SCALING AND IMPACT LEARNING PAPER

Executive summary



GSMA
Mobile for Development

GSMA

The GSMA is a global organisation unifying the mobile ecosystem to discover, develop and deliver innovation foundational to positive business environments and societal change. Our vision is to unlock the full power of connectivity so that people, industry, and society thrive.

Representing mobile operators and organisations across the mobile ecosystem and adjacent industries challenges, the GSMA delivers for its members across three broad pillars: Connectivity for Good, Industry Services and Solutions, and Outreach. This activity includes advancing policy, tackling today's biggest societal issues, underpinning the technology and interoperability that make mobile work, and providing the world's largest platform to convene the mobile ecosystem at the MWC and M360 series of events.

We invite you to find out more at www.gsma.com

GSMA Innovation Fund

The GSMA Innovation Fund accelerates digital tech solutions that address key global challenges. Through grant funding and tailored venture building support, we enable innovative organisations in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) to scale and amplify social and environmental impact.

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Note

The insights presented in this report are based on a series of qualitative interviews conducted with selected GSMA Innovation Fund alumni and selected mobile network operators (MNOs) from Asia and Africa. While these case studies provide perspectives on how partnerships between startups and MNOs can be forged, they reflect the specific experiences of the organisations involved and the contexts within which they operate. These findings should not be interpreted as universally applicable to all MNOs or startups. Instead, they are intended to illustrate examples of partnership models, benefits, challenges and lessons learned, which may inform, but not guarantee, potential collaboration.

Executive summary

Background and purpose

The GSMA Innovation Fund's (the Fund's) impact strategy is rooted in scaling digital innovations that create positive social impact. While the Fund understands how to support grantees to scale commercially, there is less clarity on how commercial growth correlates with scaling social impact and what support might be offered specifically for the latter.

Method and learning agenda

Using three cases of grantees from the Fund's climate action rounds; interviews and feedback from the GSMA Innovation Fund team; and relevant literature, we interrogated **how commercial scaling and social impact scaling are related and how best to support social impact scaling**.

Selected grantee cases at a glance



ATEC

Bangladesh

Electric pay-as-you-go (PAYGo) cook stoves for customers switching from wood and gas-burning stoves, with IoT carbon-credit tracking.



Vitara

Ghana

Traceability via software linking smallholder shea nut farmers practicing environmental conservation to global markets for fair trade shea nut and shea products.



Koolboks

Nigeria

PAYGo solar-powered and traditional freezers, marketed to solve gaps in the cold chain for micro- and SMEs.

