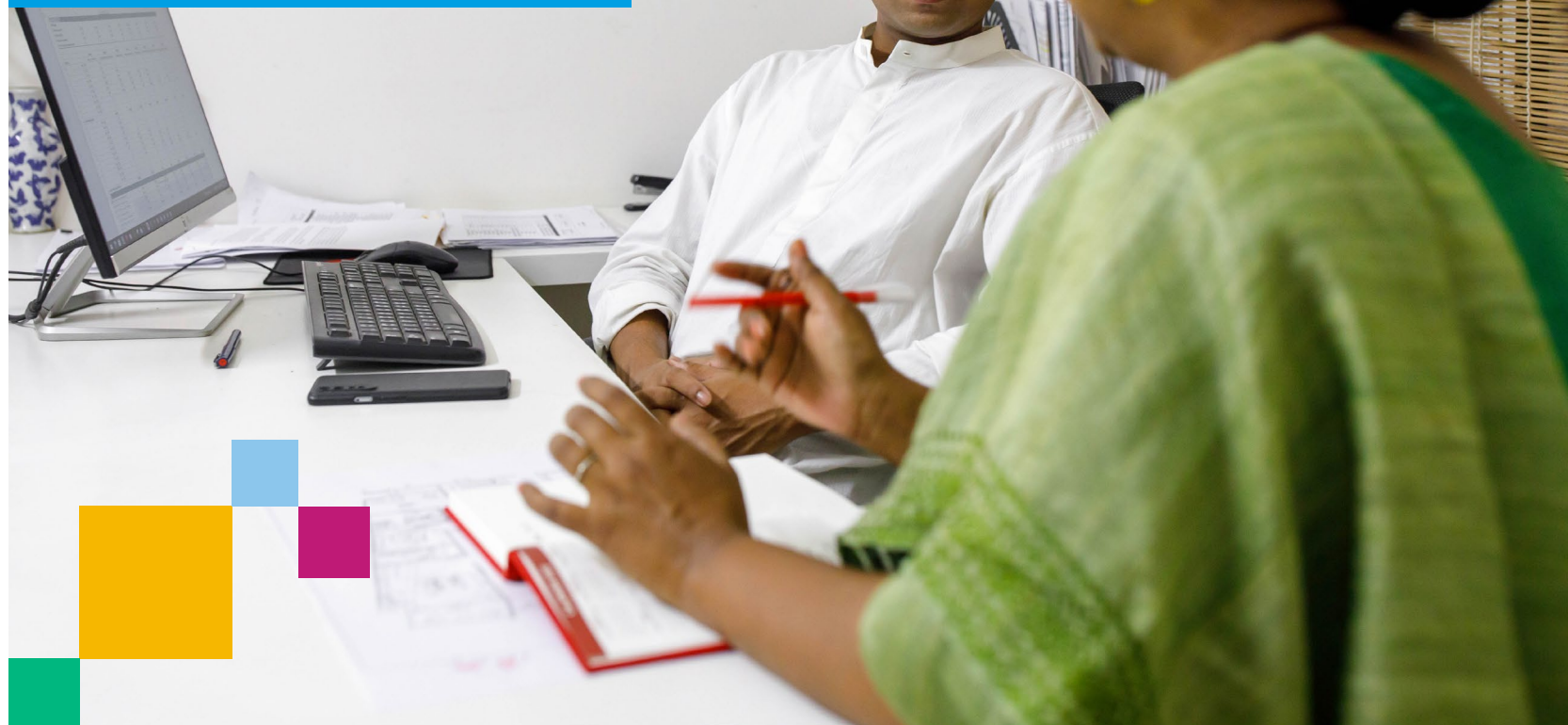
Maintain relationships with funded enterprises

- a. Maintaining relationships with local entrepreneurs is easier when your team members are in the same country – but it still takes proactive effort. Inviting previously supported enterprises to events is one way to help them to continue growing their networks, while ensuring you keep learning from them.

A work in progress

At TRANSFORM, we're proud of the changes we made, but we know that we can always go further – and learn from others – when it comes to shifting power.

For us, it's all about continuous adaption. And an intersectional perspective is vital for examining gender, class, race and other power dynamics, ensuring that marginal groups benefit.



5

PAIR FLEXIBLE FUNDING WITH HANDS-ON BUSINESS SUPPORT

Read this chapter if you're figuring out how to deploy each partner's core skills and resources in a way that sets up impact enterprises for growth and scale, while benefiting the partners too.

Impact enterprises face pressures familiar to any startup

This includes building a solid leadership team, improving operational efficiency and filling skills gaps.

But beyond launching new products or services, these businesses are often also reshaping markets, systems and consumer behaviours. Crucially, their dual focus on profit and impact means they can't afford to cut corners or chase efficiency as their purely commercial peers might (see also chapter 3).

Strategic partners can help by providing funding and sharing their skills, networks and resources. Done well, that support can mean the difference between an enterprise that stagnates or fails, and one that scales up significantly. This chapter talks you through TRANSFORM's approach to providing flexible funding and skills-based support as a trusted partner.

"Social enterprises are multi-mission organisations (focusing on impact and environmental sustainability alongside financial performance) competing with mono-mission, conventional businesses (singularly focused on financial returns). As long as we do not value and economically reward social and environmental impact, the landscape will be tilted in favour of extractive companies. A central barrier to scale is the general lack of access to funding, driven by declines in official development assistance. Many impact enterprises sit between grants and bankable scale: they need patient, fit-for-purpose capital and predictable revenue to professionalise, hire, and expand. Our [research in Africa](#) shows that barriers to growth are structural – they sit in capital markets and public systems, not inside any single enterprise. Enterprises cannot address underwriting norms, procurement thresholds or regulatory recognition on their own."

François Bonnici, Director, Schwab Foundation for Social Entrepreneurship; Member of the Executive Committee, World Economic Forum



FOR CONSIDERATION

What can targeted support look like? The TRANSFORM package

Our selected enterprises received:

- Grant funding of up to £250,000.
- A dedicated Project Lead from Unilever, to provide expertise and industry connections, and act as the enterprise's 'champion' over 12-18 months.
- On request, bespoke technical assistance from EY: full-time consulting (8-12 weeks), one-to-one coaching (typically over six months), or group-based upskilling workshops along with other entrepreneurs.
- Access to an online support hub between 2022-2024, offering:
 - Training on scaling operations
 - Events with industry experts
 - Peer support from fellow enterprises
 - Matching with pro-bono consultants, mentors or leadership coaches
 - Connections to follow-on funders: investors, accelerators, and more.

"One of the most important lessons from the TRANSFORM Support Hub, powered by MovingWorlds, is that capital alone doesn't unlock growth for social enterprises — they need access to markets, strategic expertise, and peer connections. This single platform created a place where enterprises could tap into commercial partnerships, coaching, and acceleration support all in one place. That model also attracted companies like EY, Microsoft, and SAP to contribute their own expertise and networks, which multiplied the value for every enterprise involved. The result was entrepreneurs who weren't just better funded, but better equipped to navigate real commercial challenges and scale sustainably."

**Mark Horoszowski, Co-founder and CEO,
MovingWorlds**

How to go from top-down aid to a partnership of equals

Working in partnership with enterprises is far healthier – and more likely to be effective – than a more hierarchical donor-recipient relationship. What might that look like in practice?

