Q&A Responses

SCALING WITH GOVERNMENT

Collated responses to questions raised during the webinar on the Scaling with Government.

Research developed in partnership with

THANK YOU FOR YOUR AMAZING QUESTIONS

On 9 July 2026, Spring Impact hosted a webinar on our study, Scaling with Government: The government's perspective on what nonprofits and funders need to do differently – produced in partnership with LGT Venture Philanthropy and Instiglio. The study focuses on what it actually takes for nonprofits to scale their impact through government.

During the webinar, the conversation covered everything from how governments decide who to trust, to the practical realities of managing donors, political transitions, and your own leadership along the way.

Thanks to an incredibly engaging conversation, and the salience of the topic, we received more questions than we could answer during one webinar. The questions were incredibly important, so to ensure they get answered, we've collated responses to all of them, below.

Hopefully this can act as a useful resource whether you managed to join or the day or not.

Unless otherwise specified, responses are from Ali Foster-Metcalf and Rosanna Wakefield, the study leads here at Spring Impact.

You can access the webinar recording here.

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WHAT GOVERNMENTS LOOK FOR AND WHAT CAN GO WRONG

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WHAT MAKES A PARTNER A "SAFE BET"

Q The insight that the interventions/partners that the government feel are a 'safe bet' is a key factor in scaling is a really useful insight. Can you share more about what you think creates a 'safe bet', is it about evidence, orgs that have a strong track record/business model, etc?

A From the study we found that evidence and track record are necessary but not sufficient. What converted a credible option into a safe bet was a combination of quite a few things: a trusted individual with institutional fluency; willingness to adapt the solution to fit government systems; a clear, articulable vision of what government-led scale would look like; fiscal permissibility (not just low cost, but whether it can be budgeted for legally); and evidence from within government contexts, not just controlled pilots where possible.

HOW GOVERNMENTS ASSESS RISK

Q

For NGOs or not-for-profits. What are the main things that make those propositions seem less risky for governments? To some extent the "stability" of a private sector organisation is only really assured because they have a stable customer base. It's not really different if you're an NGO?

A

Spring Impact: The study found that governments don't primarily assess nonprofits on organisational stability as such – the risks they're managing are primarily political, reputational, and institutional.

What reduced risk was how nonprofits showed up. Institutional fluency – understanding how authority flows, how decisions get made, where informal bottlenecks sit – let partners navigate government systems with less friction. Additionally, respecting process, letting government lead publicly, and resolving disagreements internally each reduced the political/reputational exposure government associated with the partnership.

Cate, Water for People: For our case, our scheme funding is co-funding with private sector and government funding, so it is less risky for governments where also put responsible to their side since it still needs collaborate with their funding, so they need to allocate together with NGO (backed up by private sector) to solve the issue

BALANCING PRESSURE TO SCALE FAST AGAINST GOING DEEP

Q

We often experience that government is very focussed on numbers (outreach, scaling fast), this puts NGO partners under pressure to move fast instead of moving deep, e.g. when conducting systemic school improvement programs, where it takes time to win over all stakeholders, also parents, communities, teachers and really change mindsets.

A

This really resonates with something we heard in the study. One organisation described government wanting to scale fast – the exact pressure you're describing. What worked was naming a concrete cautionary tale rather than arguing risk in the abstract: their lead had lived through an almost identical programme years earlier that government scaled by quota without enough training or monitoring, and within two-three years regions were reporting it had failed. His line to current officials: "the programme didn't fail – we failed."

The other thing that helped: they only introduced practices government could actually sustain at scale, so "slow" wasn't just about mindset chang

THE RISK OF EFFECTIVENESS ERODING WHEN ADAPTED TO GOVERNMENT SYSTEMS

Q

How should non-profits deal with the risk that effectiveness of an intervention / approach can be changed or eroded when adapted to be easily adopted by / into government systems?

A

Spring Impact: Many of the organisations we spoke to were actually very open that the reality is that quality will drop compared to when they were delivering it – but they were willing to make that trade-off to reach many more people!

The key is usually in identifying a level of quality that is acceptable and realistic, and being clear that if quality drops below that, it's not working. One useful way organisations did this in practice was distinguishing the essence of the intervention from the mechanism of delivering it – the essence is the thing that can't be compromised, everything else (process, sequencing, who delivers what) is negotiable as long as that essence survives contact with government systems. That distinction is often more useful than a general quality threshold, because it tells you which trade-offs are safe to make, not just that trade-offs will happen. But otherwise, accept the trade-offs if that's what is needed to achieve your impact goals.

Cate, Water for People: Non-profits can deal with the risk through identifying which components are responsible for the intervention's impact, what is the core function? and which aspects can be adapted picking from government systems. If you are keen you may identify one or two forms that you can tweak without eroding anything.

