

SCALING WITH GOVERNMENT:

The government's perspective on what nonprofits and funders need to do differently

SPRING IMPACT | instiglio | LGT Venture Philanthropy

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

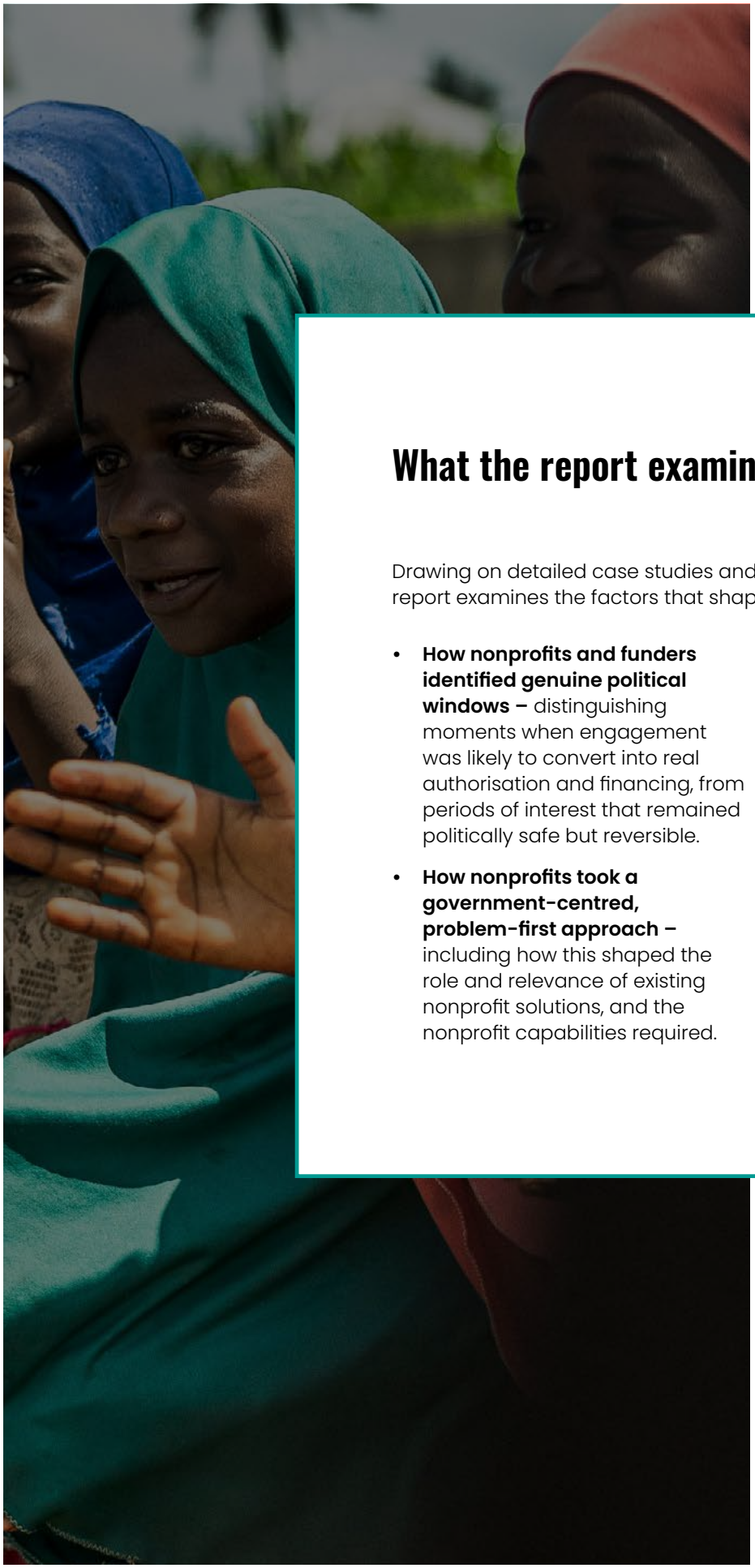
Scaling with government represents one of the most credible routes to sustained impact at scale. Yet even nonprofits with strong evidence, long-term government partnerships, and political access often struggle to move beyond pilots or partial adoption. The type of scaling with government this report focuses on – where governments authorise, finance, and sustain delivery – remains particularly difficult to achieve.

This challenge has become more acute in recent years. Levels of Overseas Development Assistance have flattened or fallen, and philanthropic funders increasingly see their role as catalytic rather than permanent. As a result, support for nonprofits pursuing the long-term, complex and uncertain route to scale with government has become harder to secure.

Existing literature offers extensive guidance for nonprofits on how to partner with governments and influence policy, but provides limited insight into how scaling with government actually happens and the conditions that enable it – particularly from the government's perspective.

This study addresses that gap. Spring Impact, in partnership with Instiglio and LGT Venture Philanthropy, examined **12 cases across low- and middle-income countries** where nonprofits have navigated scaling with government in practice. The study draws on **30 in-depth interviews** with senior government officials and nonprofit leaders directly involved in these processes. Over half of the cases are drawn from Sub-Saharan Africa, with additional examples from South and Southeast Asia and Eastern Europe, spanning health, education, WASH, and infrastructure.

By centering government decision-makers – not just nonprofit narratives – the study surfaces how governments assess risks, make decisions, and choose when (and whether) to institutionalise change, rather than offering a blueprint for scaling with government.

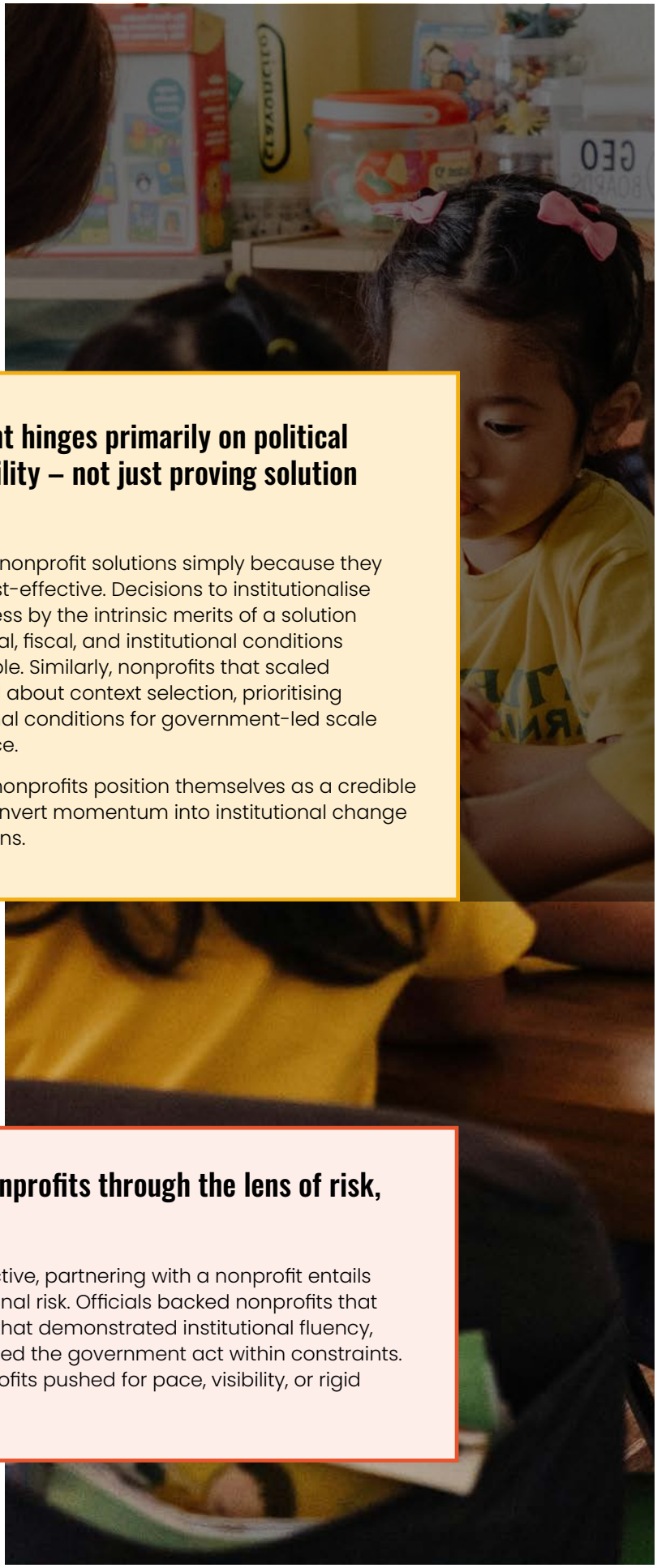


What the report examines in depth

Drawing on detailed case studies and candid government perspectives, the report examines the factors that shaped successful scaling with government:

- **How nonprofits and funders identified genuine political windows –** distinguishing moments when engagement was likely to convert into real authorisation and financing, from periods of interest that remained politically safe but reversible.
- **How nonprofits took a government-centred, problem-first approach –** including how this shaped the role and relevance of existing nonprofit solutions, and the nonprofit capabilities required.
- **What governments actually looked for in nonprofit partners –** including how credibility, political risk, visibility, and control are assessed behind the scenes.
- **How funders enabled scaling with government –** particularly in absorbing early political and fiscal risk, enabling longer time horizons, and supporting judgment about when to persist, adapt, or wait.

KEY INSIGHTS



01

Scaling with government hinges primarily on political and institutional feasibility – not just proving solution effectiveness.

Governments did not adopt nonprofit solutions simply because they were evidence-based or cost-effective. Decisions to institutionalise interventions were shaped less by the intrinsic merits of a solution and more by whether political, fiscal, and institutional conditions aligned to make scale feasible. Similarly, nonprofits that scaled successfully were intentional about context selection, prioritising settings where the institutional conditions for government-led scale were at least partially in place.

It is therefore essential that nonprofits position themselves as a credible and ready option, able to convert momentum into institutional change when a political window opens.

02

Governments assess nonprofits through the lens of risk, not impact alone.

From a government perspective, partnering with a nonprofit entails political, fiscal, and reputational risk. Officials backed nonprofits that reduced this risk: nonprofits that demonstrated institutional fluency, respected process, and helped the government act within constraints. Trust weakened when nonprofits pushed for pace, visibility, or rigid fidelity of their solution.

03

Scaling with government requires a shift in mindset for nonprofits – from asking how to scale their solution through government, to how they can partner with government to solve problems at scale.

Successful nonprofits started by developing a deep understanding of the government's problem, and worked with government to shape a scalable response within existing government constraints, including workforce structures, budgets and political priorities.

In most cases, nonprofits had existing solutions which served as credible starting points and brought innovative ideas, but were significantly adapted to fit government systems and realities. Full adoption of a solution with minimal change was very rare. In some cases, no predefined solution was taken up at all. Instead, nonprofits drew on their expertise to support governments to develop or strengthen their own approaches.

Nonprofits' willingness to adapt their solutions – or set them aside entirely – is central to whether scaling with government is possible.

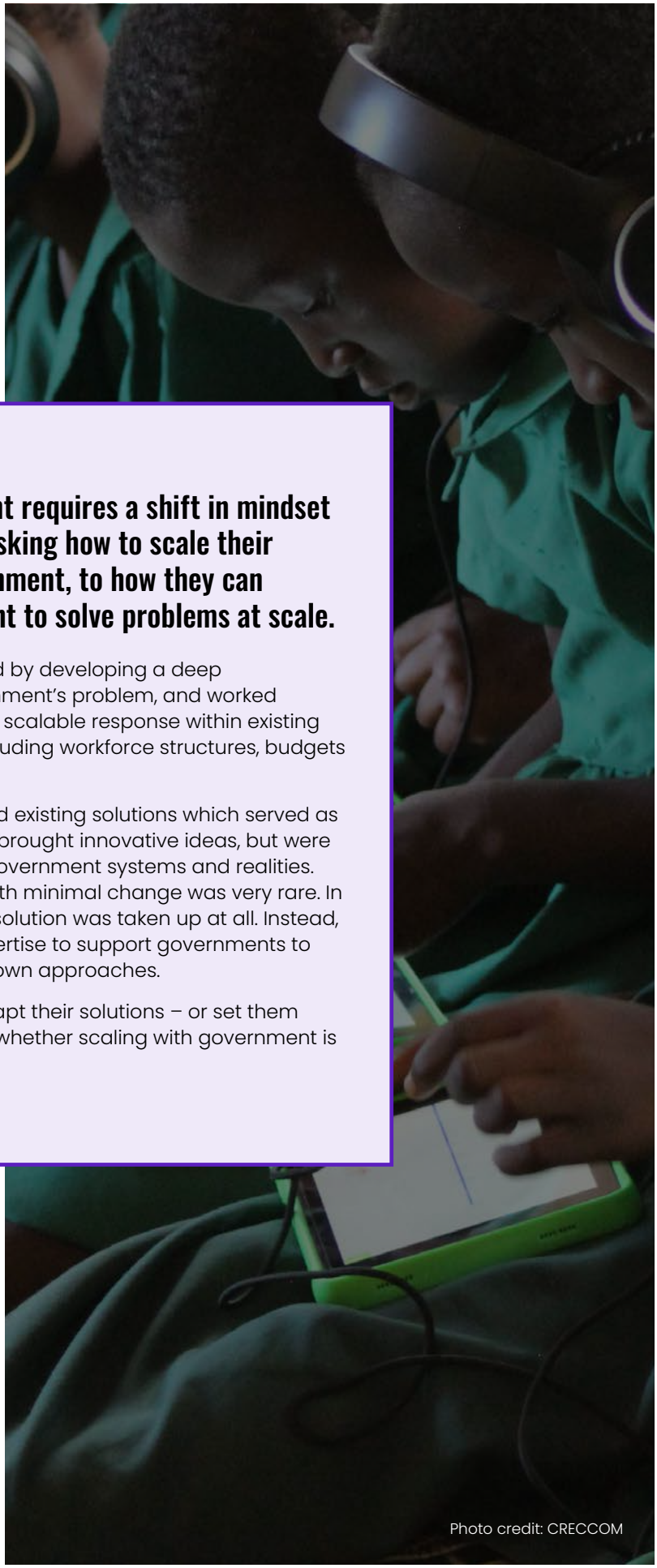
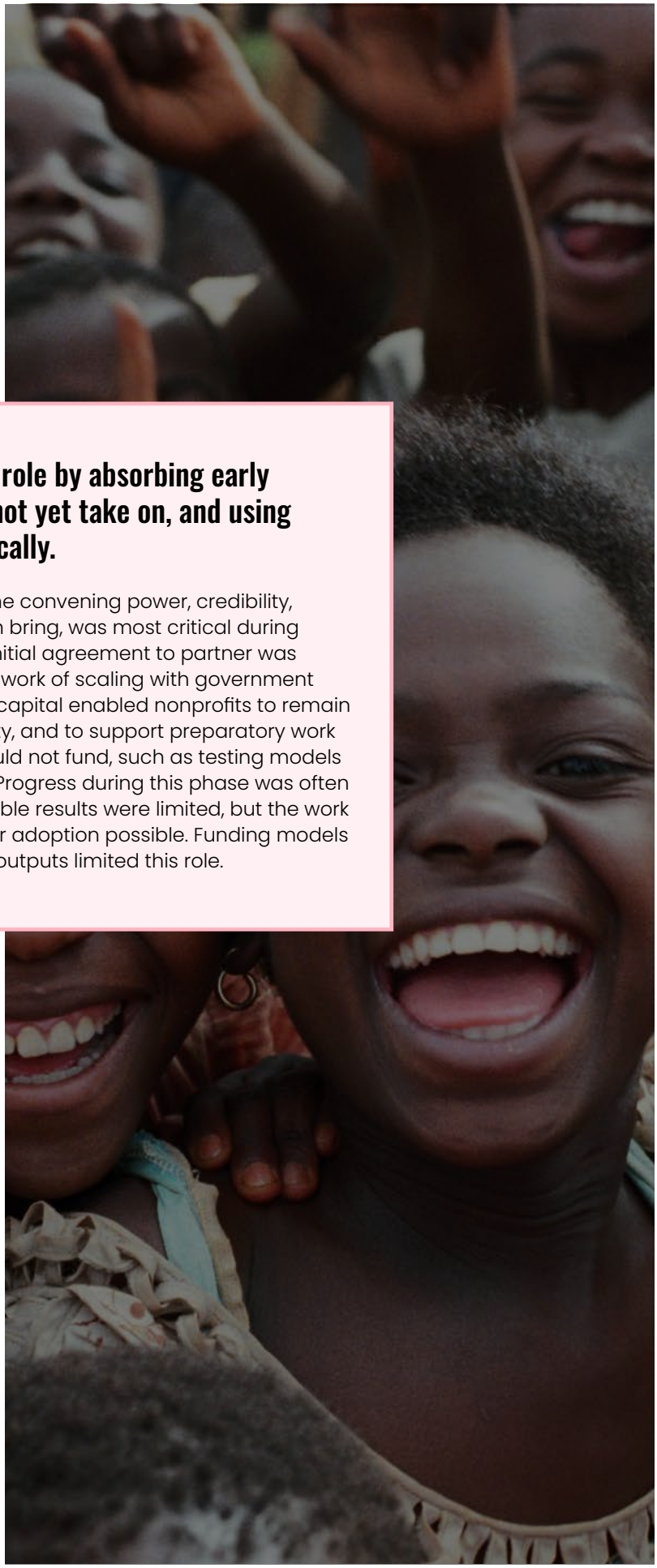


Photo credit: CRECCOM

04



Funders play a decisive role by absorbing early risks governments cannot yet take on, and using their influence strategically.