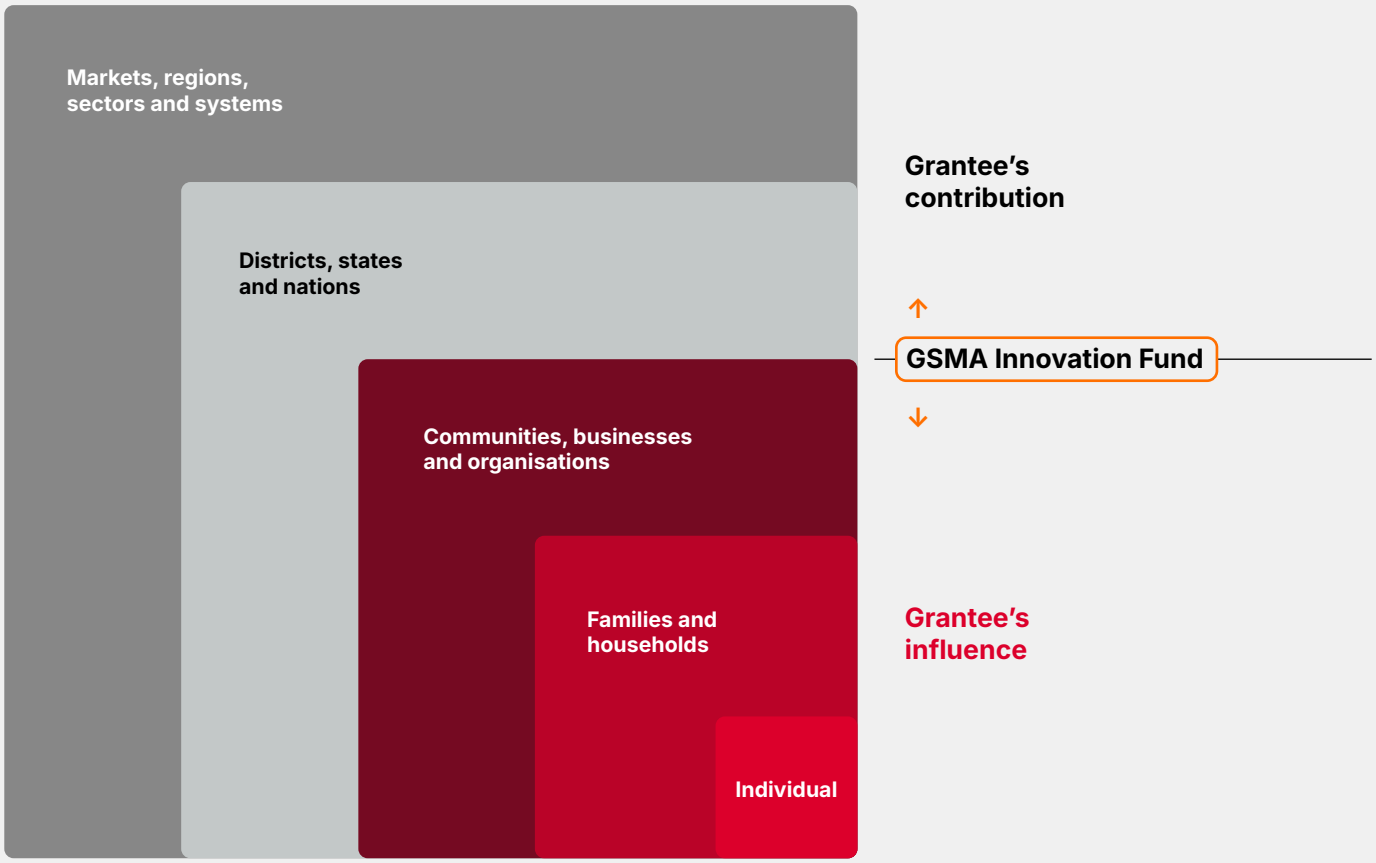
Social impact and the GSMA Innovation Fund

The Fund contributes to social impact through grantees at all levels of the social ecological model (SEM) in the figure below, albeit through different pathways and ranging from direct influence to contribution to systems change.

Grantees in some sectors, such as energy and utilities, may naturally contribute more to systems impact than others. This learning paper is **focused on the first three rings of the SEM, as this type of change is most direct to individuals, and more immediate**.

Figure 1

Social ecological model of the GSMA Innovation Fund's social impact



Social impact scaling

Grantees of the Fund are currently working across two dimensions:

↔ **Scaling out:** impacting greater numbers. This includes both adding new users/customers and replication in new contexts.

↕ **Scaling deep:** the degree to which the grantee is changing cultural and social norms and practices, including behavior, attitudes, beliefs, etc.

When social innovation scaling is studied it is clear it **has many dimensions with no uniform definition**, but being **highly contextually defined.**[1] The context, type of product, and market conditions will influence how challenging and at what pace it is possible to scale in either direction (out or deep).

Social enterprises, however, do have **drivers of social impact**. Aspects of their business model that when strengthened will contribute to their ability to have a positive social impact. These include:

- Produce quality and reliability
- Produce experience and ease of use
- Affordability for target customers
- Market penetration
- Relevance of the product

1 Townsend, Neil. (2024). Failure to scale. Elrha: London, p. 19.

How commercial and social scaling intersect – a framework

Two continuums vary business by business and have implications for the **type of scaling strategy, time frame for scaling**, and **support** that is helpful for boosting or maintaining social impact scaling.

CONTINUUM 01

Ease of social change

Question: How difficult is the social or behaviour change required of customers to uptake the products or solutions?

Why it matters: This impacts the timeframe, strategy, and challenges involved in scaling.

CONTINUUM 02

Revenue sources' relationship to the social impact pathway

Question: How intertwined and/or direct are the primary revenue sources to the social impact pathway? Can they grow revenue without growing their social impact?

Why it matters: Internal decision-making, business strategy, and how social impact can be maintained alongside commercial growth will be different depending on this. Social enterprises and mission-driven companies most often have highly intertwined revenue sources and social impact pathways.