A SPECTRUM OF PARTNERSHIPS MODELS

Q

What partnership model has worked well between non-profits and government?

A

In this study we were specifically looking at cases where the end goal was government as both payer and doer of the solution, so we can't speak to the full range of partnership models. But we did find meaningful differences in the role nonprofits' solutions played, which in turn shaped the role the nonprofit itself played. We mapped this as a spectrum. At one end, a solution adopted largely as-is however interestingly only one of the twelve cases fell here. At the other end, four cases where the nonprofit brought no predefined solution at all, and instead provided technical expertise to help government strengthen its own approach. The majority sat in the middle: there was an existing nonprofit solution that served as a credible starting point, but it was significantly adapted to fit government systems, budgets, and workforce realities.

Where a solution was more fully adopted, the nonprofit's role tended to focus on co-designing the delivery architecture (how it would be financed, governed, and embedded in existing roles) and then supporting early implementation before stepping back. Where it was more technical assistance, the nonprofit was playing a longer-term system-strengthening role – convening stakeholders, strengthening monitoring and management, helping government diagnose problems and develop its own approaches.

DIGITAL SOVEREIGNTY AND DATA SECURITY

Q

To what extent are issues around digital sovereignty and data security influencing decisions about partners? There appears to be a real move away from off the shelf solutions to developing national infrastructure - but is this translating to changes in decision making?

A

This wasn't something we set out to explore directly, so we can't speak to whether it's shifting decision-making as a broader trend. But two cases do show government moving towards nationally-owned data infrastructure, for different reasons:

In Tanzania, m-mama's government partner explicitly rejected a privately-hosted system – they wanted the data on their own servers rather than a partner's, and made the switch happen. That's a sovereignty/control decision, not funding-driven.

In Kisumu County (Living Goods), the driver is different: the county's dependence on donor-funded data hosting is flagged as their single biggest sustainability risk, and they're now planning a local data centre replicated to national level. That's less about sovereignty as a principle and more about donor-withdrawal exposure pushing them toward the same outcome – national infrastructure.

So there's a signal, but it's two cases with different underlying logic, not evidence of a consistent "move away from off-the-shelf" pattern across the study.

THE BIGGEST MISTAKES NONPROFITS MAKE

Q What is the biggest mistake organizations make when trying to scale through government, and what would you recommend doing differently from the beginning?

A From what we've seen, it's going in seeing the government as a vehicle for scaling their solution, rather than asking how they can best help government to solve their biggest problems. So going in very open minded from the beginning, and holding their solutions lightly otherwise nonprofits can spend years trying to convince a government to scale their solution, rather than collaboratively working to tackle a government problem.

BUILDING AND SUSTAINING RELATIONSHIPS, AND ALIGNMENT WITH GOVERNMENT

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MOVING BEYOND ONE CHAMPION'S PERSONAL INTEREST

Q

Any successes we have had with government have been primarily as a result of an official having a strong personal interest. I'm interested to hear opinions on how we move beyond that, and ensure interest is sustained and grows when individuals move on.

A

This is a great question and one that resonates with what we saw in the study. We found that while the individual interests and relationships were important, they weren't the only factor that signalled success.

The study showed that governments were often betting on a leader, but we were also able to unpack what makes trust durable beyond one individual: embedding the work in formal systems early (budget lines, MOUs, policy instruments) so the relationship wasn't what was holding things together; building ownership across multiple actors rather than concentrating it in one place; and creating governance structures that outlasted any individual.

DEMONSTRATING POLITICAL ALIGNMENT BEYOND NATIONAL POLICIES

Q

What is the guidance on how an NGO can demonstrate political alignment beyond national policies?

A

The findings in the study suggest that alignment needs to operate at multiple levels. Connecting the work to national policy priorities is crucial, but nonprofits can go further by tracking leadership transitions, reform agendas, and budget cycles to understand where political energy is actually concentrated at any given moment, and adapting their positioning accordingly. The EYElliance case in Liberia is a good example: their longer-term goal was integrating eye health into the national community health system, but when President Sirleaf's priority was school eye health, they aligned with that agenda first and used it as an entry point. That kind of responsiveness – being willing to sequence your work around what government is actually focused on right now, not just what national policy says – is one of the most tangible ways to demonstrate alignment.

BALANCING RELATIONSHIPS WITH PUSHING YOUR WORK & PLANNING FOR POLITICAL TRANSITIONS

Q

How do you balance government relationships and pushing your work, knowing that new administrations rarely continue within a new administration?
and; How do you handle or plan for political transitions?