Philanthropic funding, and the convening power, credibility, and access that funders can bring, was most critical during the early phase – after the initial agreement to partner was reached, but before the real work of scaling with government could begin. Patient, flexible capital enabled nonprofits to remain engaged through uncertainty, and to support preparatory work governments valued but could not fund, such as testing models within institutional contexts. Progress during this phase was often slow and non-linear, and visible results were limited, but the work was essential to making later adoption possible. Funding models that prioritised rapid, visible outputs limited this role.

These insights point to a pattern – scaling with government is not primarily a technical challenge of proving effectiveness; it is a political and institutional process in which governments weigh risk, control, feasibility, and timing.

This has profound implications for how nonprofits and funders operate. Nonprofits often start and gain traction by being technical experts – bringing a defined solution, a theory of change, and evidence of impact. When the ambition is to work with government, these capabilities remain necessary, but they are not sufficient.

Where scaling with government succeeded, nonprofits played a different role. They acted as institutional partners rather than just solution advocates. They invested in understanding government incentives, internal constraints, fiscal realities, and authorisation processes. They adapted their models to fit administrative systems. They moderated demands for pace, visibility, and fidelity. This required new capabilities: political judgement, institutional fluency, long time horizons, and comfort with ambiguity.

And supporting these shifts requires a different kind of approach to funding – one that is patient, open to ambiguity, and has realistic demands of what progress looks like.

Across the 12 cases, when nonprofits and funders were able to make this shift and the conditions aligned for scaling with government, the impact was outsized. In Nepal, around 17 million people benefit from more than 11,000 trail bridges built as a result of a partnership between the government, Helvetas and the Swiss Development Cooperation. Since 2023, the government has authorised, funded and managed the national trail bridge programme independently. In India, the government has scaled the world's largest mobile messaging service, a maternal and child health solution co-developed with BBC Media Action, to 23 states/union territories, serving tens of millions of mothers. While pursuing scaling with government is never easy and always carries risk, when it works, the long-term impact can be extraordinary.

The central question, therefore, is no longer "How do we persuade governments?"; it is:

> **What problem is the government trying to solve, how do they actually make decisions – and how do we position ourselves to make institutional change possible when conditions align?**



Photo by the Luminos Fund

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INTRODUCTION

Why this study, and what it is answering (and not answering)

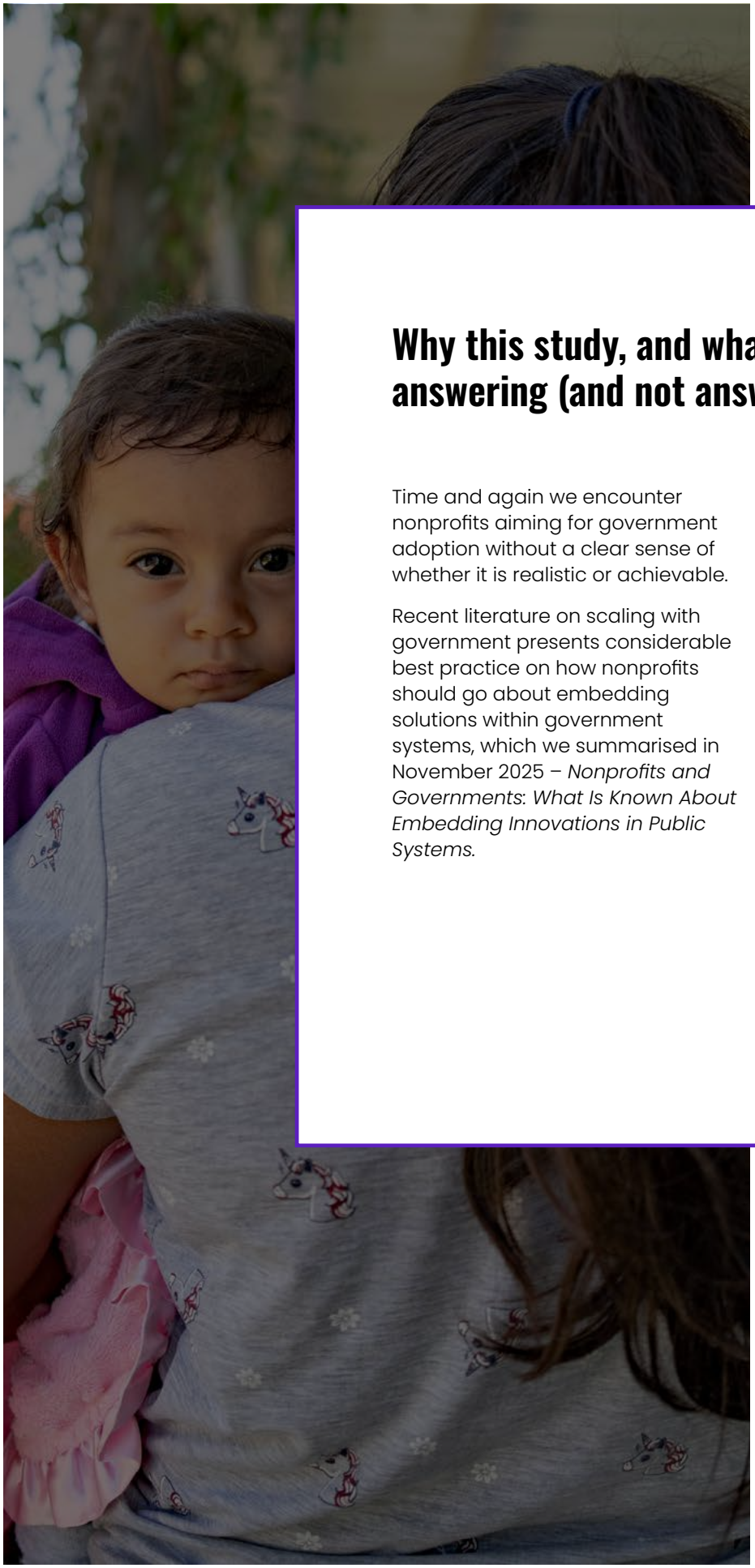
Across the nonprofit sector, scaling with government – and particularly scaling solutions within government systems – is commonly seen as one of the most effective ways to sustainably scale impact. However, as highlighted in Spring Impact's previous report *Securing Non-Profit Funding for Scale*, building government ownership of solutions is often far more complex in practice.

Scaling with government can mean a multitude of things – influencing policy change, leveraging government infrastructure, delivering on behalf of government.

This study narrows in on a particular form of scaling with government – where government becomes the authoriser, payer, and long-term driver of change, with nonprofits playing a supporting role across different routes to achieving that outcome.

What this form of scaling with government means in practice

- Government is the **payer** (budgeted, not donor-backed)
- Government is the main driver and **holds accountability**
- The change becomes part of how the system normally works – whether the government does it themselves or commissions others, and is delivered at sufficient scale to reach a large share of the target population.



Why this study, and what it is answering (and not answering)

Time and again we encounter nonprofits aiming for government adoption without a clear sense of whether it is realistic or achievable.

Recent literature on scaling with government presents considerable best practice on how nonprofits should go about embedding solutions within government systems, which we summarised in November 2025 – *Nonprofits and Governments: What Is Known About Embedding Innovations in Public Systems.*

However, there were two evidence gaps that this study seeks to fill:

1. **The government perspective –** what governments want from nonprofits, what earns trust, and how they judge value.
2. **Other ways nonprofits can support government systems, beyond scaling solutions –** for example, sharing technical expertise, strengthening capacity, or improving delivery systems.

To fill these gaps, Spring Impact teamed up with Instiglio and LGT Venture Philanthropy to examine 12 unique cases of scaling with government, interviewing nonprofits and the government representatives they worked with.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report was developed thanks to support from LGT Venture Philanthropy.

We are grateful to the representatives of the governments and nonprofits featured in this report for sharing their expertise and experiences, and for the additional experts who shared their wisdom with us.

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ENDORSEMENTS

> "This very important document illustrates a VillageReach conviction: achieving sustainable impact at scale for a given innovation is not just about scaling, it requires institutionalisation so the innovation becomes an integral part of government systems."

Carla Blauvelt,
Senior Director of Global Programs, VillageReach

> "It's refreshing to read an analysis of scaling that genuinely centres the government perspective. The framing around risk and credibility captures something we intuit but is rarely articulated so clearly. Props to Spring Impact for surfacing the messy complexity of scale."

Anushree Banerji,
Grand Challenges Canada

OVERVIEW OF THE PARTICIPANTS

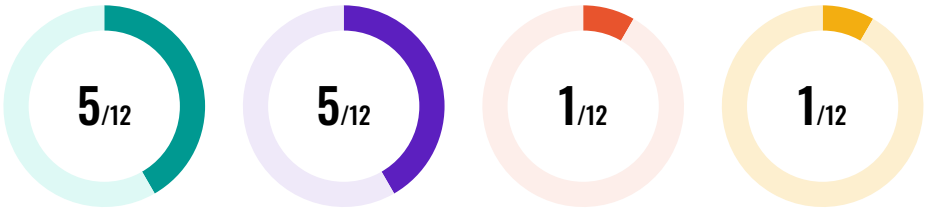
Geography

The study focuses on cases from Sub-Saharan Africa, South and Southeast Asia, and Eastern Europe. Countries include Cambodia, Ethiopia, Ghana, India, Kenya, Liberia, Malawi, Moldova, Nepal, Rwanda, South Africa and Tanzania.



Sectors

The sample is concentrated in the health and education sectors, reflecting the well recognised reality that scaling with government is more feasible in these sectors because they are typically prioritised by governments due to their statutory obligations in these areas.



Types of nonprofits presented

Most of the nonprofits in the sample fall into a particular subset – they are neither small, locally-led organisations, nor large NGOs. Instead, they are typically medium-sized organisations, working in 2–10 countries.

We did not intentionally seek large NGOs (**Street Child** is the exception here), as their experiences are already well represented in the existing literature, with the same organisations often appearing repeatedly. We had hoped to identify cases involving smaller, locally-led nonprofits; however we were unable to find such examples. The absence of locally-led organisations from this sample most likely reflects the limits of our networks and search methodology, rather than their absence in practice. Understanding how scaling with government dynamics differ for locally-led organisations – and what can be learned from their experiences – remains an important gap in this study.

THE TWELVE CASES: How the cases were selected and analysed

In selecting the cases to be included in the study, we focused on the following criteria:

- Scaling with government has been achieved, or significant progress has been made towards scale[1] with government
- Had not been heavily featured in existing literature
- A range of countries, solutions, approaches and sectors

Our team conducted a total of 30 interviews, including 15 with government representatives and 15 with nonprofit representatives[2]. For each of the 12 examples we aimed to conduct at least one government interview and one nonprofit interview.

The list of examples included is provided herein. Further details of the study methodology can be found in the Appendix.

Accelerated Learning Program, Ethiopia

Nonprofit: Luminos Fund
Government: Ministry of Education

BEFIT, Malawi

Nonprofit: Imagine Worldwide, VSO, onebillion
Government: Directorate of Basic Education

National Childcare Programme, Moldova

Nonprofit: Street Child
Government: Ministry of Labor and Social Protection, Ministry of Education

DESC Model, Kenya

Nonprofit: Living Goods
Government: County Governments, National Ministry of Health

Everyone Forever, Rwanda

Nonprofit: Water For People
Government: District Governments, Water and Sanitation Corporation Group (WASAC), Ministry of Infrastructure

Eye Health, Liberia

Nonprofit: EYElliance
Government: National Community Health Program & Eye Health Unit in the Ministry of Health

Kilkari, India

Nonprofit: BBC Media Action, ARMMAN
Government: Ministry of Health and Family Welfare

Lively Minds, Ghana

Nonprofit: Lively Minds
Government: Ghana Education Service (GES)

m-mama, Tanzania

Nonprofit: Vodafone Foundation, Touch Health, Pathfinder International
Government: Regional and District Governments, National Ministry of Health

MomConnect, South Africa

Nonprofit: Reach Digital Health
Government: National Department of Health

United World Schools, Cambodia

Nonprofit: United World Schools (UWS)
Government: Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport

Trail Bridge Programme, Nepal

Nonprofit: TRAC4Change/ Helvetas, Swiss Development Cooperation (SDC)
Government: Department of Local Infrastructure, Ministry of Local Development

[1] We see achieving scale as making a meaningful dent in a big societal or environmental problem. While it is often used as a synonym for growth, our use of the word 'scale' focuses on scaling impact to match the size of the problem, as distinct from growing an organisation or solution (which we refer to as 'growth').

[2] Four of the interviewees were not associated with the 12 cases, but instead provided expertise on government perspectives of scaling with government, and learnings across multiple countries.



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CONDITIONS FOR SCALE:

What must be in place – and what nonprofits can (and cannot) influence

Across all cases in this study, progress toward scaling with government depended less on the strength of a solution or the persistence of a nonprofit, and more on **whether governments were institutionally ready to sustain a solution at scale.**

That readiness was shaped by a small number of institutional conditions that nonprofits could not fully control. However, across successful cases, nonprofits **actively assessed these conditions early**, and then worked deliberately to strengthen feasibility within existing constraints.

This also has implications for where nonprofits choose to work. High need alone is not a sufficient basis for pursuing scaling with government – the potential for government to be a sustained scaling partner varies significantly across contexts. Nonprofits that scaled successfully tended to be deliberate about context selection, prioritising settings where the institutional conditions for government-led scale were plausible, even if not yet fully in place.

This section examines **three conditions nonprofits consistently assessed and, where possible, helped build when pursuing scaling with government:**

- Whether a genuine political window existed and could be used
- Whether government could realistically pay for the solution at scale
- Whether government could deliver it within existing systems

In practice, scaling with government only moved forward when these conditions aligned – like **gates that had to open before progress was possible.** If any gate remained closed, progress stalled.

THREE GATES EVERY NONPROFIT MUST ASSESS: At a glance

Drawing heavily on government perspectives, this section provides a snapshot of how these conditions came together in practice to enable solutions to scale, and how nonprofits could realistically help to open each gate.