When you overlay these continuum in a grid, it creates four quadrants that are all legitimate (value-neutral) places for businesses with a social impact focus to be. Each quadrant, however, may follow different scaling pathways and have different needs, as indicated in the framework below.

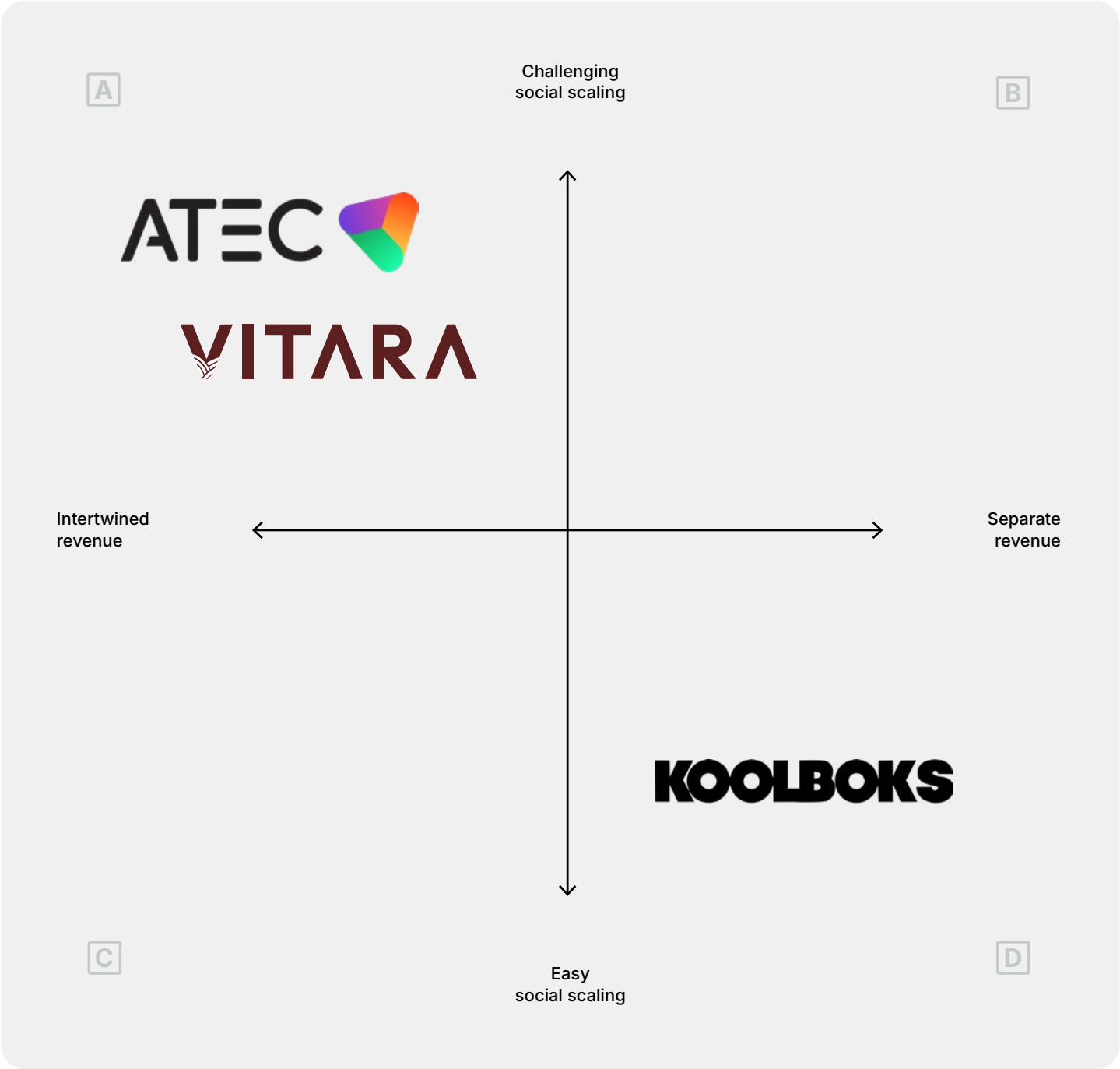
Figure 7

Commercial and social impact scaling matrix



Cases

All three cases have different scaling journeys and support which would help uplift social impact scaling:



ATEC

Bangladesh

A social enterprise that exists to solve clean cooking and climate change. They do so through electric pay-as-you-go (PAYGo) cook stoves for customers switching from wood and gas-burning stoves, with IoT carbon-credit tracking.