A

Cate, Water for People: Building strong relationships takes time. However, there also needs to be a mindset shift within the nonprofit sector – from focusing on delivering and promoting our own work to strengthening and supporting government systems. Our goal is not to replace government but to enable governments to sustainably lead and deliver services. This approach requires patience, particularly when onboarding new administrations and leadership teams. However, we need flexible funding, which allows organisations to maintain engagement and continue supporting long-term systems change even when there is no dedicated donor funding in place.

Spring Impact: To add on planning for transitions specifically: it will always be challenging and of course there is no fool-proof answer to this. It helps to separate the political layer of government from the technical layer. Ministers and senior political appointees change with elections; technical and civil service staff mostly don't. Relationships and institutional knowledge built with the latter tend to carry through a change in administration in a way relationships built only with senior political figures don't – so it's worth deliberately investing time in technical-level relationships alongside political ones.

BEST TACTICS FOR ADVOCACY/ENGAGEMENT – MOU FIRST VS. PILOT FIRST?

Q

What are the best tactics to do advocacy or engage with the government? Is it necessary to have an MoU first with local government or is it much better to have separate pilot project collaboration with each department first as a pilot & evidence?

A

Unfortunately there's not a one size fits all answer to this. From the study we found that the best approach depends on the specific context and the structure of the government there. Although in many cases having a strong MOU with sufficient detail in place was crucial early on, in several cases the MOU actually came after evidence of traction rather than before – it was the proof point that unlocked the formal step, not the other way round. So rather than asking "MOU first or pilot first," it may be more useful to ask: what's the smallest piece of credible evidence I can generate before I need the MOU to unlock the next stage?

BUILDING POLITICAL UNDERSTANDING INTERNALLY WHEN LEADERSHIP WON'T INVEST

Q

How to build political understanding in an organisation when your senior leadership does not want to invest in monitoring and influencing?

A

Political and institutional fluency isn't a nice-to-have – it determines whether scaling with government is possible at all. So if your organisation is serious about pursuing scaling with government, it's worth trying to help leadership understand how important this is – presenting the findings from the study could be a good starting point for this!

Having said that, if the organisation doesn't want to invest lots of resources you can start small: have one person who already has government contacts treat relationship-building as part of their existing role, using meetings they're already in to also build an understanding of how the department works, not just pursue the immediate agenda item. Over time, that can expand to a few more contacts at different levels, allowing you to learn more.

It will take a while to build this political understanding, but scaling with government is a long process so you have to be prepared to play the long game.

FINANCE AND FUNDING

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HOW GOVERNMENT VIEWS MIXED FUNDING

Q How does the government view prospects of working alongside mixed funding, ie. Both government and private funding?

A From the cases in the study, governments were very open to working alongside mixed funding. This is particularly important in the early stages of the journey, when the solution isn't yet proven to work well within government systems and therefore still holds a fair amount of risk for the government. At this point in most cases, the nonprofit was typically funding most of the costs, from a variety of sources, with the government co-funding a small proportion. As the effectiveness of the solution or intervention became clearer, the proportion of government funding increased.

THE "FINANCIAL GATE": ALIGNING SECTORAL PRIORITIES WITHIN FINANCE AND TREASURY

Q

Re: the important "financial gate" and the need to secure dedicated line items in public budgets - Do you have any insight from across these cases re: alignment of sectoral priorities within finance/treasury ministries, or of cross-sectoral coordination that led to better alignment within public budgets?

A

A few examples/reflections:
Many organisations succeeded by engaging the ministry's own finance directorate directly to diagnose the specific budget barrier. In Malawi, this meant getting BEFIT onto the government's Public Sector Improvement Program (PSIP), the formal track that puts a programme on a path to the recurrent budget.
Others worked on ring-fencing revenue for a specific issue: Living Goods' partner county in Kenya fought to get the Facility Improvement Financing Act enacted, ring-fencing healthcare revenue so it can't be reallocated elsewhere – revenue more than doubled within a year.
Others focused specifically on landing in the recurrent government budget rather than a project budget line, since project budgets are temporary by design. m-mama went as far as writing Treasury sign-off into their MOU explicitly, rather than relying on the line ministry's commitment alone.
So building relationships with finance directorates in ministries was critical for many of these organisations.

We didn't find examples of cross-sectoral coordination unfortunately. Only one in Moldova that didn't fully land: ministries were protective of their own budgets and, in their words, careful about "which hills they choose to die on." What worked instead was reallocating within one ministry's existing budget rather than creating a new shared line.