THE POLITICAL PRIORITY GATE



Conditions for the gate to open:

- Clear government priority
- Decision-makers with authority engaged
- Concrete route to act (policy, reform, budget)

What nonprofits can do:

- Track political shifts, reforms, and pressure points
- Align early with government priorities
- Build relationships and trust over time
- Help turn political interest into concrete next steps

THE FINANCIAL GATE



Conditions for the gate to open:

- Legal routes to fund the solution (budget lines, procurement)
- Costs fit within public spending norms
- Reliable year-on-year funding

What nonprofits can do:

- Co-design models that fit government cost structures
- Develop clear, budget-ready costings
- Support governments to navigate funding processes
- Use co-financing to bridge to public funding

THE DELIVERY GATE



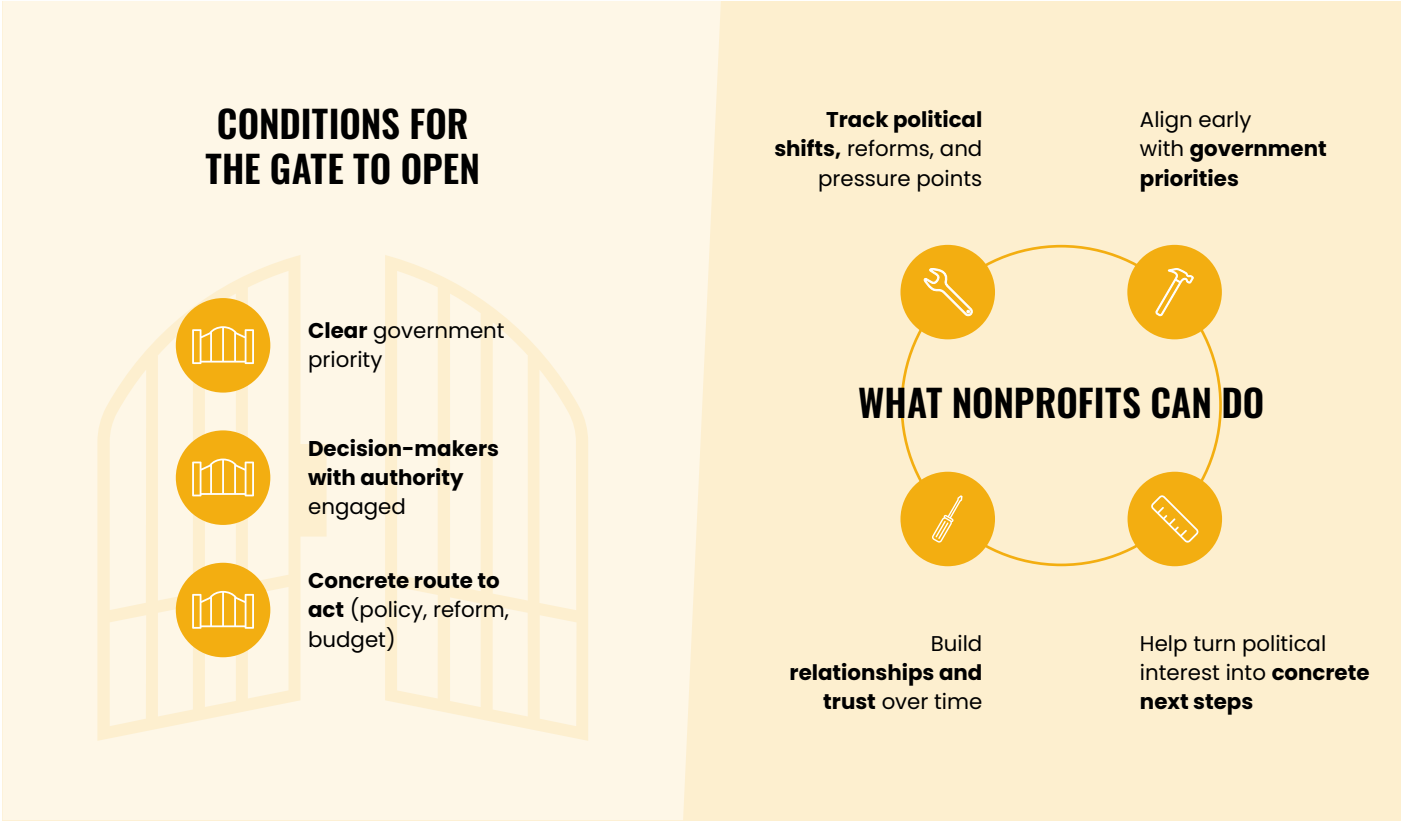
Conditions for the gate to open:

- Basic delivery system
- Solution fits existing roles and workflows
- Frontline workers can take the solution on
- Supervision structures

What nonprofits can do:

- Co-design for real-world delivery conditions
- Align with incentives and existing roles
- Strengthen monitoring and management systems
- Clarify governance and decision-making structures

THE POLITICAL PRIORITY GATE:
A genuine political window needs to exist



Political windows are temporary periods when governments have both the incentives and the capacity to take action on a problem area. While they are commonly described as moments of political "will," this framing is misleading. Across the cases examined, change occurred not because governments became newly convinced of an issue's importance, but because attention, authority, and the ability to act within existing systems briefly aligned to make action feasible.

Political windows were therefore less about intent and more about feasibility.

These moments were not created by nonprofits.

They emerged from dynamics largely outside nonprofit control, including elections, citizen pressure, leadership changes, fiscal pressure, crises, and periods of strategic planning. The role of nonprofits was not to generate these windows, but to recognise when one was opening and to be able to move quickly – because when, and whether, a window might open is difficult to predict.

The three prerequisites for a political window

Across cases, a political window opened only when there was:



A clear government priority: The issue was already recognised and owned within government, reflected in plans, targets, or reform agendas



Engagement at the right level of authority: Reaching decision-makers with control over budgets, mandates, or structures; technical and mid-level champions were not enough on their own



A concrete institutional vehicle: An existing mechanism such as a budget line, policy reform or regulation through which scale could happen

Identifying a genuine political window

Early signs of government enthusiasm – agreeing to meetings, attending workshops, taking calls – often reflect goodwill rather than real readiness to scale. This can stem from motivated mid-level officials who lack authority to act, or from side benefits like per diems and travel. Distinguishing a genuine political window from surface-level interest is therefore crucial for nonprofits.

From the cases reviewed, the following were signals that government interest was likely to translate into sustained commitment:

- **Government was investing its own political capital and resources.** In cases where officials were actively pushing something through planning, budgeting, or legal processes, and the allocation of government staff time, budget, or infrastructure (typically modestly at first) signalled a clear level of ownership beyond enthusiasm.
- **Willingness to push back on nonprofit preferences.** Governments that were genuinely invested felt comfortable saying no – whether on design choices, cost ceilings, or timelines. Deference was often a sign of low stakes, not high alignment.
- **Early involvement of finance, planning, or legal departments.** Meaningful commitment tended to result in the teams that controlled budgets and rules to be brought in early on.
- **A named champion with decision-making authority – and a system behind them.** Progress often required identifiable leaders with the mandate and seniority to unblock decisions at critical moments. But sustained scaling with government depended on building wider ownership across actors so momentum did not rest on one individual.

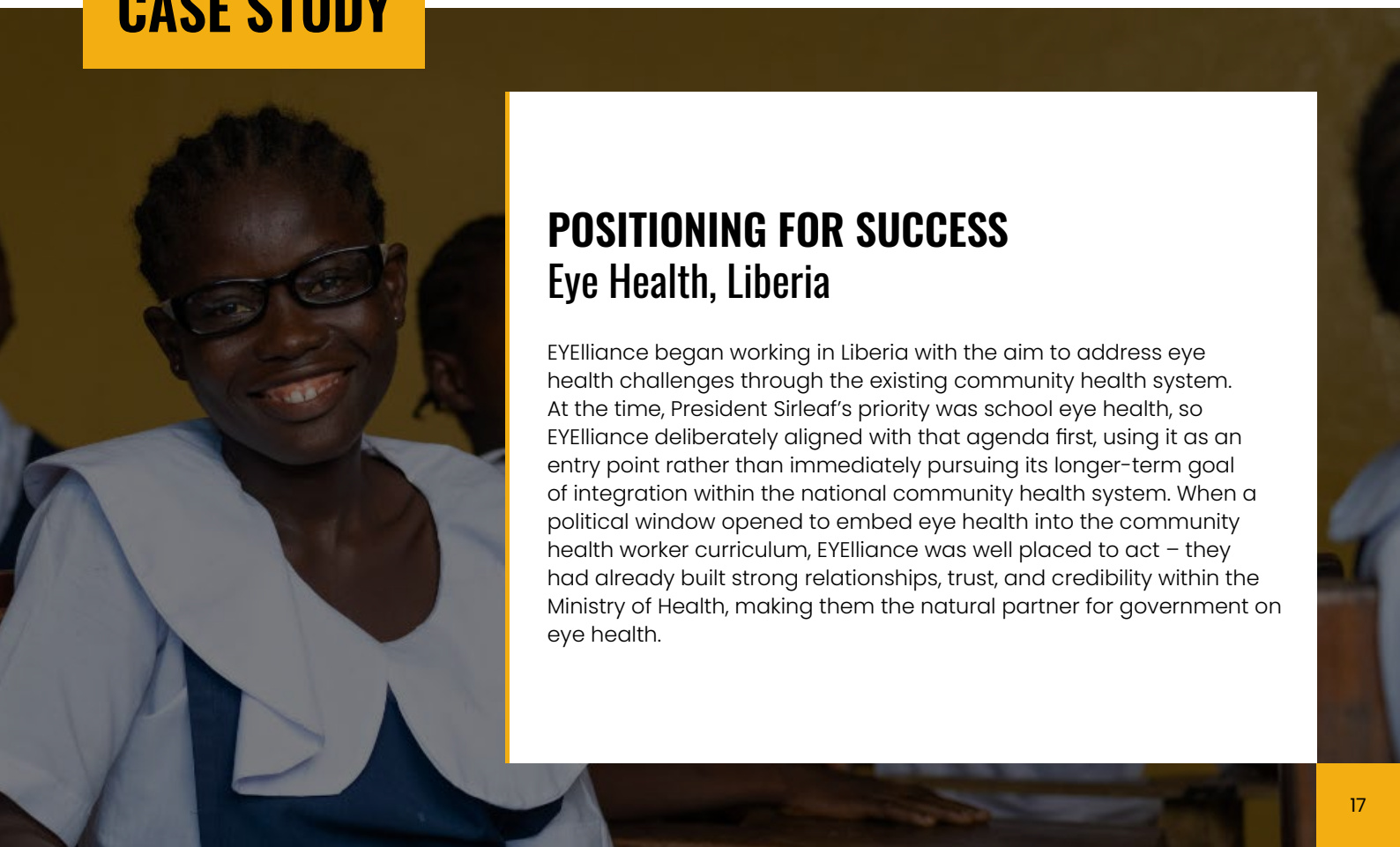
> **"Workshops get packed when there are per diems and travel – people show up. But that doesn't mean the institution is ready to commit a budget or change rules."**
>
> Hana Lakhdar,
> Former senior civil servant and policy adviser in North Africa

What nonprofits can do about political windows

While nonprofits did not cause political windows to open, they were ready when a window opened and acted deliberately and decisively when it did. This involved:

1. **Early recognition:** successful organisations demonstrated political literacy – tracking leadership transitions, reform agendas, and system pressure points rather than waiting for formal invitations.
2. **Converting momentum into institutional change:** they translated political intent into concrete, low-risk actions governments could take within existing constraints, then moved quickly to embed reforms into budgets, roles, policy instruments, and delivery systems before political attention shifted.
3. **Being well positioned for demand:** when governments were actively seeking solutions to felt problems, they were already positioned as credible, ready options – aligned with government priorities and ways of working.

CASE STUDY



POSITIONING FOR SUCCESS
Eye Health, Liberia

EYEIliance began working in Liberia with the aim to address eye health challenges through the existing community health system. At the time, President Sirleaf's priority was school eye health, so EYEIliance deliberately aligned with that agenda first, using it as an entry point rather than immediately pursuing its longer-term goal of integration within the national community health system. When a political window opened to embed eye health into the community health worker curriculum, EYEIliance was well placed to act – they had already built strong relationships, trust, and credibility within the Ministry of Health, making them the natural partner for government on eye health.



The role of advocacy in scaling with government

This study did not focus on advocacy-led organisations or campaigns whose main role is to shape political agendas, influence public debate, or apply public pressure on decision-makers. Instead, the cases examined focus on nonprofits working in sustained partnership with government to embed services and reforms.

In these cases, advocacy was often used as a supporting tool – helping build political backing and legitimacy rather than as a standalone strategy to create urgency or drive change.

For example, **Lively Minds** combined service delivery with advocacy to raise the profile of early childhood development within education systems, while also reframing the role of parents. Working closely with education authorities, they used evidence and practical delivery experience to show that parental engagement could be a normal, workable part of the education system. This helped shift how the government understood both early childhood development and parents' role in it.

In cases such as these, advocacy played a supporting role – helping make solutions credible and acceptable so that governments were ready to act when opportunities arose.

CASE STUDY

READY FOR THE MOMENT
m-mama and a political window in Tanzania

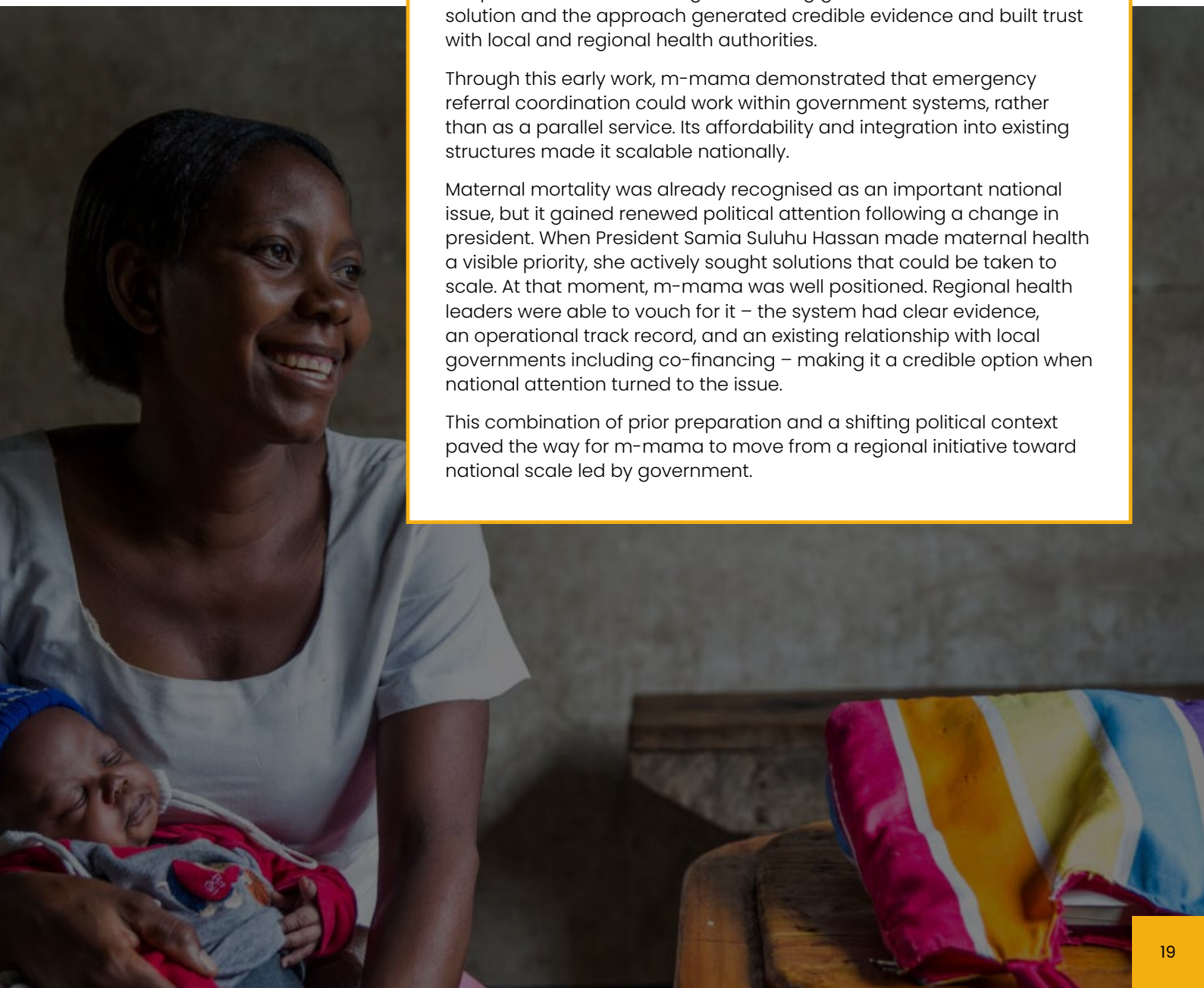
m-mama is an emergency referral and transport system designed to reduce preventable maternal deaths by improving response times within the public health system in Tanzania. The system was designed to be affordable and scalable, ensuring it could be expanded nationally without creating financial strain.

The model was first developed and tested by Vodafone Foundation, Touch Health, and Pathfinder International, and regional and district governments in the Shinyanga region, where it was built from the outset to operate within and strengthen existing government structures. The solution and the approach generated credible evidence and built trust with local and regional health authorities.