↕ VERTICAL AXIS

Ease of social change

ATEC's product targets something everyone does – cook – but **represents a substantial, almost fundamental change to this daily practice**. It requires new cookware, it changes cooking times and therefore recipes, it changes the rhythm of a household.

> "[The user] doesn't know she has a problem, this is true. But she suffers. She needs more time. She has health issues. The thing that can trigger her behaviour change is saving some cost. She needs money and to save. She can be bothered about saving money, and then, now you can tell her the other benefits."

↔ HORIZONTAL AXIS

How intertwined the revenue sources are with the social impact pathway

ATEC's **revenue sources (cookstoves and biodigesters) are all directly linked** to their social impact pathway. If they successfully sell and support the use of their products then their revenue grows and their social impact grows simultaneously.

> "The whole business model relies on social impact. We always, always, always focus on those things."





Scaling journey

ATEC is about reaching numbers – more markets and more within a single market – because their product is applicable all over the world. They need to overcome initial customer reticence, but have the ingredients to fulfill their mission "to solve clean cooking and climate change". Their timeline for growth can be relatively rapid once they have affordability (carbon offsets purchased) and social marketing messaging in place.

Support to maximise social impact scaling alongside commercial scaling

Their **main challenge to scaling is convincing customers** that their innovation responds to a problem. Support for social marketing message development and contextualisation of the product for new markets would be most helpful.





Vitara

Ghana

A social enterprise that aims to transform the shea nut value chain. They do so through providing traceability via software, linking smallholder shea nut farmers to global markets and spurring environmental conservation.

> “We haven’t considered commercial farmers and we don’t want to. It represents another type of business that we do not want to be.”

↕ VERTICAL AXIS

Ease of social change

Vitara is asking farmers for substantial behavior change in terms of resource and time investment. Substantial community engagement and time are necessary to achieve this.

↔ HORIZONTAL AXIS

How intertwined the revenue sources are with the social impact pathway

Vitara’s primary revenue stream – the sale of high quality shea nuts and shea products – is **directly linked to their social impact pathway**. They cannot do one without the other.

They are, however, pursuing a **new revenue stream** by white labeling their farmer engagement software – Treesyte. This may or may not directly link to a social impact pathway.

> “Our core value as a business is to create value for the farmers. The impact also creates value for us as a company on the commercial end of things. We are attracting investors that are interested in social impact. It is a catalyst for our ability to scale.”

Scaling journey

Vitara’s scaling journey is about **maximising the niche** that they have—shea nuts and community engagement. They need to **go deep in each community** to achieve meaningful behavior change to make the outreach investment pay off. **Their social impact takes time** and is likely to grow within each existing community through supporting other crops, doing post-harvest value creation, and building on conservation efforts (all strategies the company is currently piloting).

Support to maximise social impact scaling alongside commercial scaling

Vitara needs support honing the profitability of their model so they can continue to drive social impact in their communities. This involves support for **innovations in their delivery model to find efficiencies** and cashflow assistance to **bridge the timing challenges** inherent in both the agricultural timeframes and trust-building with communities.





Koolboks

Nigeria

Koolboks is a business with strong social impact, solving for gaps in the cold chain. They do this through PAYGo solar-powered and traditional freezers, marketed to micro- and SMEs.

↕ VERTICAL AXIS

Ease of social change

Koolboks has a product that **is easily understood and well known**.The addition of pay-go technology and/or solar technology solves accessibility problems (affordability and reliability, respectively) that are obvious and painful to their target markets.

↔ HORIZONTAL AXIS

How intertwined the revenue sources are with the social impact pathway

Koolboks has **a diverse array of revenue streams**, which is a major part of their strategy for commercial scaling. While many of their revenue streams are directly involved in their social impact pathway, **others are less direct**.

Scaling journey

Koolboks has the most pathways to scale and a strong potential to scale—refrigeration is widely used by businesses. As such Koolboks' **scaling strategy is through both revenue/product diversification and replication across markets**—using their social impact as a tool for unlocking partnerships, distribution channels, advertising, and investment. **Maintaining their social impact is a strategic choice** that is helping them reach scale.