- **Prioritise flexible, adaptive programming** that is locally led, wherever possible (see also bullet 3 below).
- **Clarify your approach and expectations** in the initial call for applications. That helps to attract enterprises ready to engage on a partnership basis.
- **Consider your contracts and agreements:** are you setting rigid targets that serve the funder more than the enterprise? Or can you approach this from a position of trust – agreeing on targets together and allowing flexibility within this?
- **Assign a “Project Lead”** with direct entrepreneurship experience to champion each enterprise within the partnership. When this works well, they act as trusted team members rather than external consultants, with the confidence and mandate to encourage testing, pivoting and where needed, adjust targets. If they don’t yet have the experience, cultivate this capability by creating space, such as monthly community calls, for Project Leads to learn from one another.
- **Find out what enterprises really want from you.** Business support programmes are wasteful when they teach skills that entrepreneurs don’t need or aren’t ready

to invest the time in acquiring. Map out needs and explore where the core partners can help, and where additional expertise is needed.

- **Treat any pro-bono offer as seriously as you would a paid-for service.** For example, before assigning a volunteer to any new enterprise request for help, EY defines a scope of work and runs a competitive internal recruitment process to find the best match.
- **Consider charging enterprises a (small or ‘low-bono’) fee for the most intense consultancy.** This ensures entrepreneurs have ‘skin in the game’ – that they’re truly ready to invest in the process.
- **Facilitate peer-to-peer learning and connection,** for example through meetups and group learning – this can be a powerful addition to learning from other experts.
- **Proactively “offboard” your grantees,** so that support doesn’t stop abruptly. Discuss the end period in good time, tie up loose ends and provide an ongoing contact person.
- **Keep in touch.** Think of past grantees as alumni and find ways to involve them as part of your community.



“Our TRANSFORM Project Lead is part of the team: she is working with us. We felt we can trust this person. She is trying to understand the context and how it can be improved. Even if in some areas she doesn’t have capacity, she tries to connect us to someone else.”

Farhana Rashid, CEO, Bhumijo (Bangladesh)

Money matters – but it needs to be the right kind

Provide patient, flexible capital where possible

This allows enterprises in complex and unpredictable environments a rare opportunity to test and learn, iterate and pivot.

Define the optimum grant size for the enterprises you support

At TRANSFORM, we set a lower limit of £100,000, because due diligence and contracting costs become proportionally high below this amount. Across our portfolio, we looked for a balance between lots of small projects (with relatively high management overheads) and fewer large projects.

Consider reinvesting in successful enterprises

Where an initial grant was particularly successful, we were able to multiply that with a second-round grant (see Kasha and TrashCon case studies on [pages 60 & 63](#)).

Consider optimum timing

It's best to offer funding when it can be truly catalytic. That might mean the Validate stage (see chapter 3, [page 40](#)), often known as the 'valley of death', when high-potential startups can easily fail, simply because they run out of money to get through the expensive stage of testing assumptions.

Adapt funding agreements to specific cases

Where a business's revenue is low compared to the amount being granted you might agree monthly payment milestones rather than quarterly ones.

"Patient capital is a combination of capital and support that is laser-focused on, and even impatient about, perfecting and scaling your solution. The patience comes in not pushing you to profit-maximise or find paths to exit. It's about helping you to build the best possible version of your business, and believing that exits will follow."

Daniel Waldron, Director of Insights, Acumen

"TRANSFORM was designed to bridge donor accountability requirements with entrepreneurial reality, where standardised reporting doesn't always reflect how impact is delivered. The programme combined shared metrics, such as people reached, with enterprise specific measures, enabling projects to adapt in real time without losing sight of their purpose."

Lisa Hawkes, Global Sustainability Senior Manager, Unilever

CASE STUDY

Reinvesting for success: Kasha

Rwanda-based Kasha is a confidential e-commerce platform delivering pharmaceuticals, medical consumables (including stigmatised sexual health products) and essential household goods such as rice, through direct delivery and a network of agents. TRANSFORM supported Kasha on product affordability, consumer acquisition and retention, e-commerce and optimising health promotion.

We then provided additional funding to help integrate micro-credit services into the platform and to expand the agent network across Kenya. The resulting upturn in revenue attracted many millions of dollars in investment, leading to further expansion into South Africa, Uganda, Tanzania, Democratic Republic of Congo, Burundi, Ghana and Egypt. With TRANSFORM's support, Kasha served over 97,000 customers and its network included over 3,000 agents, 57% of whom are women.

Key insight



Reinvesting in a small number of successful enterprises (e.g. through a second round of grant funding) can generate wider impact than funding numerous, small pilot projects.



“We have sold millions of products to women across East Africa, partnering with TRANSFORM to test what products work best and how to reach our end consumer. Eventually femtech grew into an industry and Kasha is now the market leader.”

Joanna Bichsel, Founder and CEO, Kasha (Africa)

What can bespoke technical assistance look like?

The primary consideration for providing technical assistance is simple: what do enterprises actually need?

Entrepreneurs at different stages of growth face different challenges, and their ability to get real value from any technical assistance will depend on where they are on their scaling journey. So TRANSFORM's technical assistance – whether coaching, workshops or consulting – was always tailored to the particular needs of the enterprise.

For enterprises working on specific growth challenges (operating model design, customer experience optimisation, HR strategy, IT strategy and so on):

EY teams provided **pro-bono professional consulting**, working with impact enterprises for up to 12 weeks full-time, in-person or virtually, and leveraging methodologies and know-how just as EY does in its work with commercial clients.

For example, TRANSFORM provided Indonesian circular economy enterprise **Alner** with both catalytic funding and hands-on support. An EY team provided six weeks of pro-bono consulting to help refine Alner's operating model, strengthen execution discipline and support its next phase of growth. Alner's leaders valued the combination of capital, confidence and practical knowledge.

As CEO and Co-founder Bintang Ekananda told us: *"Working with EY truly felt like collaborating with a team invested in our success. Their practical advice, data-driven insights and actionable recommendations have been transformative for our company. TRANSFORM's distinctive combination of financial support, credibility and tailored guidance facilitated us to grow from 500 to 1,441 refill stations, add five new team members, and achieve ISO QMS certification."*



For enterprises looking for sounding boards, fresh perspectives and access to new networks:

TRANSFORM provided dedicated coaching. EY and Unilever leaders were matched to an enterprise founder, typically for six months. Coaches worked directly with these founders, providing insights that were practical, bespoke and grounded in world-class expertise.

Elizabeth Mwangi, Founder of **Gwiji** – a Kenyan tech-based social enterprise that economically empowers low-income women working as informal workers, with professional skills and dignified, safe work opportunities – says the programme *“took us to a level we couldn’t have reached on our own”*. Gwiji was struggling to scale its B2B model and expand its client network organically. Strategy sessions with coaches from EY and Unilever resulted in the idea of offering corporate clients a cleaning voucher – a one-off, free trial. This helped to build brand awareness and relationships with potential clients. This led to entry into the corporate market, a leap in cleaners’ daily earnings from under US\$2 to US\$8, and a growing network of over 5,000 female cleaners. Furthermore, the mentoring and friendship between the founder and her coaches continued after the official sessions ended.

Rod Wolfenden, Africa Clients and Industries Leader at EY, and Sandro Cavaleri, M&A and Integration Director at Unilever, co-mentored Rakhee Mediratta from **Powered by People Kenya** – a B2B tech platform that connects small-batch makers to global markets. The trio remarked on the strong sense of mutual learning and the humility evident in their conversations. Rakhee would present a challenge, and together they would work through it – no one claimed to have all the answers. Indeed, Rakhee describes the coaching as a “partnership”, while Rod describes it as a *“mutual learning process between all stakeholders. The diversity of thought that each of us brought to the table is game-changing.”*



For enterprises looking to build skills and knowledge:

EY teams facilitated upskilling workshops. These brought together 15-20 enterprises in sessions of between 90 minutes and half a day, on topics such as pitching, AI skills, finances, managing talent and so on. Workshops combined practical training, group mentoring and peer-to-peer discussions, enabling participants to learn from each other and connect as a community.