SEQUENCING DONOR AND GOVERNMENT FUNDING – LESSONS FROM RWANDA

Q

Relating to Water for People's experience in Rwanda:

1. Which came first? Donor funding or government funding (in terms of co-financing?)
2. How are the governments providing finance? Is it through issuing bonds or is it paper of government budget?
3. The 55% committed by Rulindo district, was this a one time investment or has the program now been included in district development plans & budget?

A

Cate, Water for People:

1. In Rwanda, we normally have a plan with government but donor funding usually comes first during implementation due to the long government processes. In Uganda with the Results based financing, government funding comes first, we audit results and they provide the incentive. This is however, still a pilot but with good success
2. Government provides finance through its own District or national level budgets. Ministry of Finance is aware of this
3. This was committed for 10+ years every single year. The programme was always included in the District development plan and reported on through the government reports

EXPLAINING GOVERNMENT-LED REDESIGN TO YOUR DONORS

Q

When you have to let go of your solution as an NGO and the government re-design the project to be in line with their priorities - how do you explain this to your donors?

A

Quality or fidelity trade-offs when government adapts a solution aren't a failure to disclose – they're an expected part of what government ownership requires, and organisations that handled this well set that expectation with donors before handover, not after.

This isn't something grantees should have to manage alone. It requires funders to accept a broader definition of fidelity: preserving a model's core principles and intended outcomes, not replicating every component of the original solution exactly. The organisations that navigated this well agreed with donors up front which parts were non-negotiable and which were expected to flex once government took over, and kept checking in afterward to catch drift early.

Practically, that means telling donors what changed, why that's what ownership looks like, what you'd agreed was non-negotiable from the start, and how you're still keeping an eye on it.

STAYING ON TRACK IN LONG-TERM DONOR PARTNERSHIPS

Q

Thanks for the really illustrative case and summary of what donors must be ready to give up. When we are in these types of partnerships over a long time, with many terms, how can we check whether we are still on the right track?

A

This is genuinely hard, because you often can't know upfront what "on track" should look like. Government processes, capacity, and priorities shift in ways that are hard to predict at the outset, so treating early estimates as fixed targets risks holding you to something that was never realistic to promise.

From the study, what worked better was setting a direction rather than a fixed deliverable, and building in deliberate points to revisit it. Living Goods set initial timelines for stepping back from a partnership, then explicitly revisited them as they learned more about the specific context, rather than treating the original estimate as a commitment. Some organisations also used a lightweight, shared reference point with funders

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The practical implication for donor relationships: it's more honest to agree how and when you'll revisit progress together than to commit to specific outcomes you can't yet be confident are the right ones.

BEYOND THE SCOPE OF THE STUDY

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BUILDING GOVERNMENT'S OWN CAPACITY TO SCALE EVIDENCE-BASED SOLUTIONS

Q How can government agencies build their own capacities to identify, adopt, and scale evidence-based solutions more effectively?

A This wasn't a question we focused on in the study – and it sits within a much broader field of public-sector capacity-building and evidence-based policymaking that we didn't set out to review. A few insights from our work are relevant, though: Having strong internal government systems (measurement, performance management, procurement) is vital for sustaining delivery at scale, therefore governments can proactively seek out partners and funders who are willing to support them to strengthen their systems. One way for governments to do this is by joining networks or initiatives which seek to support government reform and innovation – such as the Government Empowerment Network – and identifying and championing individuals keen to drive this progress from inside government.

SCALING WITH GOVERNMENT AS A FOR-PROFIT

Q

Scaling with governments as a for-profit : do you see any additional barriers compared to being a non-profit? Would you see any difference in the learnings of the report?

A

Ithe study focused on nonprofits, so we can't point to finding from this research – but we at Spring Impact have supported mission-driven for-profits and social enterprises, so can offer our reflections.

One additional barrier for a for-profit might be the timeframes – the study found that the critical early work (relationship-building, co-designing delivery architecture, supporting government through slow institutional change) was work that governments couldn't pay for, and that required patient capital and long time horizons. For a for-profit, the pressure for faster returns or visible outputs could push against the kind of approach the research found to be most effective.

Really, what matters here is whether an organisation's incentives are aligned with that kind of patient, long-term work – not its legal structure. A for-profit going down this path would need to be clearly and demonstrably aligned to solving the problem government is trying to solve, so government can trust that its interests won't drift toward faster commercial return over time.

Overall however, the core of the report would likely hold true – governments assess partners through the lens of risk, not evidence alone. They want partners who demonstrate institutional fluency, who let government lead, and who have a credible vision of what government-led scale looks like and none of these things are inherently tied to being a nonprofit.

HAVE MORE QUESTIONS?

If you have more quesitons around scaling or want to learn more about the research, please reach out to us on.

info@springimpact.org

You can download the full study here.

Research developed in partnership with

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