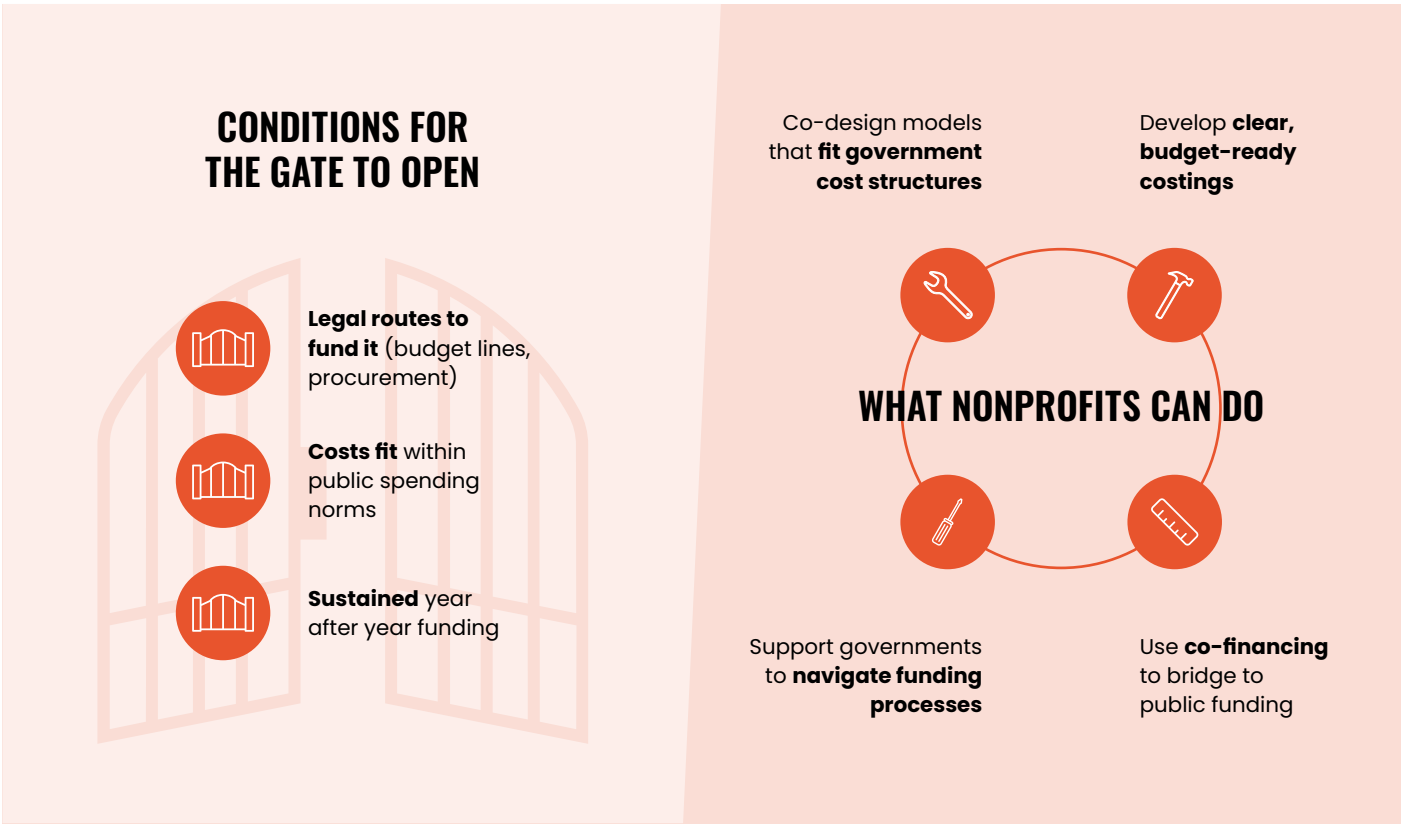
Through this early work, m-mama demonstrated that emergency referral coordination could work within government systems, rather than as a parallel service. Its affordability and integration into existing structures made it scalable nationally.

Maternal mortality was already recognised as an important national issue, but it gained renewed political attention following a change in president. When President Samia Suluhu Hassan made maternal health a visible priority, she actively sought solutions that could be taken to scale. At that moment, m-mama was well positioned. Regional health leaders were able to vouch for it – the system had clear evidence, an operational track record, and an existing relationship with local governments including co-financing – making it a credible option when national attention turned to the issue.

This combination of prior preparation and a shifting political context paved the way for m-mama to move from a regional initiative toward national scale led by government.



THE FINANCIAL GATE:
The government needs to be able to pay



Whether governments could realistically pay for services at scale emerged as one of the most decisive factors in scaling with government, particularly as public budgets have come under increasing pressure.

Governments faced varying limits – tight budgets, rigid spending rules, staffing caps and procurement guardrails. Government interviewees stressed that the key question was not just whether a solution was low-cost, but whether it could be budgeted for legally, prioritised against other demands, and sustained year after year within existing systems. For example, Lively Minds' programme had low per-child costs across different countries; however, sustainability depended on whether government could resource the ongoing costs.

In Ghana, the ongoing costs and activities – refresher training and monitoring – were harmonised into existing district and teacher activities so no additional budget line was required. Whereas in Uganda, the lack of a clear budget line for refresher training and supervision meant that the solution could not be paid for by the government. Similarly, in Nepal, trail bridges were widely regarded as cost-effective, but scale only accelerated once the government took on full funding as its budget priorities shifted.

The implication was clear: low cost is necessary but not sufficient. Successful nonprofits invested in understanding government financial realities – how money flows, how budgets are formed, and what governments can realistically keep paying for over time.



From willingness to commitment: what nonprofits can do to unlock public financing

Government interviewees consistently stressed the limits of external influence over public finance. Nonprofits could not create new budget lines, raise spending ceilings, or change public finance rules on their own.

What successful nonprofits did do, however, was work deliberately within these constraints. Across the cases, nonprofits that navigated financing transitions well:

- **Focused on fiscal permission,** seeking early clarity on what governments were legally able to fund, through which budget lines or procurement routes.
- **Adapted their models to fit government cost norms and structures,** even where this meant sacrificing elements of a "gold standard" design.
- **Helped governments make financing workable,** supporting practical steps such as preparing budgets, aligning donors around government plans, bridging short-term funding gaps, and providing technical support. These often helped unlock larger public or development finance.
- **Built co-financing agreements,** using time-bound, phased co-financing arrangements to allow governments to take on costs gradually and test whether government ownership was genuinely feasible. Clear agreements on who would pay for what, through which mechanisms, and over what period helped push governments to establish budget lines, approve posts, and integrate costs into core systems. In practice, co-financing took different forms depending on context, including sliding-scale arrangements, phased handovers, or defined cost-sharing ratios.

CASE STUDY

FISCAL FEASIBILITY IN PRACTICE
DESC Model, Kenya

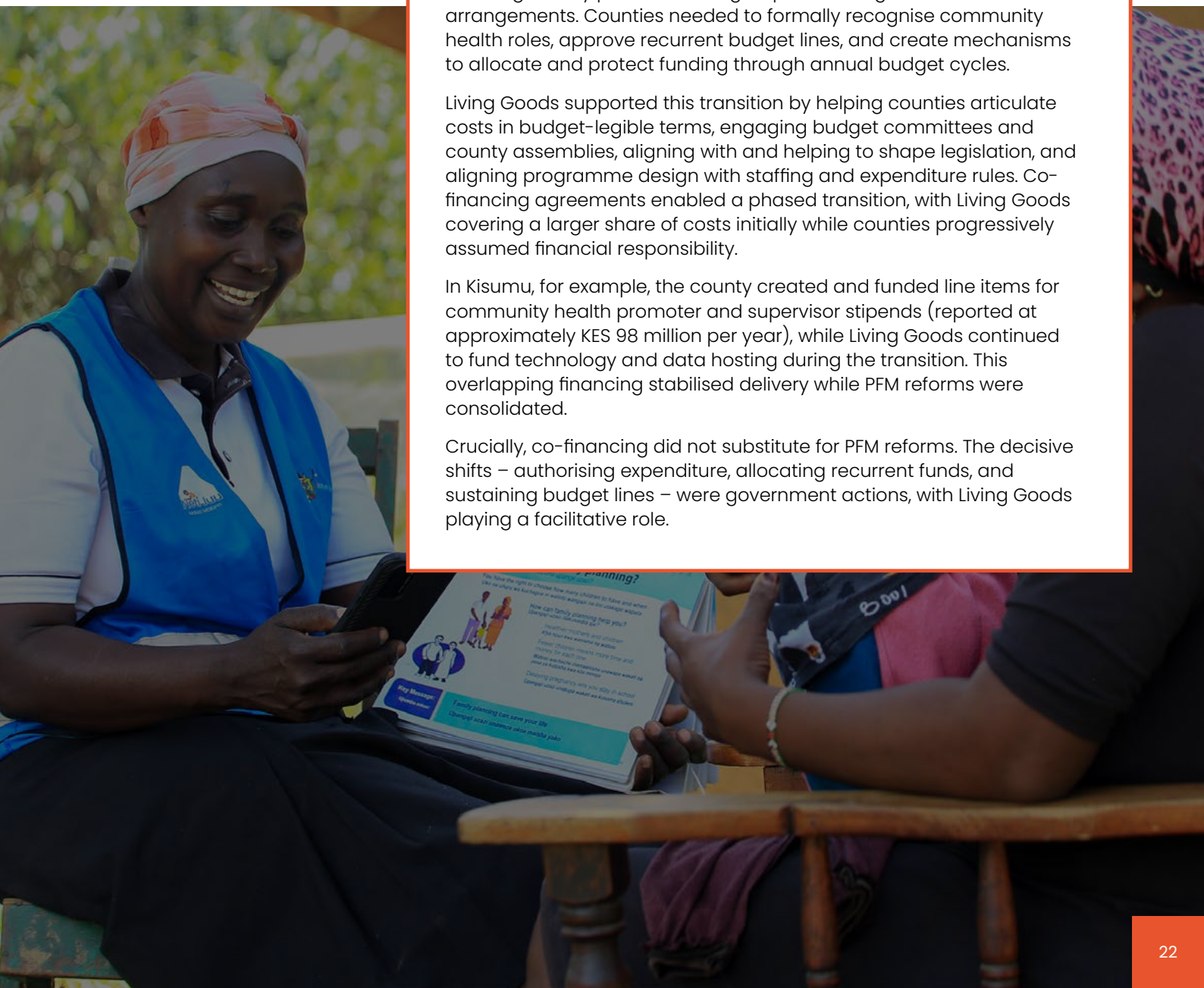
Living Goods' transition to county financing for the DESC Model in Kenya, a digitally enabled community health approach intended to save lives through scaling effective and affordable government-led delivery, illustrates how fiscal feasibility, public financial management (PFM) reform, and co-financing interacted in practice. While county governments expressed political support for community health models, progress depended on whether costs could be sustained within county public finance systems.

Securing county public financing required changes to PFM arrangements. Counties needed to formally recognise community health roles, approve recurrent budget lines, and create mechanisms to allocate and protect funding through annual budget cycles.

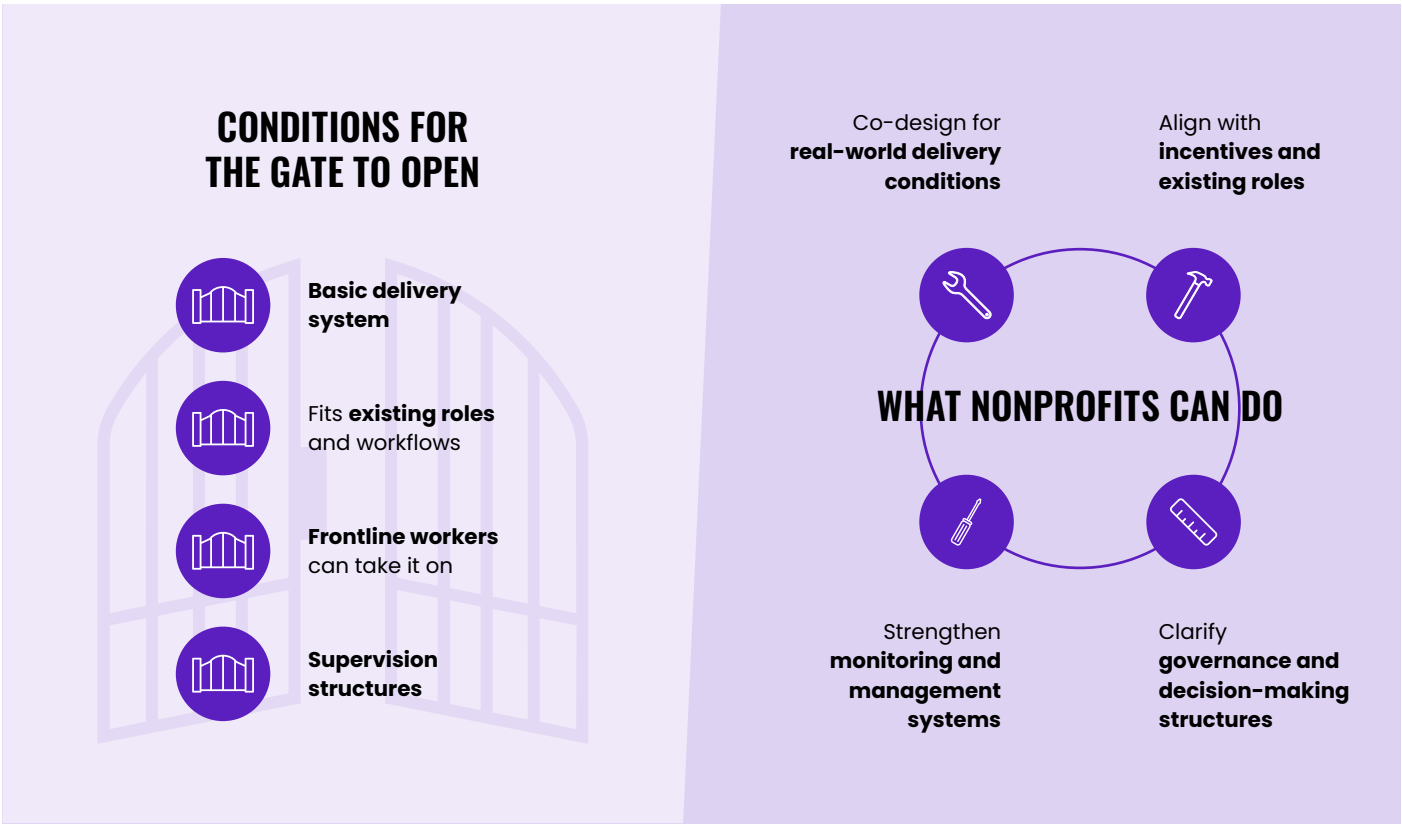
Living Goods supported this transition by helping counties articulate costs in budget-legible terms, engaging budget committees and county assemblies, aligning with and helping to shape legislation, and aligning programme design with staffing and expenditure rules. Co-financing agreements enabled a phased transition, with Living Goods covering a larger share of costs initially while counties progressively assumed financial responsibility.

In Kisumu, for example, the county created and funded line items for community health promoter and supervisor stipends (reported at approximately KES 98 million per year), while Living Goods continued to fund technology and data hosting during the transition. This overlapping financing stabilised delivery while PFM reforms were consolidated.

Crucially, co-financing did not substitute for PFM reforms. The decisive shifts – authorising expenditure, allocating recurrent funds, and sustaining budget lines – were government actions, with Living Goods playing a facilitative role.