This suite of technical assistance was available to all selected enterprises, even after their official TRANSFORM project ended, as part of our continued commitment to helping them scale.

“Growth can feel like a moving target when you’re in the middle of it. The EY workshops have helped me slow down long enough to understand what I’m actually building – and why. That shift in perspective has been more valuable than any quick fix. Every session has been focused, practical, and directly relevant to where my business is right now. No fluff – just the right questions, the right tools, and a clearer head after each session.”

Olufunto Boroffice, Founder and CEO, Chanja Datti (Nigeria)

CASE STUDY

TrashCon and WoWMaterials: a scaling success story

India generates 200,000 tonnes of waste per day, and less than 5% gets recycled. **TrashCon**'s "TrashBot" mechanically segregates mixed waste into degradable and non-degradable parts. Non-recyclable plastics are converted into WoWMaterials – biomass briquettes and a material similar to MDF that can be repurposed for furniture or construction.

Through TRANSFORM, EY consultants worked with TrashCon, building their commercial business model, to help them transition from a donor-supported organisation to a profit-making enterprise – with WoWMaterials generating the enterprise's recurring revenue. TrashCon and WoWMaterials have since scaled up its capacity 100-fold, secured US\$7m in orders, and reached a valuation of US\$40 million. Through TRANSFORM, TrashCon strengthened its commercial model and scaled its operations significantly, including expanding into WoWMaterials and transitioning towards a more sustainable, revenue-generating business model.

Our support was provided in two phases: the first grant supported tech development, and the second helped them to pivot the business model from selling machines to operating recycling plants as well as WoWMaterials production facilities. They were guided along the way by India-based professionals from Unilever and EY.

Key insights



- Grant money that is flexible rather than tied to rigid requirements is highly valuable when it comes to innovation, which is always unpredictable.
- Providing guidance at the right moment in a startup's journey is critical. Experts should be sufficiently experienced and confident in the field of entrepreneurship, and able to think through the risks without being over-cautious.
- A trusting relationship between advisors and entrepreneurs ensures the latter do not feel squeezed in. Entrepreneurs may value reassurance and sense-checking their own ideas from a 'friend' just as much as more concrete advice on what to do.



"Before TRANSFORM we were a proof of concept, a vision, with maybe four or five in our team. Today we are 170. TRANSFORM gave us that space to really build something... That helped us showcase to the world that this is possible. That's when investors started coming to us; customers started coming to us."

Nivedha RM, Founder & CEO, TrashCon and WoWMaterials (India)

Why providing business support goes two ways

As we've seen, supporting impact enterprises doesn't have to involve powerful, resource-rich institutions helping small SMEs in a one-way flow of resources. In fact, we've seen enormous value for our three core partner organisations and their employees (read more in chapter 1). Benefits include:

Challenging the status quo

Impact enterprises bring disruptive, innovative thinking that challenges existing ways of doing things within large organisations that may be slow-moving or tied to legacy ideas.

Unparalleled insight

Entrepreneurs' ability to operate with very limited resources, their insight into business models in low-income markets and their direct experience of a particular sector, geography and customer group brings new knowledge into large institutions that are more distanced from the 'front lines' of doing business.

Employee professional development

Core partner employees who work with these enterprises get to develop and stretch their skills in new contexts, learning about the real-life challenges facing low-income and marginalised communities.

Employee commitment to social purpose

When employees work with impact entrepreneurs, they gain more appreciation of the social value of their skills and more connection to their organisation's social purpose.

Employee engagement

At EY, internally advertised TRANSFORM volunteering opportunities always attracted more applicants than needed. EY has found that staff who participate in such skills-based volunteering initiatives are more likely to stay with the organisation, more likely to get promoted, and they're significantly more likely to recommend the organisation as a great place to work.





"I led a project to define Baeru's strategic objectives, assess their business model and build a value case for investment. This gave me insight into the challenges that social enterprises face and the agility and entrepreneur mindset and determination needed to succeed. I was proud to work with the founder, Divya Hegde and contribute to the incredible impact that Baeru is creating."

Holly McCann, Manager, Business Consulting, Ernst & Young LLP

"TRANSFORM projects have given me insight into the workings of the real world outside of Unilever and deepened my understanding of what it takes to deliver successful cross-sector partnerships."

Meera Vijayan, Sustainability Specialist, Unilever South Africa and TRANSFORM Project Lead

"Through TRANSFORM, I learned how powerful it is to combine corporate structure with startup-style agility. Working with Concept Loop showed me how much impact a small, purpose-driven team can make with limited resources, as long as they stay creative, fast, and connected to real community needs. I've taken this problem-solving mindset into Unilever to design and build a complete dashboard solution internally, instead of involving external vendors."

Syeda Ariba Shahid, Assistant Corporate Safety, Health and Environment Manager, Unilever & TRANSFORM Project Lead

How to equip enterprises for future growth and scale

Combining grant funding with business support gives impact enterprises a strong foundation for growth. But ultimately, the primary objective should be to help these businesses to thrive long after the initiative's formal support comes to an end. So how can partners set grantees up for success? Learn from TRANSFORM:

1 Design dedicated, additional programmes

In 2024-2025, we provided extra support and funding to five TRANSFORM enterprises to help them to attract further funding; we scaled the learnings to run a follow on programme for 20 enterprises in 2026.

2 Use the partners' networks and convening power

Showcase your grantees where possible. After **Loowatt**, an African sanitation enterprise, joined us on a conference panel, they secured a £50,000 grant from someone they met in the room.

3 Help enterprises to understand the investor and market landscape

So they can respond accordingly. TRANSFORM grantee **Ainer** used investor intelligence to pivot from targeting conventional VCs, to prioritising grant funding alongside private capital, aiming for an even split between the two. Ultimately, it secured a grant and matched equity funding.

4 Foster a culture of ongoing operational improvement to build investor confidence

Encourage enterprises to demonstrate clear growth plans, strong financial controls and operational improvements. This includes bringing in additional expertise where needed. **Drinkwell** and **Wecyclers** both appointed experienced Chief Financial Officers (CFOs) to improve financial controls and reporting. Drinkwell also hired a Chief Technical Officer (CTO). These hires enhance internal processes while signalling reliability and professionalism to potential investors.

5 Consider standardising a clear, step-by-step approach to make enterprises investment ready

Help enterprises to work through three stages: preparation (e.g. creating pitch decks and financial models); engagement (targeted outreach and managing investor discussions); and closing (negotiating terms and finalising agreements).

6 Pair grant funds with specialist advice on fundraising

For example, on structured portfolio monitoring, financial modelling and governance structuring as well as risk mitigation. Drinkwell used TRANSFORM's grant funding to build compliance and invest in investor outreach. Ultimately it raised £229k in grants, £156k in loans and a convertible note of just under £400k.

6

BRING ENTERPRISES INTO PARTNERS' VALUE CHAINS

Read this chapter if you're looking to work with impact enterprises through your core business – for mutual benefit.

The case for social procurement

Impact enterprises are agile, creative problem-solvers. Meanwhile, large corporates and public sector organisations are hungry for new innovations to solve their challenges and may have the resources to turn them into reality. Public-private partnerships offer a useful structure for fuelling mutually beneficial innovation.

Social procurement is one way to take public-private partnerships to the next stage. Seeking out suppliers that prioritise people and planet alongside profit is a powerful way to demonstrate your values. It can also:

- Reduce your environmental footprint.
- Increase positive impact aligned to organisational goals – such as local job creation, employment of vulnerable or marginalised groups and support to SMEs.
- Allow you to invest in impact as part of core business rather than as an additional expense.
- Help you stand out from competitors.
- **Reduce the risks of unethical practices*** within your supply chains.
- Make your supply chain more diverse and resilient.