> "During partner negotiations with NGOs and governments and when you are entering partnerships, you need to explain your social impact. With officials they want you to bring numbers to the table... And NGOs, too, they need to show a grant has achieved a purpose."

Support to maximise social impact scaling alongside commercial scaling

With revenue generation that can potentially grow separately from social impact Koolboks could benefit from **support to build internal processes and practices to keep social impact central**. This would include strategies like explicit decision-making frameworks, developing principles to use for decisions, and further integrating or embedding responsibility for social impact within culture and across teams.



Recommendations

01 Know the social impact pathway(s)

It is worthwhile to map a social impact pathway to **be specific about who the company is reaching and what benefit they are realising**. As businesses pivot, adapt, and rapidly experiment to refine their models and respond to changing conditions this is something that **needs to be regularly revisited**.

A social impact pathway can be **regularly used in strategy, decision-making, and team discussions** to:

- Select type of social impact scale to pursue
- Identify and measure specific metrics
- Find levers for scaling social impact
- Assess potential new revenue streams and their potential to contribute to or detract or be neutral to social impact scale

02 Place companies on the commercial and social impact scaling matrix

Assessing both the pathways of social scaling and the revenue models relative to social impact will place a company on this matrix and possibly help identify the type of support to offer. To place a company, assess both continuums through discussion.

CONTINUUM 01

Ease of social change

Discuss these questions:

- How big is the change?
- To adopt the product, how much change is required of the customer?
- Does this optimise the status quo or offer something completely new?
- Are there lots of barriers to use?
- Does the customer realise this is a problem they need solved?

CONTINUUM 02

Revenue sources' relationship to the social impact pathway

Discuss these questions:

- Do they consider themselves a social enterprise?
- What are they trying to provide and to whom?
- Is this tied to the social benefit or impact pathway in every instance?
- Can they earn revenue without having the stated social impact?

03 Based on placement, consider different types of support for the specific scaling journey

The quadrant a grantee falls into provides a good starting point for finding the right support to shore up continued social impact scaling. Spend time getting to know the business, customers, and product to best diagnose which portion is most challenging.There are many options for support that may be strengthening social impact scaling depending on context and situation.

These include, but are not limited to:

- **Help motivating customers** to purchase and/or use their product; social marketing, behavior change specialists, public health professionals, and/or international development professionals.
- **Patient capital**, having realistic timeline expectations for reaching a certain scale of user base or realised benefit to customers. When behavior change is more challenging it can take longer.
- Investment in **Ux design** that eliminates any barriers to use of or experience of the product. This includes before and after care of a product and all interactions with a company as well as product design and interface.
- Time and investment to **innovate the product delivery methods** (community-member promotion, customer education or training, partnering with known brands, etc.). This means innovating both to meet customer realities and to meet real resource and sustainability constraints to a long-term model.
- **Building leadership and cultural practices**[2] that strengthen a company's likelihood of maintaining social impact while pursuing revenue sources that less directly correlate to impact are:
  - Explicit decision-making frameworks
  - Mission-embedded incentives
  - Customer representatives in leadership
  - Cultural rituals that reinforce mission
  - Transparent impact measurement.
- Help refine business model to **ensure affordability** for underserved and vulnerable customers.
- Ensuring **product quality and product use**. A substandard product is not just an unhappy customer, because stopping use or being unable to use the product limits its social impact.
- **Consider the delivery model another area of innovation**. Distributing and driving adoption of a product may require as much attention as the product itself.
- Actively **build company leadership competencies and skills** in:
  - Resource mobilisation
  - Developing operating routines
  - Making Entrepreneurial adjustments

2 Ometto, M. P., Gegenhuber, T., Winter, J., & Greenwood, R. (2018). From Balancing Missions to Mission Drift: The Role of the Institutional Context, Spaces, and Compartmentalization in the Scaling of Social Enterprises. Business & Society, 58(5), 1003–1046. https://doi.org/10.1177/0007650318758329. Battilana, Julie & Sengul, Metin & Pache, Anne-Claire & Model, Jacob. (2015). Harnessing Productive Tensions in Hybrid Organizations: The Case of Work Integration Social Enterprises. Academy of Management Journal. 58. 10.5465/amj.2013.0903. Ebrahim, A., Battilana, J., & Mair, J. (2014). The governance of social enterprises: Mission drift and accountability challenges in hybrid organizations. Research in organizational behavior, 34, 81–100.

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