THE DELIVERY GATE:
The government needs to be able to deliver at scale

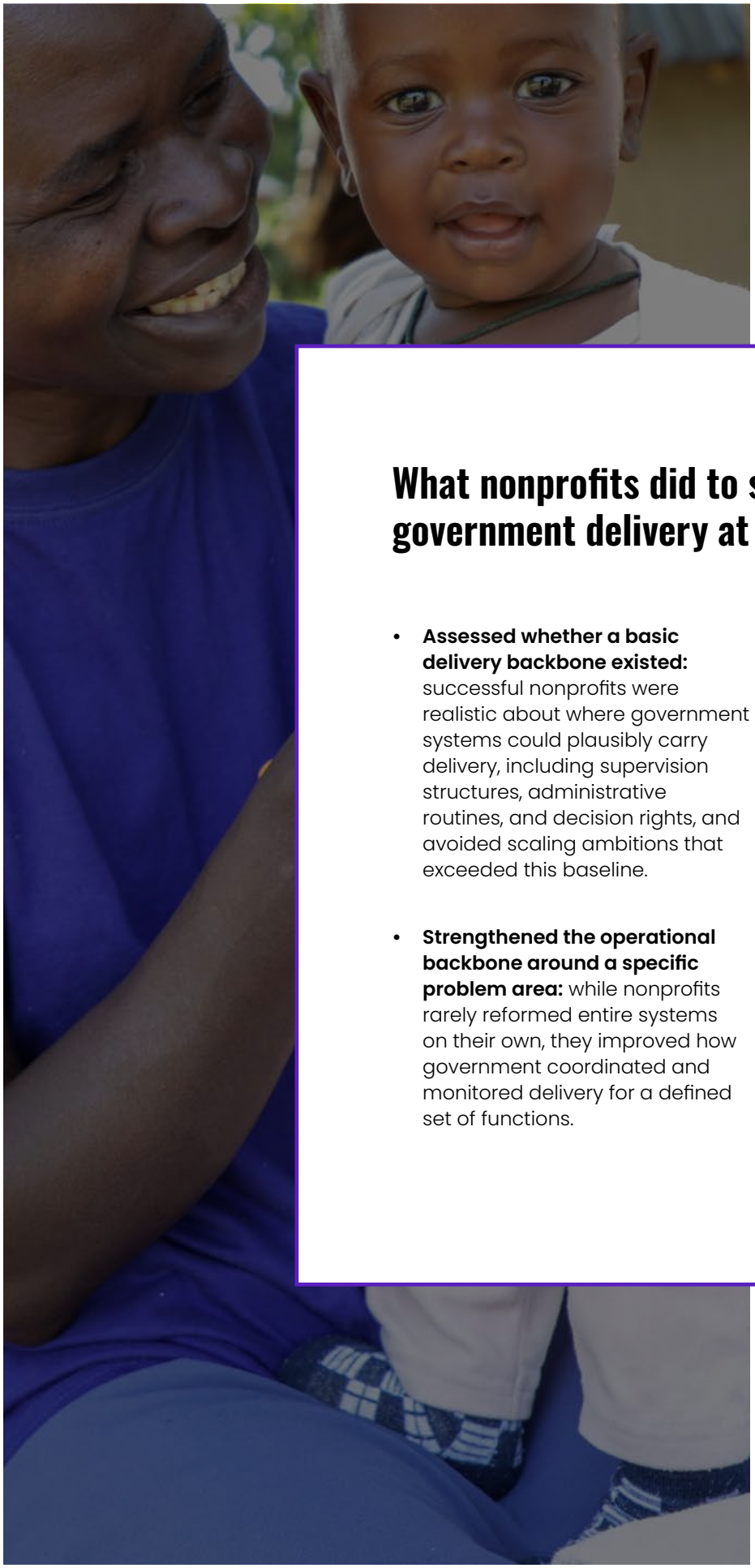


Even where political windows and public financing exist, scaling with government depended on a third condition: whether the government could eventually run the solution at scale through its existing systems. It had to become part of "normal government business".

This did not always require direct delivery by public sector workers such as teachers, health workers, or ministry officials.

In some cases, governments chose to contract external providers to deliver at scale, while retaining overall accountability. For example, in India, once BBC Media Action had stepped back after fulfilling its role of developing and scaling Kilkari to 16 states, the Ministry of Health decided to procure ARMMAN to continue to scale it, rather than deliver it at scale itself, due to the specialist capabilities required to run a digital health service.

In practice, organisations tended to work with governments where a basic level of institutional functionality already existed, such as core administrative architecture and routine supervision structures. Where nonprofits made a difference was not by replacing these systems, but by strengthening how they functioned around a specific problem area.



What nonprofits did to support government delivery at scale

- **Assessed whether a basic delivery backbone existed:** successful nonprofits were realistic about where government systems could plausibly carry delivery, including supervision structures, administrative routines, and decision rights, and avoided scaling ambitions that exceeded this baseline.
- **Strengthened the operational backbone around a specific problem area:** while nonprofits rarely reformed entire systems on their own, they improved how government coordinated and monitored delivery for a defined set of functions.
- **Determined when a hybrid delivery model was appropriate:** not all functions need to sit within government at the outset to achieve government-led scale. Effective nonprofits helped identify which elements (such as data infrastructure) were better outsourced, while keeping government in its core role as the steward of the programme.
- **Designed fit-for-purpose systems:** nonprofits played a critical role in helping governments design functional operational and governance systems.

The building blocks of delivery at scale

Nonprofits undertook many activities to strengthen government delivery capacity. However, a small set of actions repeatedly proved most critical in improving governments' ability to deliver at scale.

1. Aligned Incentives: when delivery becomes part of the job

At the frontline, solutions were often delivered by already stretched public sector workers. For an intervention to last, it needed to be built into their official roles, responsibilities, and performance expectations, rather than treated as an extra task reliant on goodwill or short-term motivation.

When delivery advances a teacher's career

Lively Minds (Ghana) aligned delivery with *teacher professional incentives*. Participation in the programme counted toward formal continuous professional development and contributed to teachers' professional licensing requirements. This meant delivery was not "extra work for an NGO project," but an activity that advanced teachers' careers within the Ghana Education Service.

Making programme roles formally visible

Imagine Worldwide is working with the government in Malawi to formalise the role of the BEFIT coordinator teacher – which involves additional responsibility – by ensuring it is recognised within school and district structures. This avoids a common failure mode where programmes depend on invisible labour that quietly disappears once external support tapers.

2. Strong Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs): turning partnership into operational discipline

Nonprofits put in place MOUs or contracting arrangements that went beyond administrative formality. Well-designed agreements disciplined behaviour on both sides by making responsibilities explicit, setting out how roles and expectations would shift over time, and confronting the financial path to scale upfront. Rather than vague promises of "handover," these agreements treated early nonprofit funding as temporary scaffolding, clarifying who would pay, decide, and deliver at each stage – and making both scale and eventual exit realistic.

3. **Fit-for-Purpose Monitoring Systems: helping government manage, not just report**

   Monitoring systems emerged as critical to governments' ability to deliver at scale, but only when they functioned as management tools for the state rather than just as reporting mechanisms for donors or nonprofits. Governments valued systems that helped them spot gaps, understand why they were happening, and take action – strengthening their ability to run programmes. Where donor reporting created additional demands, organisations that prioritised monitoring that was useful to the government – and layered donor requirements on top – were more likely to achieve durable scale.

CASE STUDY



BUILDING A MONITORING SYSTEM TO MAINTAIN QUALITY AT SCALE
Lively Minds-GES, Ghana

As Lively Minds scaled its early childhood programme with the Ghana Education Service, maintaining quality across more than 3,500 schools became a central challenge. To address this, Lively Minds worked with district and regional education teams to build a data collection system and real-time dashboard to strengthen monitoring and performance management, giving government managers clear visibility into which schools and officers were delivering activities and where support or intervention was needed.

From a technical perspective, the approach worked. A second randomised controlled trial found that the programme's impact was maintained at scale – something Lively Minds attributes in part to this monitoring "scaffolding".

However, the system also revealed important limits. The monitoring model relied heavily on accurate data being inputted, analysis of data to drive decision-making and escalation, which in turn required significant behaviour change within government. Over time, government introduced new data systems, which then necessitated additional work and training as the Lively Minds monitoring system needed to be harmonised into this.

This experience has reshaped Lively Minds' approach in new contexts. Rather than building monitoring systems, they now prioritise lighter-touch monitoring that fits within existing government supervision structures, approaches and budgets, accepting trade-offs in the density and quality of data collected and ability to take early remedial action.

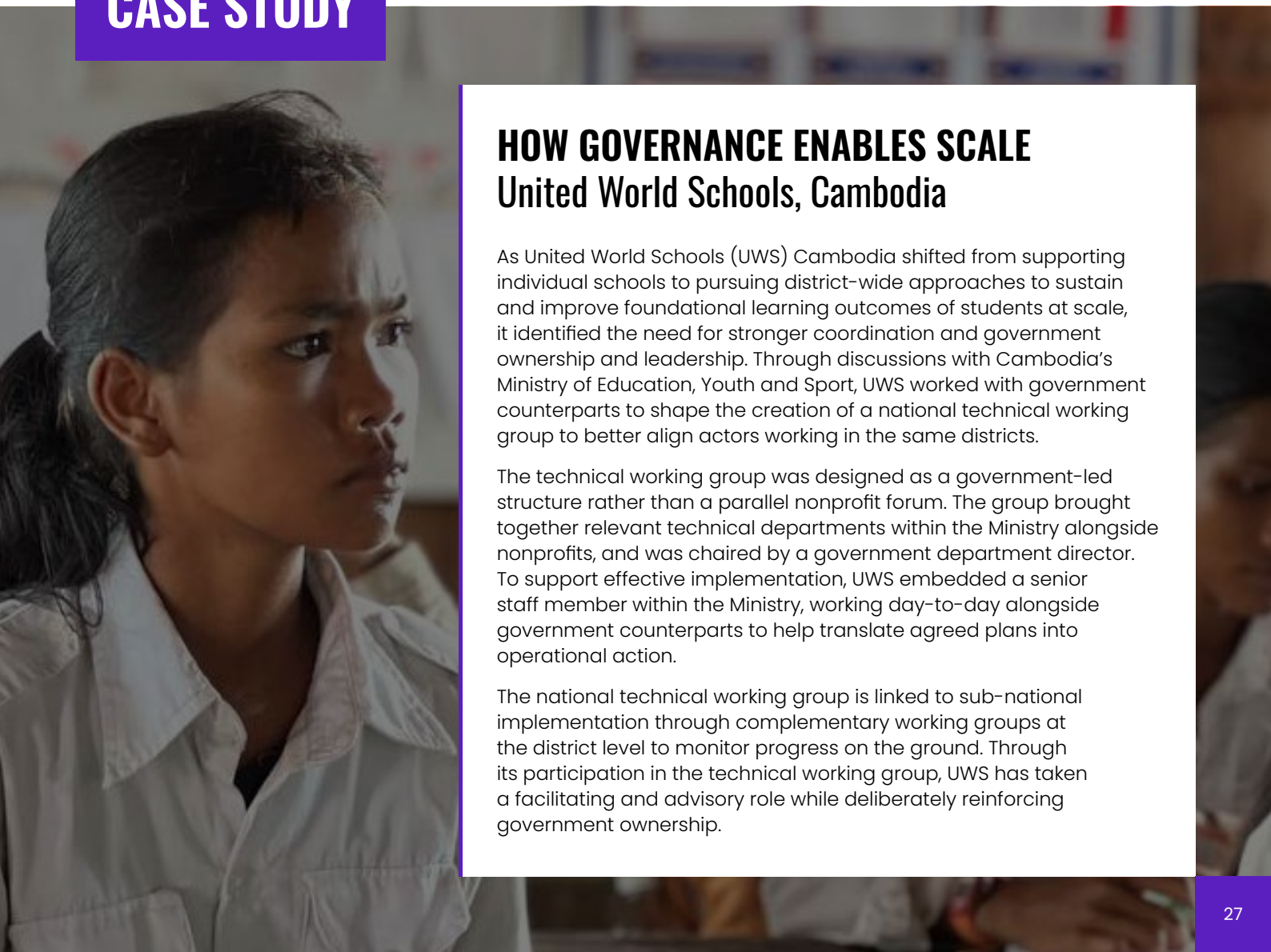
4. Governance and Management: building the state's self-correcting mechanisms

A government's ability to sustain delivery at scale also depended on having clear governance structures. These acted as the system's self-correcting mechanisms, helping routine problems to be identified and addressed before they escalated.

These structures took different forms depending on the sector and geography – including steering committees, technical bodies within ministries, routine performance review meetings, and school management committees.

The role of nonprofits was not to run these structures, but to help formalise, strengthen, or activate them around a specific problem area. This included clarifying decision rights, supporting early facilitation, embedding data, and helping routines take hold. Nonprofits progressively stepped back as these functions became routine within government.

CASE STUDY



HOW GOVERNANCE ENABLES SCALE
United World Schools, Cambodia

As United World Schools (UWS) Cambodia shifted from supporting individual schools to pursuing district-wide approaches to sustain and improve foundational learning outcomes of students at scale, it identified the need for stronger coordination and government ownership and leadership. Through discussions with Cambodia's Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport, UWS worked with government counterparts to shape the creation of a national technical working group to better align actors working in the same districts.

The technical working group was designed as a government-led structure rather than a parallel nonprofit forum. The group brought together relevant technical departments within the Ministry alongside nonprofits, and was chaired by a government department director. To support effective implementation, UWS embedded a senior staff member within the Ministry, working day-to-day alongside government counterparts to help translate agreed plans into operational action.

The national technical working group is linked to sub-national implementation through complementary working groups at the district level to monitor progress on the ground. Through its participation in the technical working group, UWS has taken a facilitating and advisory role while deliberately reinforcing government ownership.

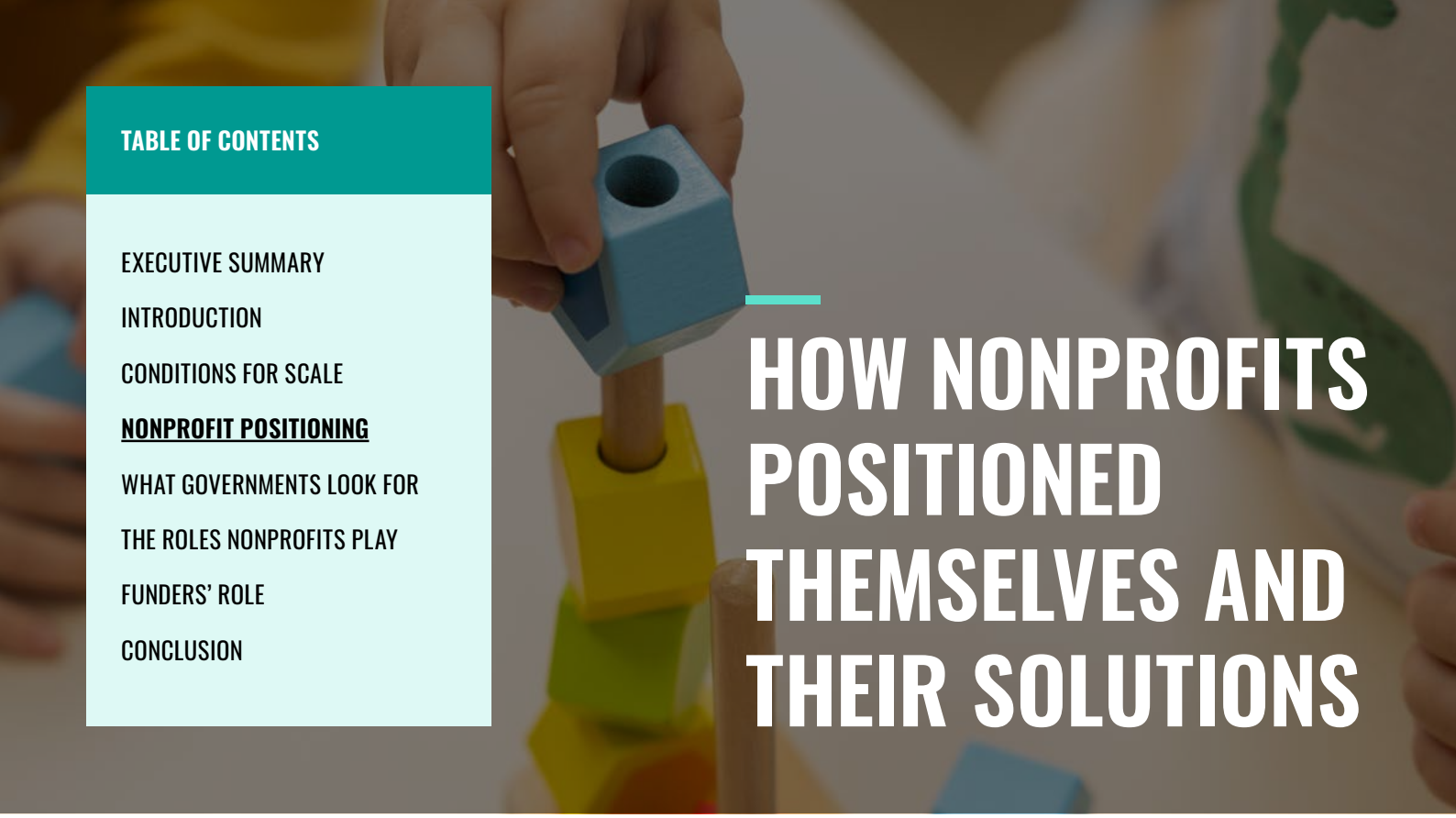


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HOW NONPROFITS POSITIONED THEMSELVES AND THEIR SOLUTIONS

A SHIFT IN MINDSET:
From protecting solutions to solving problems with government

Typically, nonprofits begin engaging government with a proven solution they believe in, and understandably want to protect. What distinguished the cases in this study was a willingness to set that instinct aside. Rather than leading with a solution to 'handover', these organisations started with the problem the government was trying to solve, and worked backwards to consider what role they might play.