Many corporates are taking this opportunity seriously. Under the Schwab Foundation's Rise Ahead Pledge for example, 25 corporate signatories have collectively invested over US\$525 million in social innovation since the launch of the pledge in 2023.

**Analysis of more than 180,000 global supply chain events in the [State of Social Procurement research](#) shows that social risks such as strikes, protests and disputes, make up one in five supply chain disruptions. This strengthens the case for more resilient and inclusive supplier ecosystems.*

CASE STUDY

Supply chain benefits: a new market for Unilever, growth for Kasha

In 2018, Unilever launched its Lifebuoy soap brand exclusively through ecommerce platform Kasha in Rwanda. It was difficult for Unilever to penetrate the more rural and lower-income market – but that's where Kasha has a strong and proven operation through its agent network. This was pre-COVID, and there was little mass market awareness of an antibacterial soap: consumer comparisons for soaps were mostly made on price. So Kasha ran educational campaigns on the benefits of handwashing. That generated sales and distribution of Lifebuoy soap, and provided valuable insights for Unilever. Kasha recommended a change in bundling and pricing strategy, which Unilever implemented, and Lifebuoy became the category leader as a result.



Meanwhile, for an impact enterprise, securing a major buyer is one of the most powerful ways to develop an innovation and expand its reach. After all, if you want to achieve scale, you can get there much more quickly by partnering with an organisation that already has it (like Unilever, which owns hundreds of brands in 190+ countries) than by working alone.

Impact enterprises:

- Gain credibility, legitimacy and visibility – smoothing the path to securing further partners, buyers or capital.
- Get help to overcome the “missing middle” in enterprise financing and transform cash flow, by shifting from reliance on grants or unpredictable income towards more stable, market-based revenue.
- Can more easily attract investment because future income is more reliable.
- Can quickly expand impact by reaching new markets.
- Potentially influence a large organisation’s long-term strategy.
- Learn valuable lessons about how to integrate into corporate supply chains for business evolution.

But the benefits don’t stop there – they extend beyond the enterprise and far into the wider community in which it operates. A purchase agreement helps an enterprise to grow, which leads to more people earning an income either as direct employees, or perhaps as franchise owners or entrepreneurs. This stimulates economic growth and can address inequality by providing work to people from underrepresented groups.

So how do you integrate impact enterprises into your value chain?

Different routes for integration

You can engage impact enterprises elsewhere in your value chains. For example:

In research and development (R&D)

To access innovation and test new approaches in a low-risk (to the buyer) way, which can build long-term, organisational resilience.

In procurement

To buy goods and services.

In sales

To potentially access new geographic markets (e.g. informal or rural populations) and/or underrepresented consumer groups (e.g. women).

In marketing

To reach new consumers via new channels and trusted partners.

CASE STUDY

Three ways we integrated enterprises: TRANSFORM's experience

There's rarely one template for integration into an organisation's supply chain – that's part of what makes it a complex process. Stay open to different possibilities as you look for win-wins.

We've found success with three general approaches:

1 Supplier partnership

Waste management specialist **Hasiru Dala Innovations**, in India, helps to professionalise informal waste work by providing opportunities for entrepreneurship, fair wages and safe working conditions. With support from TRANSFORM, the business increased the capacity of its plastic waste aggregation facilities tenfold, secured Fair Trade Guaranteed Enterprise status from the World Fair Trade Organisation (WFTO) and contributed recycled plastic feedstock towards Unilever's Sunsilk Naturals shampoo bottle, which incorporates 50% recycled content.



2 Advertising partnership

TRANSFORM supported the expansion of impact enterprise **Bhumijo** in Bangladesh, which builds and maintains hygienic public toilets. FCDO funded the building of facilities which tested new designs and EY supported with a framework for growth and business development, while Unilever brand Domestos signed an on-site advertising deal. This secured Bhumijo's business model financially while allowing Domestos to live its brand purpose of "winning the war on unsafe sanitation". (see Boost and Kasha case studies on [pages 37](#) & [62](#) for examples of new routes to market in sales).

3 Corporate responsibility partnership

In India, under the Companies Act 2013, all publicly listed companies are mandated to spend 2% of their net profits on corporate social responsibility (CSR). Over the past few years, Hindustan Unilever Ltd has partnered with several TRANSFORM enterprises, engaging them as implementation partners for specific CSR initiatives – particularly in the areas of plastic waste management and circularity.

4 Innovation partnership

See case study on the following page.



CASE STUDY

Teaming up for innovation: Unilever's refill pilots

Unilever's target is for 100% of its plastic packaging to be reusable, recyclable or compostable by 2030 (for rigid plastic) and by 2035 (for flexible plastic). But even a multinational can't discover and develop alternative packaging alone. By supporting refill and reuse pilot projects, Unilever gets valuable insights to guide its own strategy, while also supporting the wider field of alternative waste management.

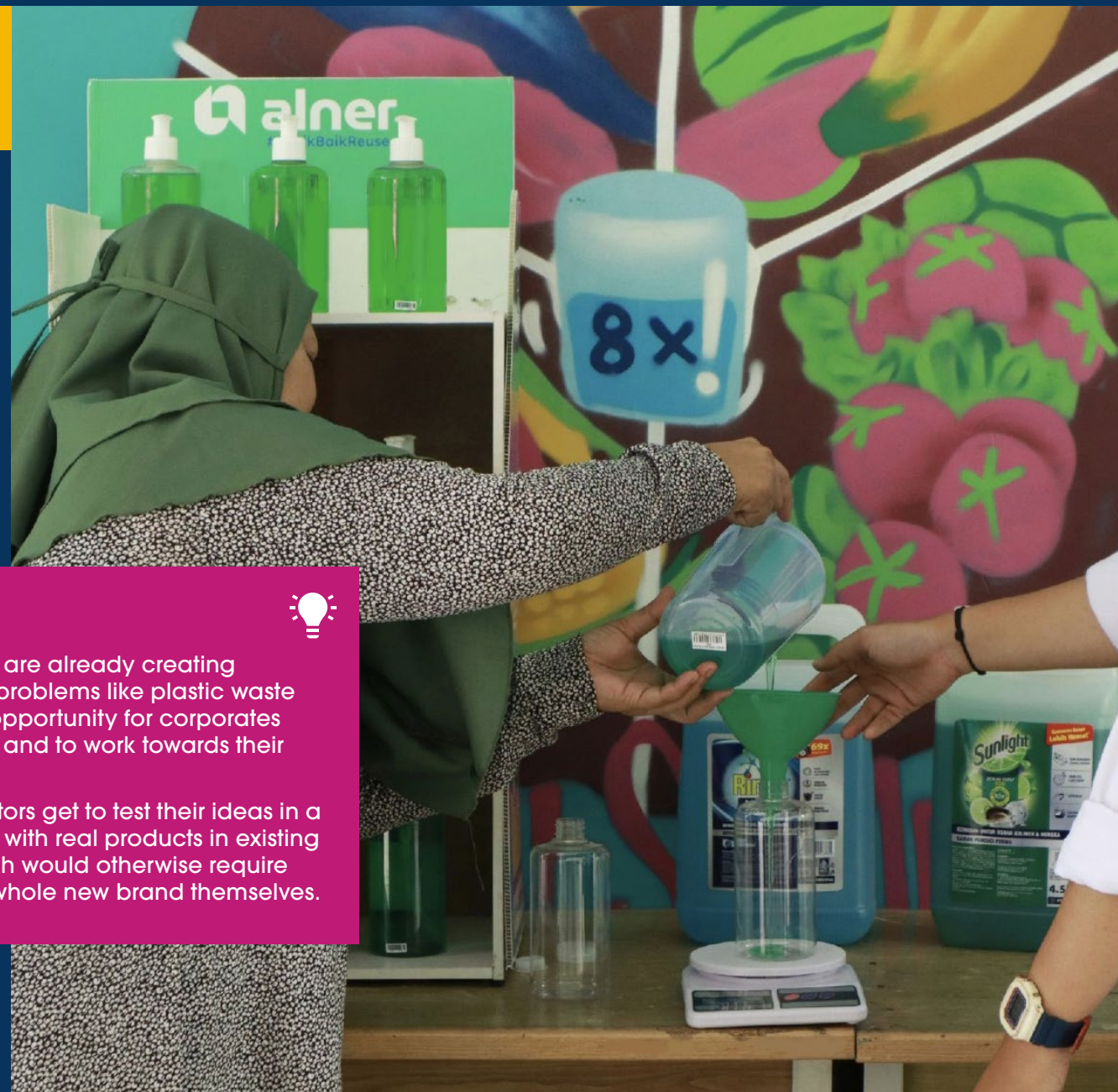
This includes working with TRANSFORM enterprises such as **Alner** in Indonesia to introduce manual refill stations to local household stores. With Unilever Indonesia and TRANSFORM support, Alner built, piloted and scaled a low-tech refill solution for Unilever's Sunlight, Wipol and Rinso brands, specifically adapted to low-income customers.

Unilever also partnered with TRANSFORM enterprise **Bopinc** in Bangladesh to test self-service, cost-effective refill models, drawing on Bopinc's expertise in early consumer engagement, innovative distribution models and creative behaviour change campaigns. The refill machines, developed in collaboration with **Smartfill**, provide real-time sales data, helping to better understand consumer preferences and price points, which then allow the development of more targeted product offers.

Key insights



- Impact enterprises are already creating solutions to major problems like plastic waste – offering a huge opportunity for corporates to learn from them and to work towards their own goals.
- Meanwhile innovators get to test their ideas in a real environment – with real products in existing retail settings, which would otherwise require them to launch a whole new brand themselves.



Barriers to supply chain integration – and how to overcome them

It's difficult for a small enterprise to break in to global supply chains – because they might not know who to contact within a large organisation, how to get their attention or how to build initial trust.

Sometimes impact enterprises need upfront financial investment to prove their model, or to pay for the necessary facilities so they can produce sufficient quantities: the enterprise cannot pay, and the buyer is unable to fund this kind of experimentation, creating an innovation stalemate. Sometimes there are mismatches in terms of volume, quality or pricing – for example, impact enterprises may need to charge a premium for their products or services, while cost is always one of the key criteria reviewed by procurement. And a large corporate or government buyer typically requires any new supplier to fulfil extensive requirements and meet stringent standards. These can be too cumbersome for a small company.

Public-private partnerships can change this dynamic, by providing some of the upfront financing to enterprises, helping them to understand what large organisations expect, and connecting them to the right buyers. In TRANSFORM's case they can ensure that their own procurement teams at Unilever are aware of the opportunities and benefits to them of 'buying social', too.

INSIGHT

Spotlight on public procurement

When it comes to public procurement, the potential is also vast. Global public procurement spending today is an estimated US\$13 trillion annually. EU member states spend €2 trillion of this annually, accounting for 13.3% of the bloc's GDP. In Europe, 29% of social enterprises say most of their revenue comes from government contracts. And in the UK, all public procurement (worth over £380 billion a year) must now consider social value under the Procurement Act.

But these opportunities remain untapped. For example, only 11% of social enterprises in Africa say they participate in public procurement. Legal tools for social procurement are underused, possibly because they are not well known. Social procurement also lags behind green procurement in terms of frameworks and sophistication. There is still a strong culture of awarding contracts to the lowest bidder, and this is hard to change. Both private and public procurement often focus on low price and low risk, which tends to exclude suppliers who put impact first.

Changing this requires:

1. Clearer criteria and qualification pathways benefitting impact suppliers.
2. Procurement rules that weigh social value alongside price and quality.
3. Practical ecosystem infrastructure like supplier registries, buyer guidance and simplified tendering.

The Schwab Foundation's social procurement work also points to regulation as a lever that can embed social expectations into value chains across jurisdictions. Public-private partnerships can accelerate this by co-designing registries and standards, piloting frameworks and outcome-based contracts, and financing supplier readiness so more impact enterprises can compete.

Source: Schwab Foundation

How to support supply chain integration – tips from the TRANSFORM experience

Our experience has shown that successful value or supply chain integration relies on **enterprise readiness, corporate commitment and sustained relationship-building**. What does that look like in practice? We suggest the following steps at each stage of the process.

1 Programme design

Planning

Consider supply chain integration from the early stages of overall programme design: map out what the relevant core partner needs and where innovations could play a role.

Team setup

Local team engagement is essential, preferably through a locally based Project Lead who can be an internal ally – we found that strong, committed Project Leads were the single most important driver of success. Assign a team member responsible for supply chain integration in each country, who can help bridge the various teams, e.g. Project Leads, procurement, R&D.

Decision-makers

Clarify organisational structure and where decision-makers sit.

Expectations

Align different internal corporate teams - innovation, sustainability, and procurement functions often operate with different risk thresholds. Clarify the potential buyer's technical expectations (for example on product quality, volume, specifications) and compliance requirements (policies, audits). Consider creating a checklist or guidance document to help onboard future enterprise partners.

Policies

Understand any policies and targets at the buyer organisation that incentivise engagement with SMEs. For instance, one TRANSFORM Project Lead helped an enterprise to negotiate shorter payment terms in a contract by finding the Unilever policy that showed they were entitled to this.

2 Enterprise selection and contracting

Criteria

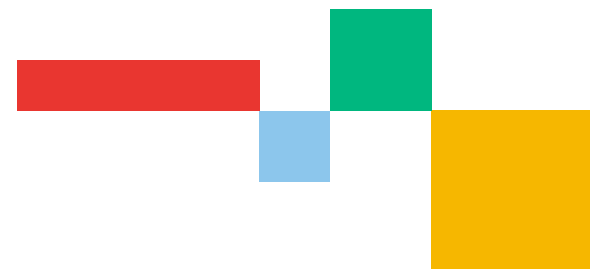
Select enterprises based on both strategic relevance and commercial maturity, not only impact potential.

Selection

Ensure relevant people are in the room when selecting enterprises – for example, the colleague responsible for procurement or plastic innovation (but be clear on how much and when in the process they can influence the selection process).

Contracting

Draft grant agreements or contracts that allow enterprises to work with competitors, rather than limiting them to any exclusive agreements.



3 Project phase: supporting a specific enterprise

Alignment

Workshop with your enterprise how their solution can be positioned to deliver to the buying organisation's internal strategy and culture, helping 'translate' this into its internal language.

Senior buy-in

Get relevant senior leaders on board at the start of the project and ensure the collaboration is aligned with their core priorities, e.g. sustainable sourcing targets, potential cost reductions, market development or supply chain resilience. Ideally, a senior leader becomes a proactive champion for the enterprises and brings others in the organisation along through their passion and belief in the business. Organising site visits and building relationships with senior leaders early can help to achieve this. Senior buy-in accelerates internal approvals, unlocks cross-functional support and ensures visibility.

Navigation

Help your enterprise to understand the stakeholders – access to an organisational chart is a powerful resource and often hard to glean from the outside.

Business support

Design business support to include guidance on what the buyer needs and how the process typically works. Provide coaching and ensure the enterprise keeps up momentum and demonstrates improvement and commitment.

Realistic expectations

When communicating with the buyer, position the enterprise as a strategic opportunity with potential to scale, without overpromising. Communicate early and often. Formalise expectations early: pilots should be underpinned by written assumptions, timelines, and success criteria that survive staff changes.

Scope

Work towards small-scale pilots, given the challenges of supplying large volumes, before agreeing more ambitious deals. Provide as much clarity as possible, for example on specific amounts of product to be delivered.