In practice, this required two mindset shifts. The first was **putting the problem before the solution.** Organisations focused first on understanding the problem governments were trying to address, being open to the possibility that their solution might need to be adapted – or indeed set aside entirely – in order to fit government systems.

The second mindset shift that nonprofits underwent was **seeing themselves as a partner to help solve government's problems, rather than seeing government as a vehicle through which to deliver their solution at scale.**

That meant engaging with governments early, understanding their biggest felt problems, co-designing rather than pitching solutions, and being realistic about what governments could fund, manage, and sustain over the long term.

Together, these shifts reframe the central question. Rather than asking how government can be persuaded to adopt a nonprofit's solution, the question becomes how nonprofits can support government to solve a problem at scale – and therefore what kind of solution can actually last within government systems.

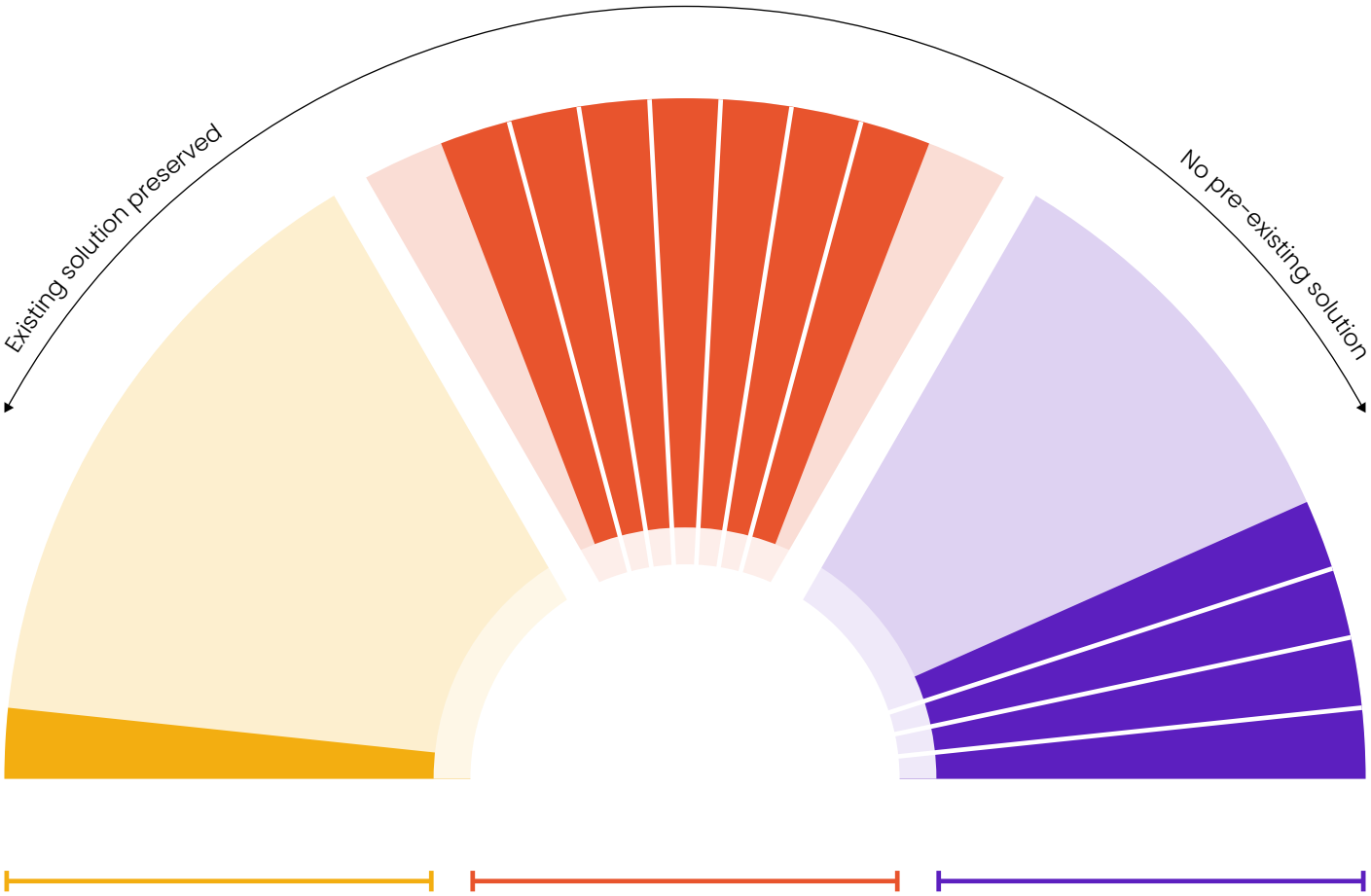
Reframing the question in this way should not diminish the vital role that nonprofit solutions play. Nonprofit solutions are often breakthrough ideas that would be unlikely to emerge within government systems, and they can play a crucial role in pushing public service delivery into new frontiers. Nonprofits should not abandon their solutions – these are among their greatest assets – but they should be willing to hold them lightly in order to achieve long-term impact at scale with government.

HOW EXISTING SOLUTIONS FEATURED IN PRACTICE

When organisations approach scaling with government with these mindsets, the role of their existing solution becomes more flexible. Across the cases, we observed a spectrum in how central the nonprofit's original solution remained as approaches became embedded in government systems – from governments adopting a nonprofit's solution largely in its original form, to nonprofits supporting system reform without scaling any defined solution at all.

Most cases fell somewhere in the middle of this spectrum, with existing solutions reshaped, sometimes significantly, to address governments' felt problems and fit the realities of public systems. Organisations often shifted their position along this spectrum depending on context, drawing more heavily on elements of their solution in some countries and less in others.

A spectrum of approaches



SOLUTION LARGELY PRESERVED:

1 of 12 cases

SOLUTION ADAPTED WITHIN PUBLIC SYSTEMS:

7 of 12 cases

NO EXISTING SOLUTION USED:

4 of 12 cases

Existing solution preserved — No pre-existing solution

SOLUTION LARGELY PRESERVED

At one end of the spectrum, a nonprofit's solution was adopted with relatively little modification. This happened where the model already aligned closely with government delivery structures and cost constraints, and where an unusually favourable political moment created the conditions for adoption.

Just one organisation in this study scaled in this way: Lively Minds' model was taken up across government education systems in Ghana with its core elements largely intact. However, this approach was proven ineffective in other contexts with more constrained systems and fiscal space. As a result, Lively Minds has shifted its approach to supporting governments to scale selected components of the core model that can be easily integrated into existing systems and budgets.

SOLUTION ADAPTED WITHIN PUBLIC SYSTEMS

Far more commonly, scaling required adaptation of the original solution. Nonprofits worked alongside governments to modify delivery structures, align the model with existing workforce roles, adjust costs to fit public budgets, or fold elements of the solution into existing public programmes. The nonprofit's original solution mattered – it provided a credible starting point – but what government ultimately implemented often looked quite different from what the organisation had initially developed.

> "If a solution is worth bringing into government, first identify its essence. Then be flexible about how it's done. As long as we don't lose that essence, we can tweak things – change how they work – so the model fits our system."
>
> Senior County Government Executive for Health (Kenya)

NO EXISTING SOLUTION USED

At the other end of the spectrum, some organisations were not scaling a specific solution at all. Their role was to help governments think through how a problem was being addressed across the system – convening stakeholders, supporting diagnosis, facilitating policy or institutional change.

> "We didn't arrive in Moldova with a childcare model to push. We came in after the Ukraine crisis asking, 'What do you need us to do to support Ukrainian learners?' – not with a ready-made solution, but to understand government priorities and help deliver on them."
>
> Street Child (Moldova)

Both ends of the spectrum carry risks.

Attempting to scale an existing solution largely unchanged can succeed where conditions align closely, but the study found only one example that did not require significant adaptation.

Solutions scaled without government adaptation can face legitimacy challenges, making them vulnerable to shifts in political leadership, budgets, or policy priorities, and harder for officials to fully own and adapt over time.

At the other end, system-focused work with no defined solution can be difficult as progress is diffuse, hard to attribute, and depends heavily on government capacity to drive change.

This helps explain why most cases gravitated toward the middle of the spectrum: a clear intervention, held loosely enough to be reshaped around the realities of public systems.

CASE STUDY

WORKING WITH GOVERNMENT TO STRENGTHEN WASH SYSTEMS
Everyone Forever, Rwanda

Water For People's work in Rwanda illustrates how nonprofits can support governments to address a problem at system level, rather than promoting a specific solution for adoption.

Water For People recognised that to achieve their aim of universal access to safe and reliable water services, no single solution, no matter how complex, was going to be able to fulfil that role. Instead, they had to plan for the whole population, understand the full range of services in each district, and work through district government mandates under Rwanda's decentralised WASH system to help create district-wide services.

To achieve this, Water For People positioned itself as:

- A long-term technical and financial partner to district governments, not a service provider running parallel projects
- A co-investor, initially providing 55% of the funding alongside district and national government budgets
- An embedded counterpart with staff working from government offices, supporting district technical teams and national WASH counterparts
- A critical friend at national level, helping the Ministry of Infrastructure understand system bottlenecks and co-develop strategies to overcome them

By taking this approach, Water For People was able to gain political and bureaucratic buy-in quickly, with mayors and ministries backing them such that WASH recommendations were integrated into district development plans and national sector strategies and budgets.

As the work progressed, Water For People could shift their focus to support the government to add in the missing system pieces – such as market-based sanitation solutions, private maintenance contractors, national financing strategies and tariff work.

By intentionally centering their work on the WASH system as a whole, rather than championing a single solution, Water For People helped Rwanda move from projectised WASH to district-led, nationally supported services that can keep running after external partners step back.

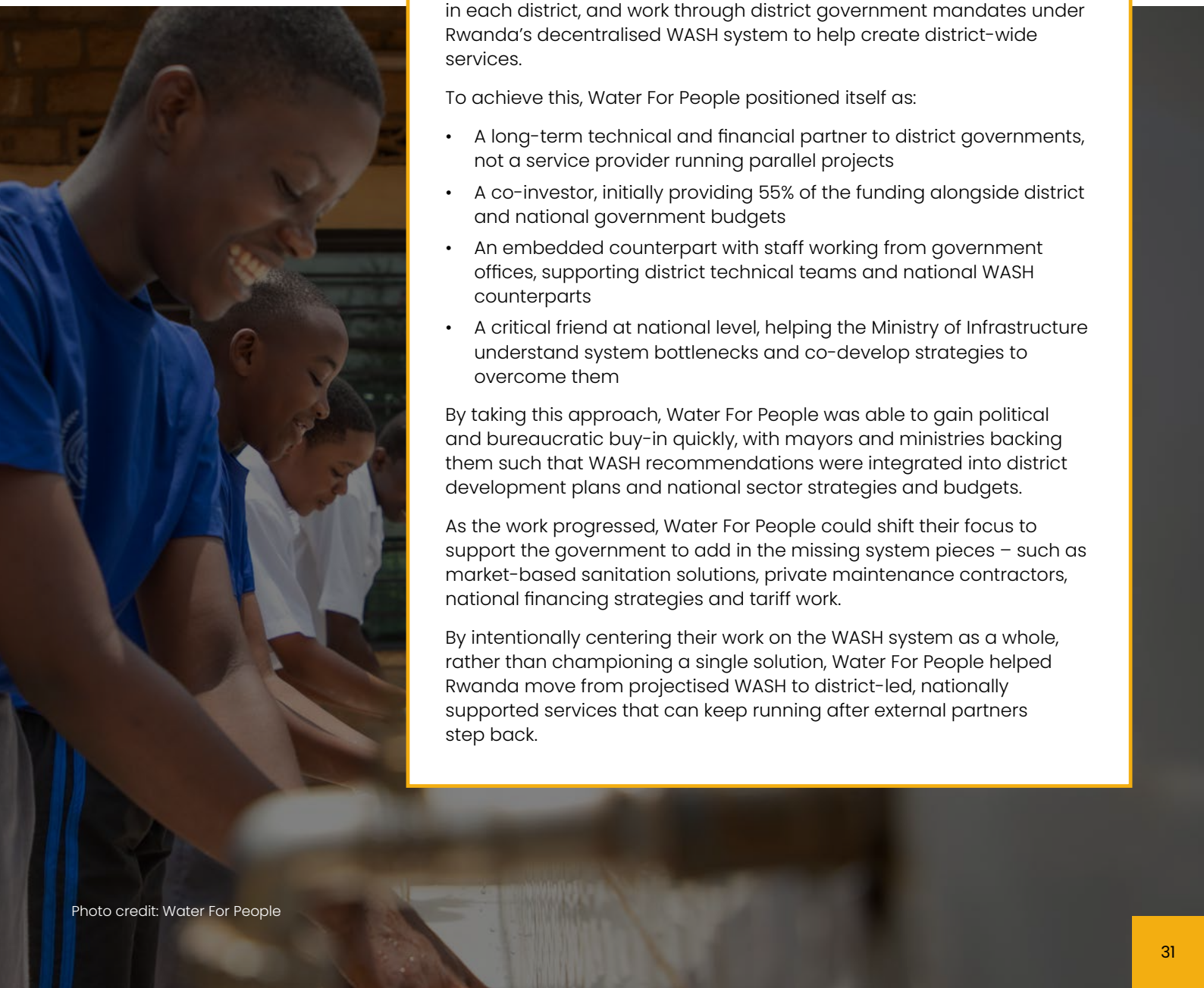


Photo credit: Water For People

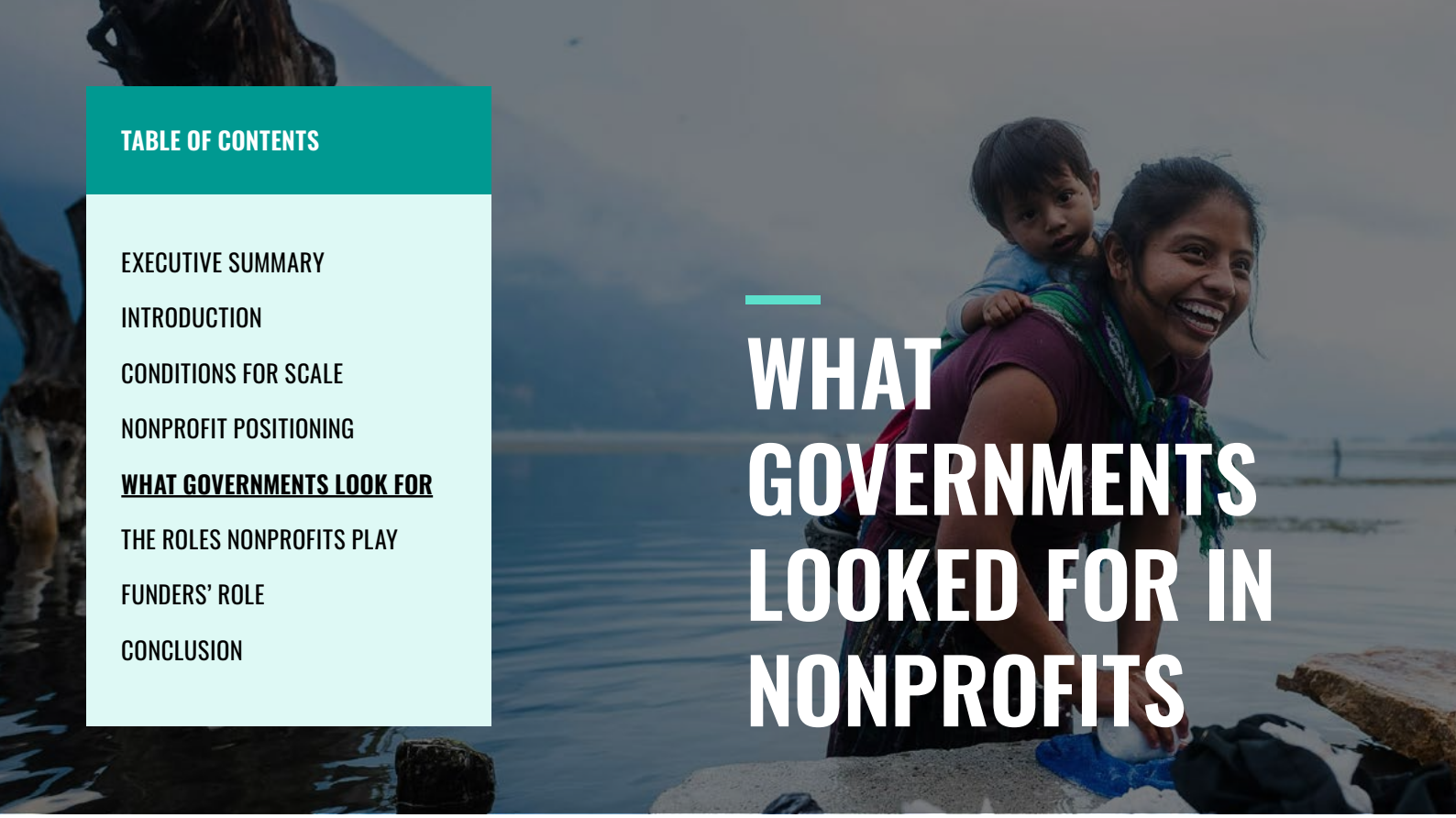


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WHAT GOVERNMENTS LOOKED FOR IN NONPROFITS

The conditions described above shape when scaling with government was possible, but they do not determine who governments choose to partner with. While political windows, the ability to pay and the ability to deliver set the limits of feasibility, **nonprofit behaviour strongly influenced whether those opportunities could be taken up.**

This was because governments were not primarily evaluating nonprofits on the brilliance of their solutions or delivery track record. Instead, they were judging how the organisation showed up as a partner – whether they inspired confidence, reduced risk, and demonstrated credibility over time.