Sustain momentum and champion the enterprise both internally and externally

Follow up with internal contacts on behalf of the enterprise you are championing to ensure timely responses. Use PR and external validation to boost momentum and raise the enterprise's profile, for example through events, showcases, awards or media coverage.

4 Continued engagement

Throughout each of the above stages, the partnership's supply chain integration lead should engage with both corporate staff and entrepreneurs, as the impetus for a new partnership can come from either side. **Allow for an iterative process of gathering information**, and lots of back and forth between the two sides. Continue exploring colleagues' pain points while nurturing your network to discover promising impact enterprises.

Focus time and energy on strong potential leads with greatest strategic alignment rather than speculative prospects. Dedicate time and support to getting them corporate-ready through a tailored plan, and bring multiple prospects to colleagues in one meeting for maximum efficiency wherever possible.

5 Project phase: supporting a specific enterprise

Sometimes things don't go according to plan – the key is to keep learning from what works and what doesn't.

Provide detailed feedback so that the enterprise can build on the experience.

Beyond buying agreements: how supply chain support sparks other opportunities

Working with Unilever through TRANSFORM often allowed enterprises to test and prove their models in real-world conditions.

In some cases, collaboration led to proof of concept, and enterprises went on to secure agreements with other corporates. Successes include:

- Fairtrade recycled plastics provider **Hasiru Dala Innovations** went on to provide clothing brand H&M with buttons for their garments.
- **Boost**, a B2B commerce platform which allows retailers to order products via WhatsApp, has signed commercial deals with both Unilever and other FMCG companies.

In the case of its **Mint with Purpose** project, TRANSFORM played a facilitation role. It brought together **Seva Trust** (an NGO promoting education and development in rural India), **DSM-Firmenich** (a global science-based company and leader in nutrition, health and taste), and **Norex** (a supplier operating within the mint supply chain), around a shared commitment to enhance smallholder livelihoods. The project eventually linked mint farmers in India with toothpaste manufacturer Haleon.

At the same time, integrating enterprises into the supply chains of large organisations is not always easy, and many early discussions don't lead to a purchase agreement.

This was also the case at TRANSFORM, where many enterprises we engaged with did not end up working directly with Unilever brands. But in the process, they gained valuable experience. They got a better sense of quality, volume and pricing expectations, and became better positioned to work with other large FMCG buyers, including Unilever's competitors. For example, Unilever looked into buying from one Indian agritech startup, but it didn't result in a commercial partnership. While not all engagements progressed to commercial integration, these interactions helped enterprises better understand Unilever's quality and scale requirements, alongside providing actionable feedback to strengthen their readiness for large-scale supply chains.

Where there was no direct link to Unilever brands, TRANSFORM was sometimes able to help enterprises to access other buyers. For example, we connected sanitation enterprise **Drinkwell** to municipal authorities in Bangladesh, playing a role in the government adoption of this innovation.

In September 2024, EY connected waste management **Baeru** with 30 leads from Nike's Responsible Sourcing Global Team, engaging them on Baeru's model and helping the enterprise brainstorm how to fit into corporate supply chains, like Nike.



“Hasiru Dala Innovations was able to engage with global companies such as Hindustan Unilever, H&M and Cofresco, thanks to the funding and business support offered by TRANSFORM. The initiative helped us upgrade our plastic waste aggregation centre and to be recognised as a Fair Trade Guaranteed Enterprise by WFTO. Our success with these corporates was also due in large part to internal champions within each company, whose belief in our work helped us navigate complex Research and Development, and procurement processes.”

**Shekar Prabhakar, Co-founder and CEO,
Hasiru Dala Innovations (India)**



7

PROACTIVELY MANAGE YOUR PORTFOLIO

This chapter is for you if your partnership is up and running, but you want to stay relevant and raise the bar. Read on for a checklist for proactive partnerships.



Adapting for relevance and impact

Your partnership is up and running and you are working with a brilliant cohort of enterprises. Your job isn't done, however. Context changes quickly and what worked last year might not be fit for purpose today. How you manage your portfolio needs to reflect that.

Proactively developing your portfolio – reviewing what's working, building on success and learning from failure as you seek out new grantees – translates into stronger focus, relevance and impact.

This might mean seeking diversity through a greater mix of business models, geographies and approaches (while remaining within the scope of your partnership's purpose), to tap into innovation from new or unexpected places. Or it might mean responding to external events or to windows of opportunity like political or public interest in a particular sector or issue.

Sometimes it's about pre-empting the evolving priorities of the core partner organisations – for example, changing sustainability focus areas. This isn't always easy, but if you've established a strong partnership (see chapter 2), you'll be well-positioned to ride the waves, and make the most of opportunities as they arise.



Four ways to proactively manage your portfolio

1 Build in flexibility from the outset

- Ensure a broad enough scope for the partnership. TRANSFORM's overarching focus on low-income households allowed us to shift from energy projects towards advancing the circular economy and reducing plastic waste as this aligned better with the opportunities Unilever could provide through its value chain.
- Establish a working culture that welcomes the unpredictability of innovation. Partnership leads can model this by demonstrating openness to changes of direction. Proactively discuss lessons learned and pivots. Allow partners to hear directly from entrepreneurs to build their understanding.
- Create a theory of change and monitoring and evaluation system that allows for constant improvement and adaptation as you learn and progress.
- Establish strong, regular communication to help build resilience to external or unforeseen shocks. This was a major lesson at TRANSFORM when the Covid-19 pandemic hit (see case study on the following page).

2 Regularly review your purpose, priorities and governance

- Return to the partnership Venn diagram (see chapter 2, [page 25](#)) periodically. Discuss what has changed, and any implications for your portfolio. Is it time to review your thematic priorities?
- Review the overall balance. For example, you might have agreed that a portion of enterprises you support will be more relevant to one partner than others: is the balance still working?
- Review your governance. Now that you've been working in partnership, can any processes be simplified? Can any decisions be delegated?

3 Use your portfolio to respond to windows of opportunity

- Shifting political and public attitudes can be an opportunity for your programme to expand into new thematic areas of impact. At TRANSFORM, securing internal buy-in for a shift towards reducing plastic waste as part of our thematic priorities was part of a wider interest in this issue: David Attenborough's Blue Planet II documentary had captured public and media attention and funders wanted to act swiftly on plastic.

4 Keep learning and pursuing best practice

- Adjust for inclusion. Understand the local context, then consider what you can adapt to better include marginalised groups (see box on 'How to embed gender inclusion' and TRANSFORM case studies on [pages 83-85](#)).
- Help your enterprises to gather data and learn so that they can continue to build on their impact (see 'The power of data collection' [page 82](#)).
- Capture the lessons learned from failures – and communicate these internally.
- Invest in professional development among core partners, through further training, site visits, attending industry events, etc. Each of TRANSFORM's core partners offer training as part of our organisations, but we can see the value in standardising this across the initiative.
- Communicate your partnership learnings externally (see next chapter 8), while also learning from insights shared by other partnerships.
- Test new directions, create pilots and invest in research to fill knowledge gaps.

CASE STUDY

How to weather the storms together: insights from our Covid-19 experience

Unforeseen events and shocks don't have to spell the end of the partnership, as we learned in 2020. When Covid-19 hit, we quickly launched the Survive & Thrive initiative, a platform to enable impact enterprises to survive by receiving business continuity support, and to thrive by pivoting quickly to contribute to the crisis response efforts, with additional grant funding. The aim was to mount an impact enterprise-led response to the pandemic while building resilience for the future of impact entrepreneurship.

We were also able to quickly respond to the Covid 19 pandemic outside of TRANSFORM. The **FCDO** and **Unilever** partnered with the **London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine** to launch the £100 million Hygiene & Behaviour Change Coalition. Together we provided funding, technical assistance and hygiene products to over 20 non-governmental organisations, which in turn reached more than 1.2 billion people. TRANSFORM was a blueprint for this partnership: it would not have been possible without the relationships, trust and contractual templates that were already in place.

Later, we were able to renew funding for a second phase of TRANSFORM, from 2020-2025. Our business case highlighted that the spirit and ingenuity of impact enterprises was needed more than ever in the post-Covid world, and that our partnership was uniquely positioned to support them.

Key insights



- Strong communication with the enterprises is essential to gain a good understanding of what support they most need when things are changing rapidly.
- A partnership of trust is vital when it comes to taking risks together. Commitment to the overall vision of the partnership, rather than the specific route to get there, makes it easier to agree on adaptations.
- Clear governance structures and a setup that includes ongoing communication (very regular meetings) allow for quick decision-making when needed. Creating temporary subcommittees and delegating specific aspects help move things on in times of high pressure.
- Strong programme management and coordination skills within the partnership become an even greater asset in moments of crisis.
- External shocks bring risks for your programme and all those you work with, but also opportunities to adapt and potentially make more impact – if you can be flexible and proactive.



CASE STUDY

The power of data collection

The TRANSFORM Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) system has collected gender and disability disaggregated data from 2022. This includes data on people reached, income generated, customers and clients, and wider communities impacted. From 2024, the M&E system also included data on the gender of leaders and founders of supported startups.

Saltech Design Labs, an Indian circular economy startup, used the power of data to attract investment and redesign its waste recycling operations. It has also established a five-year public-private partnership with the Gandhinagar Municipal Corporation (Capital City ULB, Govt. of Gujarat) to co-invest in a recycling plant in Gandhinagar city that converts plastic, construction and industrial waste into materials for public infrastructure. Alternate revenue from EPR credits will be shared to recoup the public investment.

TRANSFORM's guidance on monitoring, evaluation and learning played an important role. By developing a theory of change and setting up systems to collect data such as amount of waste recycled, carbon emissions etc., Saltech was able to better understand its impact and to convey this to prospective investors.

Using gender-disaggregated employment data, Saltech began tracking permanent and temporary jobs by male and female workers and used these insights to adopt more inclusive hiring practices. For example, at a recycling plant it set up for the Somnath Temple to upcycle plastic waste into construction blocks, Saltech's active involvement and suggestions led to the employment of seven women and one man to operate the facility.

Saltech also used impact data to design its recycling systems to meet women's needs – with conveyor belts to minimise lifting heavy weights, on-site accommodation for workers and their families, and company transport to ensure the safety of those travelling far distances to and from the plant.

“Social enterprises often aim to effect behaviour change. Any business model or theory of change must adopt a behaviour-change lens in both the framework and the measurement indicators. This approach is essential for internal learning and for wider communication.”

**Dr Deepti Sastry, Measurement expert,
Integrative Solutions**





How to embed gender inclusion across your programme

At TRANSFORM, we commissioned a gender expert to review our programme and recommend changes to make it more inclusive. This is a snapshot of the recommendations (we were not able to implement all of these before the end of the programme).

Outreach

- Make sure all messaging, media products and communications about your support to entrepreneurs is gender-sensitive (including in the choice of graphics, language, colours).
- Liaise with relevant local and national women and women-in-business organisations to reach more potential applicants.

Application

- Adjust core criteria to mention women as a particular target group for an impact project. Prompt specific responses on how the enterprise tackles problems that are specific to women, how it includes women (as employees, suppliers, sellers or customers), what specific gender-inclusive policies and/or practices are in place or to be developed, and how it has impacted women to date. This ensures the emphasis on gender equity is clearly communicated.
- Require applicants to give the gender breakdown of founders, owners and leaders.
- Give extra support to women entrepreneurs, who may have had less experience of public speaking, to prepare for live pitching.

“TRANSFORM has been instrumental in helping us move from intent to execution. Their support enabled us to build a structured, industry-linked skilling and placement model for inclusive blue-collar employment for people with disabilities, strengthen our training infrastructure, and demonstrate that inclusive employment can work at scale. Beyond funding, TRANSFORM brought strategic guidance and ecosystem credibility that accelerated employer adoption and deepened our impact.”

Vineet Saraiwala, Founder and CEO, Atypical Advantage (India)



Selection

- Include a gender inclusion specialist in your evaluation committee, ideally with scoring responsibilities.
- Train selection committees on gender and social inclusion.
- Consider adding points to women-owned enterprises.

Implementation

- Revise your risk management framework to include specific gender and social inclusion risks and mitigation plans.
- Deliver inclusion training and bespoke coaching to enterprises.
- Facilitate introductions among women entrepreneurs across the cohort, to support informal peer learning and connection. Liaise with other initiatives and associations supporting women entrepreneurs and provide access where possible.
- Facilitate connections with financial institutions and (impact) investors to ensure women entrepreneurs are aware of and can navigate available opportunities.

Monitoring, evaluation and learning

- Analyse and report impact on women and men by disaggregating data by gender, for example the number of direct beneficiaries with access to training, whose income has increased, etc.
- Feed the results back to Project Leads and enterprises, and help them to adjust as needed.



Adjusting for inclusion: TRANSFORM's experience

Over more than a decade, TRANSFORM's work has consistently aimed to support enterprises serving low-income and marginalised communities. However, our experience also showed that inclusive outcomes do not happen automatically. Translating inclusion from intent into practice requires deliberate effort and reflection.

CASE STUDY

Building inclusion capability within the programme team

We invested in gender inclusion training to build capability across the programme team, working with external gender and inclusion experts. The training focused on gender mainstreaming, challenges faced by women-led businesses, gender-inclusive sourcing, co-creation of proposals with a gender lens, and gender-responsive monitoring, evaluation and reporting. Sessions were recorded so learning could be accessed flexibly and revisited beyond live delivery.

Feedback highlighted that the training helped teams better understand the relevance of inclusion to their roles and the support they provide to enterprises, shaping how these issues were approached in day-to-day work.

Key insight

Building a shared baseline of knowledge helps programme and Project Leads engage more confidently and consistently on inclusion.



"The Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) training helped me see practical opportunities to embed inclusion more intentionally across TRANSFORM, as well as other programmes I support. It strengthened my understanding of how thoughtful design and delivery can lead to more equitable outcomes for the communities we work with."

**Sara Holloway, Associate Director, Ernst & Young
Advisory Services (Pty) Ltd**



CASE STUDY

Supporting enterprises with workshops and tailored coaching

TRANSFORM complemented internal training with targeted support for enterprises, recognising that inclusion priorities and starting points varied widely by business model, sector and maturity.

Cohort-based workshops

Group workshops were designed to create space for practical learning and exchange, enabling enterprises to learn directly from one another. A disability inclusion workshop, delivered by FCDO's Disability Inclusion Helpdesk with support from external inclusion experts, focused on why disability inclusion matters for business and highlighted practical, low-cost workplace adaptations. Peer learning was a central feature: TRANSFORM enterprise **Eco Brixx** shared its experience of integrating people with disabilities into its workforce, providing a concrete and context-relevant example for others.

A second workshop built on these foundations by exploring disability-inclusive products and services and engagement with Organisations of Persons with Disabilities, again drawing on peer-led approaches. This session also included input from **Atypical Advantage**, a TRANSFORM enterprise working to connect people with disabilities with inclusive employers.

Key insight



Programmes should not underestimate the value of peer-to-peer learning. Leveraging the expertise and lived experience of enterprises themselves can make inclusion more relevant, credible and actionable for others.