This distinction is critical. While nonprofits often approach government engagement as a question of demonstrating effectiveness, governments approach it as one of risk management.

This section explores **how governments assessed nonprofit partners in practice and what made a nonprofit trustworthy in the eyes of government.**

01.

Governments were often betting on a leader, not just a solution or organisation

Across interviews, government officials emphasised that they often trusted individuals before organisations. Early decisions were shaped as much by the credibility and judgment of the person representing the nonprofit as by the solution itself. From a government perspective, backing a nonprofit carries political and reputational risk – and a trusted individual makes that risk easier to take.

From a government perspective, this credibility was typically signalled in two ways:

- **Institutional fluency:** Officials trusted individuals who understood how government actually works – how authority flows, how decisions are made and sequenced, where informal bottlenecks sit, and how to work within formal processes.
- **Demonstrated commitment:** Individuals built trust by showing real skin in the game – through sustained presence over time, senior leadership on the ground, and early actions that created accountability.

CASE STUDY

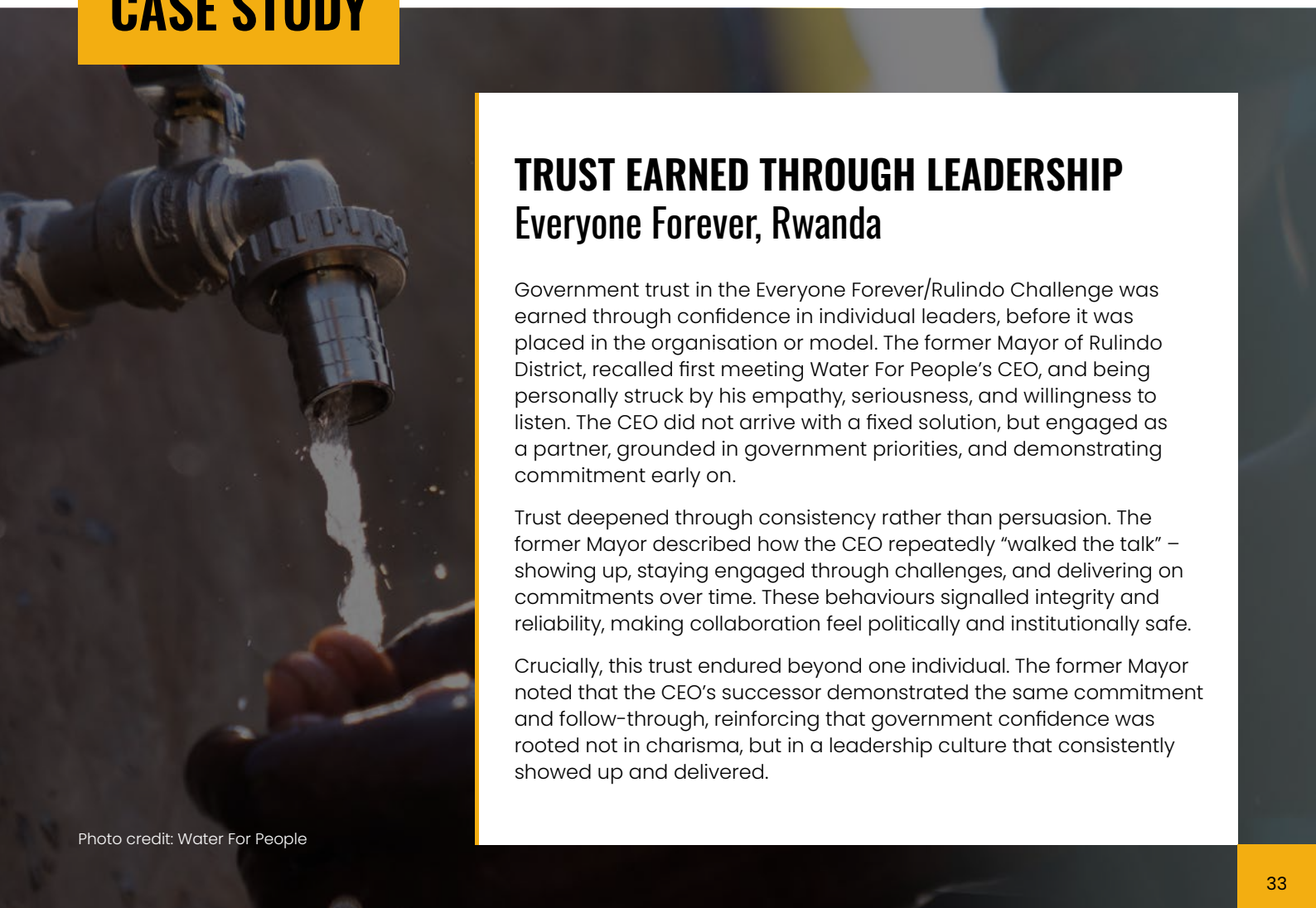


Photo credit: Water For People

TRUST EARNED THROUGH LEADERSHIP
Everyone Forever, Rwanda

Government trust in the Everyone Forever/Rulindo Challenge was earned through confidence in individual leaders, before it was placed in the organisation or model. The former Mayor of Rulindo District, recalled first meeting Water For People's CEO, and being personally struck by his empathy, seriousness, and willingness to listen. The CEO did not arrive with a fixed solution, but engaged as a partner, grounded in government priorities, and demonstrating commitment early on.

Trust deepened through consistency rather than persuasion. The former Mayor described how the CEO repeatedly "walked the talk" – showing up, staying engaged through challenges, and delivering on commitments over time. These behaviours signalled integrity and reliability, making collaboration feel politically and institutionally safe.

Crucially, this trust endured beyond one individual. The former Mayor noted that the CEO's successor demonstrated the same commitment and follow-through, reinforcing that government confidence was rooted not in charisma, but in a leadership culture that consistently showed up and delivered.

02.

Governments looked for a clear vision of scale

Many nonprofits shy away from defining an end state of government-led scale as they want to signal flexibility. However, in some interviews the opposite pattern emerged: reluctance to discuss end states did not make nonprofits appear more adaptable; it made them less trustworthy.

Government trusted nonprofits when they could articulate what government-led scale would eventually look like, and how their role would evolve as government ownership deepened.

They also expected increasing specificity and proof over time – moving from directional intent to formalised commitments, to demonstrated execution within public systems.

In practice, this meant clarity on how funding would transition into public budgets, how responsibilities would shift to government actors, what capabilities would need to be in place for government to manage delivery independently, and what realistic timelines for that transition looked like. Nonprofits that could describe this trajectory – even at a high level – were seen as more credible partners.

Governments also valued nonprofits that were explicit about the fact that they would not stay forever. A Senior County Government Executive for Health in Kenya described how trust deepened when organisations acknowledged early that they would eventually exit, making transition and sustainability standing agenda items rather than deferred end-of-project conversations.

> **"Governments won't back mission alone – they look for a clear vision of the end game: how institutionalisation will take shape within roles, budgets, and systems, then the path designed backwards from there."**
>
> Hana Lakhdar,
> Former senior civil servant and policy adviser in North Africa

CASE STUDY

A WELL PLANNED TRANSITION
Trail Bridges, Nepal

Helvetas, a Swiss development organisation working with the government of Nepal on rural infrastructure in Nepal, set a standout example in planning and communicating its transition.

Helvetas and the Swiss Development Cooperation signalled their intention to exit roughly a decade in advance, giving the Department of Local Infrastructure within the then Ministry of Local Development early clarity that long-term ownership would sit with the state. This was later formalised in 2019 through SWAp Framework 3, a government-led, multi-year sector programme that aligned Helvetas' exit with national planning and budgeting cycles, and explicitly stated that Helvetas' support would end at the close of the phase.

This provided line ministries and implementing departments with visibility over future responsibilities and costs, and confidence that these could be absorbed within existing public systems. Helvetas exited as planned at the end of 2023, by which point the Department of Local Infrastructure, the Ministry of Physical Infrastructure Development, and local governments had assumed full responsibility for the trail bridge sector.

The trail bridge programme is now a regular government programme, with an annual planning and budgeting system embedded across all three levels of government, resulting in an annual output of around 500 bridges and an average annual budget of ~ USD 25 million.



03.

Governments expected co-design of scaling architecture as well as the solution

Government representatives valued nonprofits that paired a clear vision with a commitment to co-design with government.

They emphasised that they do not want to be presented with a fully formed solution. They want nonprofits to approach them early, be transparent about their intentions, and co-design the solution, roles and scale plan together – within government priorities and systems.

Governments are the decision-makers on issues that create long-term obligations for the state – including how budgets are structured, how delivery is organised, which standards apply, and how accountability is enforced. Nonprofits that worked side-by-side with government on these decisions were more likely to build trust and secure sustained ownership.

> **"Real co-design means creating spaces for joint decision-making – such as through committees and working groups where we adapt and decide together. Without that, 'signing off' becomes a formality rather than true shared ownership."**
>
> Edwin Muhumuza,
> Former Ugandan government official

Levels of co-design

Problem diagnosis:
Jointly diagnosing the underlying problem for government to address, before a solution is determined.

Solution design:
Design or adaptation of delivery model, costs, standards.

Scaling architecture:
Financing, governance, and delivery arrangements at scale.

04.

Governments valued political and relational safety and expected nonprofits to think like the state

Government officials repeatedly emphasised in interviews that partnering with a nonprofit carries personal, political, and institutional risk. While nonprofits tend to optimise for urgency, innovation, and donor timelines, government counterparts operate under constant public scrutiny, audit risk, political pressure, and bureaucratic constraint. Both sides care about impact – but they are judged on very different things.

From the state's perspective, this translated into a simple but demanding test of trust: does this nonprofit understand the risks public officials are carrying, and do they behave in ways that reduce, rather than heighten, those risks?

Governments described four signals that helped answer this question.

1. **Treating government as a capable partner:**

   Governments trusted nonprofits that treated them as equal, capable partners. Several interviewees expressed frustration with a common nonprofit belief that government lacks capacity. What government counterparts wanted instead were organisations that respected existing expertise, acknowledged constraints as real, and positioned their role as strengthening, not substituting, public systems.

2. **Using expertise in a complementary way:**

   Government interviewees were clear that expertise alone does not build trust. What mattered was how that expertise was used. From a government perspective, nonprofits were viewed less favourably when they used expertise to do the government's job in parallel or in its place. Trust increased when they used it to strengthen specific gaps in public systems.

   What governments wanted were partners who understood why the state could not solve the problem alone, and positioned their expertise to help close those gaps over time. These gaps typically fell into three categories:

   - Technical gaps: tools, standards, or specialised know-how
   - Capacity gaps: coordination or execution bandwidth
   - Financing or feasibility gaps: risk absorption, proof, or bridge funding

3. **Cautious use of visibility:**

   Relational safety depended on how nonprofits used power, visibility, and voice. Trust deepened when nonprofits avoided public grandstanding, allowed government to lead publicly, and handled disagreement or learning through internal channels rather than external signalling.

4. **Predictability and respect for process:**

   Governments felt safer with nonprofits that worked through formal roles and hierarchies, respected decision rights, and avoided surprises whether around timelines, design shifts, or public communication.

> **"We really want the partners to work with us, not to work for us as if they are consultants... to understand the government systems, operations, structures, and come to support – not to compete, but to complement the government's efforts."**
>
> Senior government official, Directorate of Basic Education, Malawi

CASE STUDY

MAKING ADOPTION SAFE FOR THE STATE
Accelerated Learning Program, Ethiopia

In Ethiopia, Luminos Fund's early engagement illustrated how winning government trust requires understanding and aligning with government's expectations of engagement.

Although Luminos' accelerated learning programme addressed a real policy priority and showed early promise at the classroom level, where Luminos had been focusing its efforts in order to develop and refine the model, senior government officials described initial resistance when they felt that Luminos sought to work directly with districts, before established regional and zonal education authorities were fully engaged. As the former State Minister at the Ministry of Education explained, "they came with the initiative and preferred to implement it directly with districts. That immediately created resistance."

This resistance was not about the solution itself, but about the risk created for officials whose authority and accountability had been perceived to have been sidestepped. Trust grew once Luminos worked deliberately through ministry hierarchies, aligning the programme with policy processes, and inviting government officials to observe the programme in practice as it was being implemented in classrooms.

This allowed officials – from federal Ministry of Education units to regional bureaus and local education authorities – to exercise visible ownership over decisions. This strengthened trust and reduced institutional risk for government counterparts, making engagement easier and helping the programme gain traction within Ethiopia's national education system.



Photo by the Luminos Fund



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THE ROLES NONPROFITS PLAY ACROSS THE JOURNEY

This section pulls together insights from across the study to show how nonprofit roles shifted over time – from laying the groundwork, to co-designing with government, to supporting delivery.

When seen together, the true extent of nonprofits' work starts to emerge, including the critical elements that are often less visible and less well funded – especially before scale begins and once government delivery is underway.

THE NAVIGATOR:
Before scale

THE ARCHITECT:
During scale

THE SUPPORTER:
After adoption begins

THE NAVIGATOR

Before scale:
understanding the system, preparing the ground and positioning the nonprofit's work

The required role:

- Build credible, long-term relationships with government, while understanding who holds real authority and how decisions are made
- Navigate political dynamics, incentives, and stakeholders, not just technical teams
- Develop a clear understanding of how the problem is defined and prioritised within the system
- Align the nonprofit's work with government priorities, constraints, and timing, rather than leading with your solution
- Track political shifts, reform agendas, and moments of opportunity, and adapt the approach accordingly

What this means in practice:

- Nonprofits are positioning themselves as a credible partner to help solve a government priority
- This work is often slow and hard to fund, but it shapes whether scale is possible at all

THE ARCHITECT

During scale:
co-designing the solution, and how it functions within government systems

The required role:

- Diagnose political, operational, and financial constraints that will shape what is feasible at scale
- Translate policy ambition into delivery models that can function within government systems and budgets
- Work alongside government to co-design how the model fits into existing, roles, responsibilities, workflows and incentives, even where this means letting go of elements of the original design
- Support integration into policy, plans, budgets, and formal decision-making processes for long-term sustainability
- Define how the nonprofit role will evolve and reduce over time, as government ownership increases

What this means in practice:

- The nonprofit is not handing over a solution. It is helping build a system that government can own and run
- This is where scaling is constructed and embedded

THE SUPPORTER

After adoption begins:
supporting early government-led delivery to ensure systems work in practice

The required role:

- Stay closely engaged to troubleshoot early delivery and coordination challenges as systems begin operating at scale
- Provide targeted technical or advisory support, without taking over delivery or creating dependency
- Strengthen monitoring and management systems so government can identify and respond to problems
- Help ensure that delivery becomes part of normal government operations, rather than relying on external support

What this means in practice:

- The work does not end when government takes over. This phase is critical to ensuring systems actually function
- This role is often less visible, but determines whether scale is sustained in reality



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THE ROLE OF FUNDERS

Scaling with government is inherently challenging: the constraints are political (not just operational), the timelines are longer, and the journey is rarely linear. What looks like "slow progress" is often the real work of scaling with government.