"I attended one of the disability inclusion workshops and found it eye-opening. We've since begun exploring opportunities to include differently-abled people in suitable roles, while also sensitising project teams to the risks faced by people with disabilities in rural and farm settings. In difficult, remote contexts, we know progress will be gradual, but we're committed to making practical changes."

Ashwini Kumar, Co-founder, Terra Ecopreneurs (India)



“We really appreciate every effort and the documents TRANSFORM has been able to help us with. We now feel we are there – we are more ready than where we started from.”

**Christine Namawanda, HR Manager,
Eco Brixs (Uganda)**

Tailored technical assistance and coaching

Recognising the need for more differentiated support, TRANSFORM piloted tailored inclusion coaching for five enterprises between December 2025 and March 2026. Preliminary gender and disability assessments were used to identify realistic, context-specific entry points for each business. These ranged from addressing childcare constraints to strengthening leadership pipelines.

Early engagement suggested that even short-term, focused support could help enterprises identify practical actions where leadership commitment was strong.

As a result of TRANSFORM’s coaching, waste management enterprise **Eco Brixs** prepared to launch an on-site childcare facility for employees with young children – a practical response to one of the most persistent barriers to women’s workforce participation. Together, TRANSFORM and Eco Brixs worked through expected demand, staffing needs, service design, and a range of operational and governance questions, then translated these into the policies and procedures needed to run a safe and impactful childcare service.

Key insight



Tailored coaching is most effective when it meets enterprises where they are, rather than applying uniform expectations. Progress is also strongest where senior leadership is motivated and committed to driving change – impact programmes can support this by strengthening the case for action

SHARE LESSONS LEARNED

Read this chapter to find out why and how to amplify your insights. Find ways to pass on lessons learned both during the partnership, and when it comes to a natural end.

Why share learnings?

For many organisations, transparency is a way of working or a core value. For some it's a requirement – for example those spending public money. But there's another major reason to communicate openly.

Even the most ambitious partnership can't do everything: we need all hands on deck to really make a difference on social and environmental issues. And there's one quite simple way to maximise the impact of your work: make sure your peers (and competitors!) know about it. Setting out what you've done and demonstrating that it worked inspires others to replicate your success and build on it. It's about encouraging creative adaptation, collaboration and continual improvement.

This ethos has always been core to TRANSFORM: success for us was not just about the achievements of our enterprises, but about developing the evidence and insights that others – partners, academics, enterprises – could benefit from.



COMMUNICATING IN PARTNERSHIP: A CHECKLIST

It's tempting to delay thinking about communication until your programme is well under way. But making some key decisions early on will make things much smoother – and allow you to capitalise on timely opportunities to spread the word as soon as they arise.



Make it a priority. Build external communication into your work together from day one. Treat learning and sharing as core activities, not an add-on – the best way to ensure this actually happens is by including it in your programme's core objectives. But connect any communication efforts back to your core partnership purpose rather than creating a video or issuing a press release just because you can.



Untangle disagreements. Partners may have differing views on what to publicise. You may also have different approaches or rules on terminology. Take time to figure this out early on. Involve an external expert to facilitate this process if needed. Create a core guidance document or a checklist of rules. Where relevant, integrate these rules into contracts with enterprises too so they are clear on the programme's dos and don'ts.



Assign responsibilities. Who will coordinate and lead on communications within the partnership? What needs to be approved by the other partners and what's the process for securing approval?



Get a core plan in place. Create a communications plan that factors in target audiences, key channels and creative ways to get your insights out there (see examples on the following page).



Consider timings. What are your key milestones or dates – the moments when you want to communicate externally? Are there any clashes among the core partners (for example, other communication priorities for their organisation at that time)?



Set up systems. Create language and branding guidelines. Set up systems for gathering materials from enterprises and partners (e.g. photo libraries and guidance on permissions).



Clarify comfort with publicising failure. Explore how much each partner is comfortable with sharing, and with whom.



Think about replication. Highlight the insights that others can replicate or learn from. Make it easy for busy people to quickly grasp the core points.



Don't forget to communicate internally. Keep core partner colleagues and employees informed too – this contributes to employee engagement and ongoing buy-in. We tested quarterly "community forums" – informal online gatherings – to share insights from TRANSFORM's work and to spark further discussion and engagement. Initially these focused on internal stakeholders; later we opened them to external audiences too.



Preserve and pass it on. No partnership or initiative lasts forever. Plan in good time so that any research, websites or other materials won't be lost when the funding stops.

FOR CONSIDERATION

Components of a communications plan: some starting points to consider

Potential sources of insight

- Entrepreneur stories
- Enterprise impact data
- Programme-level data and annual reports
- Updates and reports from Project Leads
- Research papers

Potential audiences

- Enterprise support organisations
- Investors
- Prospective partners
- Competitors
- Customers
- Taxpayers
- National Governments
- Researchers and academics
- Media
- Core partners' employees

Potential channels

- Website, social media and newsletters of both core partners and of the partnership
- Core partners' internal channels, e.g. intranet, newsletter
- Local, national, and specialist media
- Sector-specific, entrepreneurship or global development events
- Local partners' channels (websites, newsletters, social media)
- Webinars
- Influencers

Three principles for powerful storytelling

Concepts like social innovation and impact can feel abstract to those not directly involved. Stories that bring these to life with real-world examples make them tangible. That helps policymakers, investors and others to grasp why this work matters, and how they could play a role.

What's more, people remember stories more easily than facts. So balance hard data and numbers with engaging narratives.

1 Use emotive storytelling to capture and keep attention

Help audiences to connect emotionally with the people you work with. Set out what's at stake. Show how they've overcome obstacles and faced uncertainty. Tell us what has changed as a result.

2 Bring in real voices and faces wherever possible

Even a short direct quote brings a story to life. Similarly, photos of real people draw the eye much more than something abstract or a stock image. That could be entrepreneurs, workers or customers, as well as their mentors, coaches and advisors.

3 Authenticity and transparency beats perfection

Honest reflections are often more useful than polished narratives, even if – or especially when – things haven't worked out as expected.



From insight to action

TRANSFORM was established in 2015 with a clear ambition: to help impact entrepreneurs test and scale commercially self-sustaining, market driven solutions to global challenges, and reach 15 million people by 2025.

Since then, TRANSFORM exceeded expectations. More than 160 impact enterprise and research projects have been supported across 19 countries in Asia and Africa, reaching more than 21 million people, from business owners and workers to customers and communities – and beating original targets by a third (33%).

In total, TRANSFORM distributed more than £88 million in grant funding and in-kind business support. Led by three core organisations, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) UK, Unilever, and EY, we've been joined by programme and project partners along the journey such as the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Global Solidarity Fund, Mastercard and Microsoft. Together, we have helped enterprises strengthen their business models and build foundations to scale their impact, with over £66.4 million in follow-on funding secured so far.

For more than a decade, TRANSFORM has demonstrated what becomes possible when public and private sector organisations commit to long-term collaboration in support of impact enterprises. We believe that the long-term value of TRANSFORM is not in what we achieved alone – it is in what others can now build from it. We hope this playbook helps you to design, launch or strengthen your own partnerships – whether by testing new models, shifting decision-making closer to local actors, or combining funding with hands-on support in new ways.

Having delivered its intended outcomes, TRANSFORM concludes in 2026 with a strong legacy of more resilient enterprises and insights to inform future collaborations. These learnings have been captured in TRANSFORM's open-access and practical playbook, so others can adapt and apply the model in the years ahead.

For questions or further information about TRANSFORM, please contact EY Ripples Markets eyripplesmarkets@ey.com.

If you do use lessons from this playbook and TRANSFORM's model, we would appreciate acknowledgement. We recommend the following wording:

This work draws on insights from TRANSFORM, a unique joint initiative between Unilever, the UK's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, and EY. Learn more here: TRANSFORM Playbook (linked).