Yet, **supporting nonprofits to scale with government presents a powerful opportunity for funders to achieve meaningful, exponential change.** When a nonprofit successfully scales with government, the outcome is not just a larger programme – it results in a permanent shift for everyone the public system serves, sustained by public financing long after any grant cycle has closed. A single government adoption decision can reach more people in one year than a decade of nonprofit-led project delivery. In Tanzania, for example, the m-mama emergency transport system now reaches the entire country, fully financed by the government, with the original funder, Vodafone Foundation, able to step back.

Across cases examined in this research, **the role of funders emerged as a critical success factor.** While governments ultimately determine whether solutions are adopted and financed, funders influence whether nonprofits have the time, flexibility, and risk tolerance required to accompany government through the long and uncertain path to government-led scale.

For funders to understand how their funding can be best deployed, they must start from the government's perspective. The central question for government was whether donor support fit the way government plans, budgets, and delivers at scale. Funding was most helpful when aligned with government priorities, plans, and budget cycles, and used catalytically to strengthen capacity. By contrast, off-budget financing, fragmented projects, or incentive structures that bypassed public systems were seen as increasing political risk.

FOUNDATIONAL REALITIES FUNDERS MUST ACKNOWLEDGE

Reality 1: Scaling with government required slow systems work, which is often invisible

The evidence consistently highlighted that groundwork is essential and often lasts 12–24 months. This groundwork cannot be divided into discrete projects – it involves relationship-building, coordination, policy development, and capability-building across institutions.

Because it produces few immediate or visible outputs, it is often treated as an overhead rather than the core work, despite being central to success. Funding models that prioritise short-term delivery metrics during this phase can therefore undermine scaling with government efforts.

Reality 2: Progress is unpredictable, and often looks like failure

Scaling with government is shaped by political cycles, fiscal shocks, and administrative churn. As a result, progress is rarely linear, and periods of stagnation are common and often outside a nonprofit's control.

Successful scaling with government therefore depended on flexible funding that allowed nonprofits to pause, adapt, or re-sequence work as conditions shifted. Funding models that treated slow progress as failure frequently risked withdrawing support at precisely the moments when persistence mattered most.

Reality 3: Nonprofits were rarely paid by government for the work they did to scale with government

Across all cases reviewed, none of the nonprofits were paid by the government for the work they were doing. Their most valuable contribution was often not programme delivery or technical expertise, but the unprocurable work of making systems ready – navigating bureaucracy, building trust, coordinating actors. This was rarely due to unwillingness, but to procurement rules, public financial management constraints, civil service mandates, and political risk. In effect, the work governments needed most was the work they were least able to fund.

As a result, donor funding rarely ended when government financing began. In most cases, philanthropy continued to support nonprofits' ongoing role alongside government throughout long transition periods – often up to a decade – until nonprofits were able, if at all, to meaningfully exit. Even then, many nonprofits continued to play an advisory role to governments that still required external funding.

Reality 4: Scaling with government was rarely funded by a single actor from start to finish

Scaling with government was financed through layered and overlapping sources of capital, with different funders supporting different functions at different stages. Philanthropic funding often underwrote early system preparation and partnership-building, while government co-financing, bilateral aid, or blended finance supported expanded delivery during transition.

Government budgets typically assumed responsibility for ongoing delivery only once systems were sufficiently prepared – often alongside continued donor support for non-procurable system functions.

Reality 5: Monitoring that supports government delivery may differ from funder reporting needs

Governments consistently emphasised the value of monitoring systems that supported day-to-day management – helping officials identify problems, understand causes, and act through existing supervision structures. In practice however, government monitoring capacities differ from standard donor reporting requirements, creating a tension that could undermine scaling with government efforts if left unaddressed.

Funders seeking to support scaling with government therefore needed to actively invest in building government monitoring capacity over time, working alongside nonprofits to close the gap. This means there is a need for monitoring systems that served government management needs first, while also creating a credible pathway toward the rigour that donor accountability frameworks require.

The roles funders play in enabling scaling with government

Given these realities, funders who buy into and understand the scaling with government journey can play a pivotal role in making it possible. The evidence points to three distinct funder roles. The first is widely recognised, but remains vital.

The other two are less obvious and far less discussed, and proved crucial in a number of cases.

01
Providing patient, flexible capital to absorb early adoption risk

Scaling with government requires a fundamentally different type of funding from traditional forms. Funders must provide patient, flexible capital that acknowledges the extended timelines and adaptive nature of the work.

This type of funding enabled nonprofits to work through extended pre-adoption phases with government where visible impact was limited, and investment in relationship-building was essential. It allowed nonprofits to absorb early political and fiscal risk, and to secure co-financing arrangements that shared risk and built government ownership. Flexible capital also allowed nonprofits to build internal capacity for new ways of working with government, shifting from delivery roles to system support, coordination, and technical assistance. Finally, patient capital allowed nonprofits to stay engaged after formal adoption, e.g. through technical assistance, ongoing advisory support or monitoring.

Funders must distinguish progress from persistence

For funders to play this patient capital role, they need to be able to distinguish between nonprofits that are doing the often tedious work of scaling with government well, and those that are simply persisting in the hope that adoption will eventually follow. Across cases, this depended on capabilities that extended well beyond technical or sectoral expertise – including political fluency, systems understanding and relational credibility.

However, from a funder's perspective, this distinction is rarely clear. Long timelines and uncertain pathways make it difficult to judge whether slow progress reflects real progress, or a lack of traction.

Currently, most philanthropic organisations lack the ability to rigorously assess these nonprofit capabilities. Therefore, funders must cultivate a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the factors that contribute to successful government partnerships – including how, why, and when government partnerships succeed – and adapt their operating models so they can confidently allocate patient capital.

In practice, this means looking for signs of movement within the system, such as increasing government ownership, integration into plans or budgets, and shifts in the nonprofit's role, rather than progress defined by time or activity alone.

02
Investing in government capacity

The second role funders played was investing directly in government – both in the people and the systems – not only in nonprofits. Strengthening the capacity of government to innovate and lead reforms, absorb external models, and scale through targeted investment, helped create the conditions for scale and supported governments to sustain effective delivery over the long term.

This included supporting networks and platforms that identify and connect reform-minded government champions, build their leadership ability and facilitate their incubation of sectoral transformation. One such example is the Government Empowerment Network, which brings together and connects public servants to inspire, incubate, and materialise solutions to structural challenges. Investing in government also meant investing in the systems that sustain delivery at scale – such as measurement, performance management, procurement, and incentive structures – without which there is a risk that the quality of delivery diminishes over time.

In Ghana for example, the Global Partnership for Education supported government-led scale by financing training and supervision capacity in district and regional education offices, enabling government staff to consistently deliver and oversee the Lively Minds-GES programme in the long-term. In practice, funders often pursue these investments in partnership with multilateral development banks and other actors working to strengthen public sector performance.

03
Leveraging influence and networks

Beyond capital, funders brought convening power, credibility, and access that nonprofits lacked, particularly in the early stages of engaging with government. They helped open doors with senior officials, legitimise nonprofits in the eyes of government counterparts, and signal confidence at critical moments by showing up in crucial meetings.

Funders also used their influence to encourage government co-financing and to align other donors around a shared approach, reducing fragmentation and building momentum behind a credible pathway to scaling with government. In some cases, funders went further still, drawing on their own government relationships to help nonprofits identify genuine decision-makers and assess whether political conditions were right to act.

CASE STUDY

UBS OPTIMUS FOUNDATION'S ESSENTIAL ROLE IN ENABLING SCALING WITH GOVERNMENT

National Childcare Programme, Moldova

The role played by one of Street Child's funders – the UBS Optimus Foundation – in helping establish a nationwide childcare programme in Moldova illustrates how funders can do far more to support scaling with government than simply provide capital.

In addition to providing flexible upfront funding, UBS Optimus Foundation played an early catalytic role through engagement with senior government figures, including by joining Street Child on a pivotal call with Members of Parliament. The purpose was twofold: to signal to the government that the funder was serious about systems-level impact, and to allow the funder to hear directly from senior officials about policy priorities and the envisaged role of childcare.

Street Child, UBS Optimus Foundation, and government officials mutually agreed a co-financing commitment "in principle" (it wasn't a legally binding agreement). The emphasis was on ensuring the government had "skin in the game", rather than on strict cost-sharing compliance. Over time, government investment has far outstripped the original UBS Optimus contribution, with the equivalent of over USD 20 million channelled through the state budget.

UBS Optimus Foundation has since shifted to a light-touch, flexible stance, as the Moldovan government has increasingly owned, funded, and led the national childcare programme.

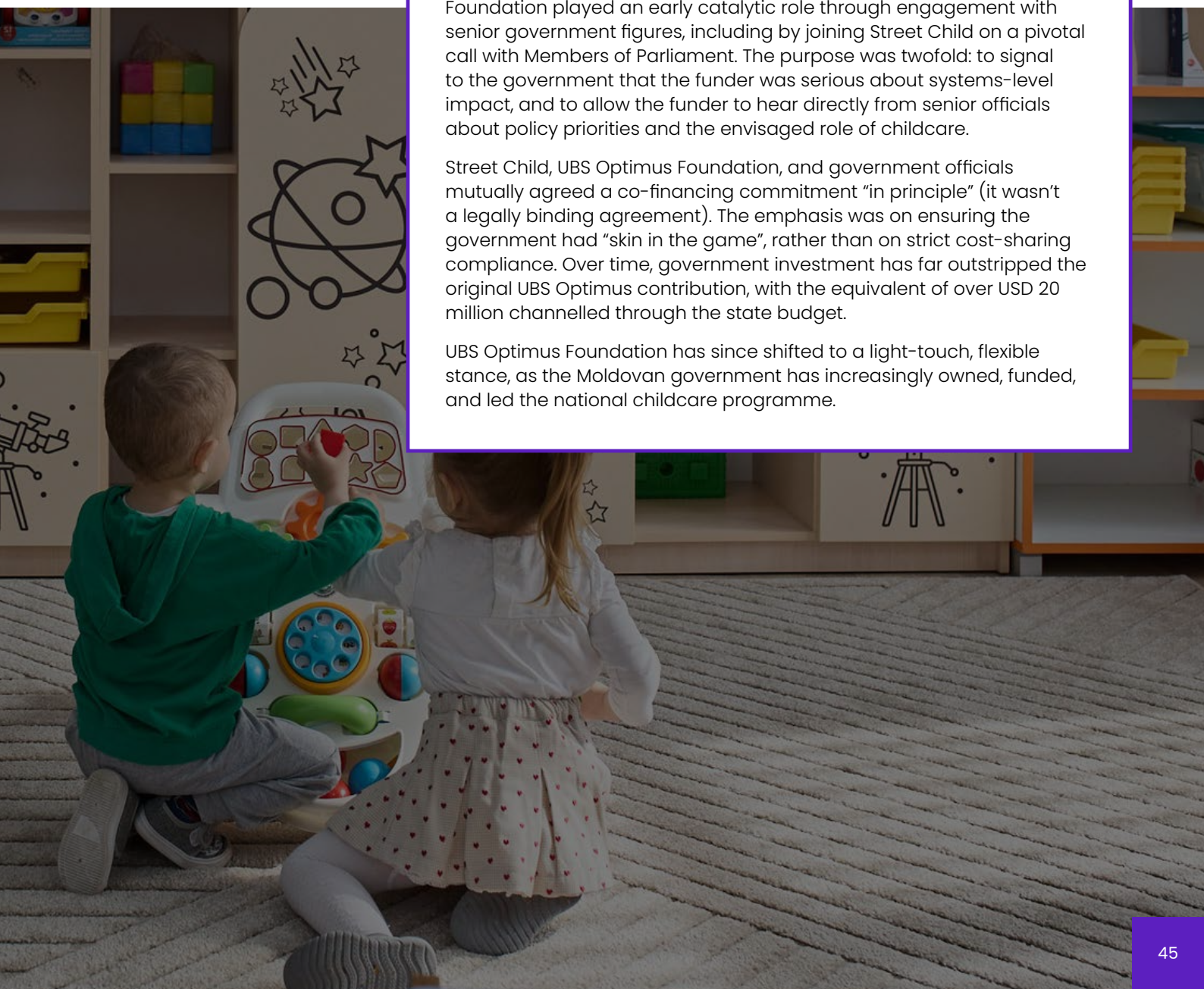




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Across the 12 cases in our research, one thing is clear: what ultimately determined scale within government systems was not technical merit, but whether governments could authorise, finance, and sustain change in practice.

Nonprofits that achieved durable scale did not succeed by perfecting their solutions or persistence alone. They succeeded by understanding how power, risk, money, and decision-making actually operate inside public systems – and by adapting their role accordingly.

This marks a fundamental shift: away from asking "How do we persuade government?" and toward asking "How do governments actually make decisions – and how do we position ourselves to make institutional change possible when conditions align?"

In many cases, that shift meant letting go of visibility, control, and even the assumption that a nonprofit's own solution would be what was scaled. What mattered more was whether the work made it easier and safer for government actors to authorise change, commit resources, and stand behind delivery over time.

The most significant shift, then, is not from pilot to policy, or from donor funding to government budgets. It is a shift in mindset: from seeing scale as replication, to seeing it as institutional change; from proving that something works, to supporting government to take responsibility for the change year after year, within real constraints.

This reframing has uncomfortable implications. It challenges familiar sector narratives about evidence, ownership and exit. It also raises questions about what nonprofits and funders are really optimised for – and whether current incentives reward the kind of work scaling with government actually requires.

This study leaves us with some critical questions:

For nonprofits

- Are we positioning ourselves as partners to government to help solve problems at scale, or are we still trying to convince them to scale our solution?
- Are we designing for how governments actually engage with nonprofits, or for how we hope they will?
- Are we reducing institutional and political risk for government – or unintentionally increasing it?

For funders

- Do our funding models recognise that the most critical work of scaling with government is slow, relational, and often invisible?
- Are we set up to recognise when nonprofits are making substantive institutional inroads – rather than mistaking persistence for progress?
- Are we prepared to bridge-fund work that governments cannot pay for, even when it produces few short-term outputs?
- And ultimately: are we willing to absorb early risk so that governments can take financial ownership later?

As with any qualitative study, this research reflects a relatively small sample of scaling with government journeys, drawn from organisations that have made substantial progress. While this allowed us to examine these dynamics in depth, future work could explore the experiences of locally-led organisations pursuing scaling with government, examine cases where efforts have stalled or taken different forms, and investigate other ways that nonprofits partner with government to address problems at scale. It could also examine how nonprofits engage with policy change – given that many are working in response to policy gaps or failures – and how advocacy is used to open political windows, shift government priorities, and create the conditions for scale. We see this study as an early contribution to a growing body of work on how nonprofits and governments can achieve durable scale together.

Scaling with government is known to be a powerful route to impact. But it is a long game, shaped by constraints that no single organisation controls. The real work lies in understanding the larger constraints, aligning with the reality of the systems, waiting for the right conditions, and being ready to act – decisively – when they do appear.

APPENDIX

STUDY METHODOLOGY

The study is exploratory and designed to identify new insights that build on or fill gaps in existing literature. Key components include:

- **Literature Review**

  Examining existing research and publications on scaling with government to identify existing best practices and evidence gaps.

  A summary of the findings from the literature review was published in November 2025 - Nonprofits and Governments: What Is Known About Embedding Innovations in Public Systems.

- **Expert Interviews**

  Engaging sector leaders to refine study questions and ensure relevance.

- **Case Selection**

  Researching relevant global cases, through both desk searches and recommendations, resulting in a long-list of 40 cases from which the final 12 were selected. The final selection is designed to include a range of global cases, with a focus on Sub-Saharan Africa, spanning different geographies, sectors and solutions, while highlighting stories not featured in existing literature.

- **Qualitative Interviews**

  30 semi-structured interviews with government and nonprofits representatives, connected to the 12 cases, each bringing deep expertise in scaling with government.

- **Thematic Analysis**

  Analysing interview data to identify common enablers, challenges, and patterns in scaling with government.



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