



A New Look at Strategic Pathways for Solving Social Problems at Scale

By Marina Fisher, Alyson Zandt, Angie Estevez Prada, Paola Jimenez-Read, and Bradley Seeman

How can nonprofits and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) help far more people while keeping their own organizations at a sustainable size and cost? In 2014, The Bridgespan Group's Jeffrey Bradach and Abe Grindle explored this question in "[Transformative Scale: The Future of Growing What Works](#)." They examined pathways to deliver impact at a scale that truly meets significant social needs.

A decade later, we take another look at pathways for solving social problems at scale. To do so, we tapped into Bridgespan team members' experience working with nonprofits and NGOs in the United States, Asia, and Africa to develop scalable strategies to address social problems. For this update, we examined the strategies of approximately 80 organizations and interviewed the leaders of 11 of these organizations on their journeys to scale their impact.

This article provides an updated guide to the pathways, or core strategy components, that nonprofits and NGOs use to deliver outsized impact on social problems while keeping their organizations' size and growth manageable. We did not look specifically at how organizations expand their direct services—opening new sites, serving more clients—because this typically requires a corresponding increase in size and cost. However, direct service growth can have a powerful impact on social change, particularly as a source of organizations' credibility and evidence base. Indeed, even as organizations pursue one or more of the pathways identified below, they may also continue or even expand their direct service work to create even more impact.

A Note on Methodology

Most of the 80 organizations in our dataset are funded by one of three funding collaboratives with which Bridgespan has worked—the [Audacious Project](#), [Blue Meridian Partners](#), and [Co-Impact](#). We also examined the current strategies of other organizations featured in Bridgespan's original 2014 article on transformative scale. Of course, this isn't a fully representative sample. We recognize that the organizations studied for this research are disproportionately represented by these collaboratives and, inevitably, they reflect the interests of those funding sources. Yet, the organizations represent a wide range of issue areas, working in the United States and globally. Additionally, almost all have received substantial funds from at least one funder to explicitly support their strategies to solve social problems at scale. This sample provides us a rare opportunity to look in detail at how scores of nonprofits and NGOs are working to solve social problems at scale.

Pathways to Solving Social Problems at Scale

Through our recent research, we have identified eight main pathways, falling into three categories, through which nonprofits and NGOs are working to solve social problems at scale across a wide range of fields, geographies, and strategies. These eight pathways represent an evolution of our perspective from the original article. They build from the insights and pathways identified there, informed by an additional decade of experience collaborating with scaling organizations in a dynamic range of political and social environments across the globe. (We highlight references to the categories and pathways in the remainder of the article as a reminder.)

Eight main pathways to transformative impact

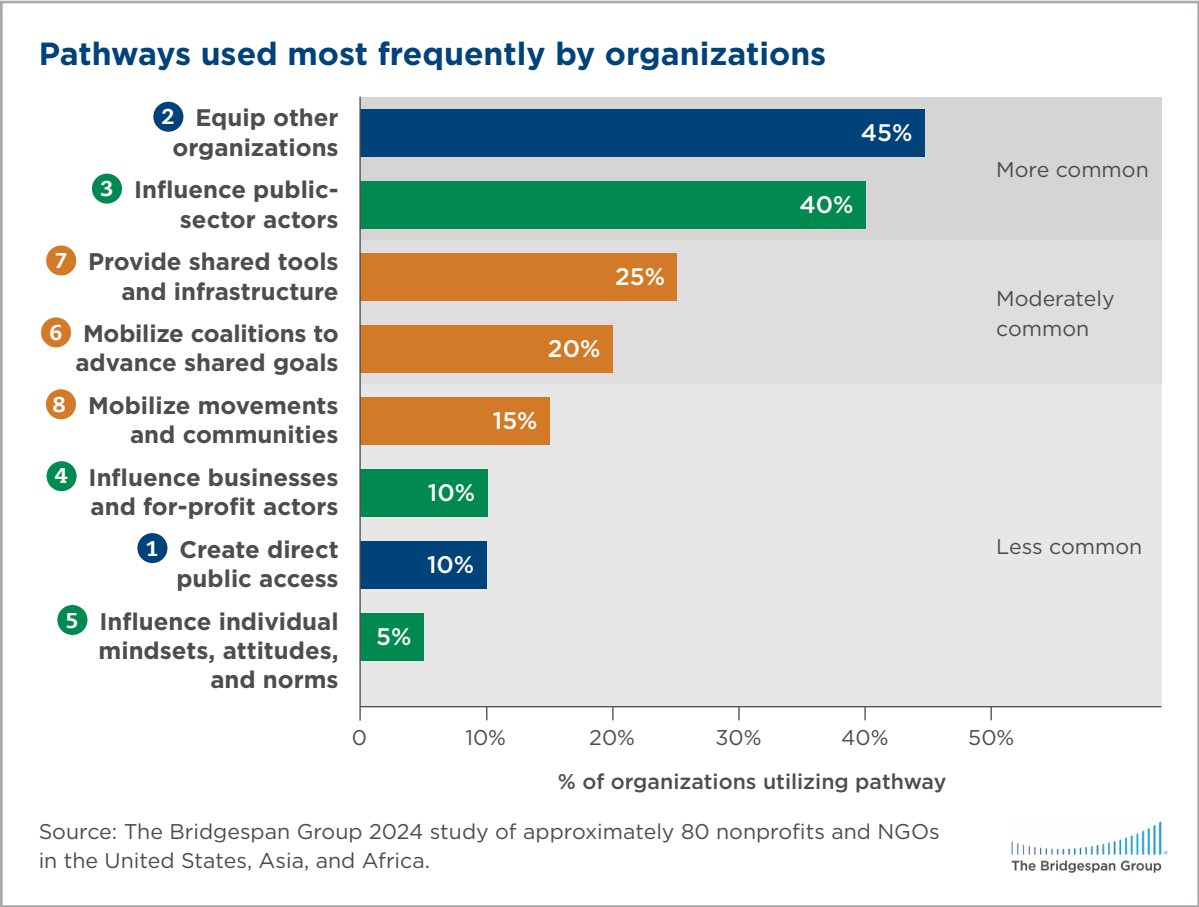


Source: The Bridgespan Group 2024 study of approximately 80 nonprofits and NGOs in the United States, Asia, and Africa.



For more information on each pathway—the contexts in which each is commonly used, examples, and the organizational capabilities commonly associated with each—see [“Eight Pathways to Solving Social Problems at Scale”](#) in the Appendix.

Achieving durable and equitable population-level impact often requires an ecosystem of organizations and actors pursuing all of these pathways, along with providing direct services. However, each organization is likely to focus its work on a subset of the pathways. The choice of pathways reflects an organization’s judgment about the most effective role it can play in helping to solve a social problem at scale. Here is how frequently each pathway is used among the 80 organizations we examined.

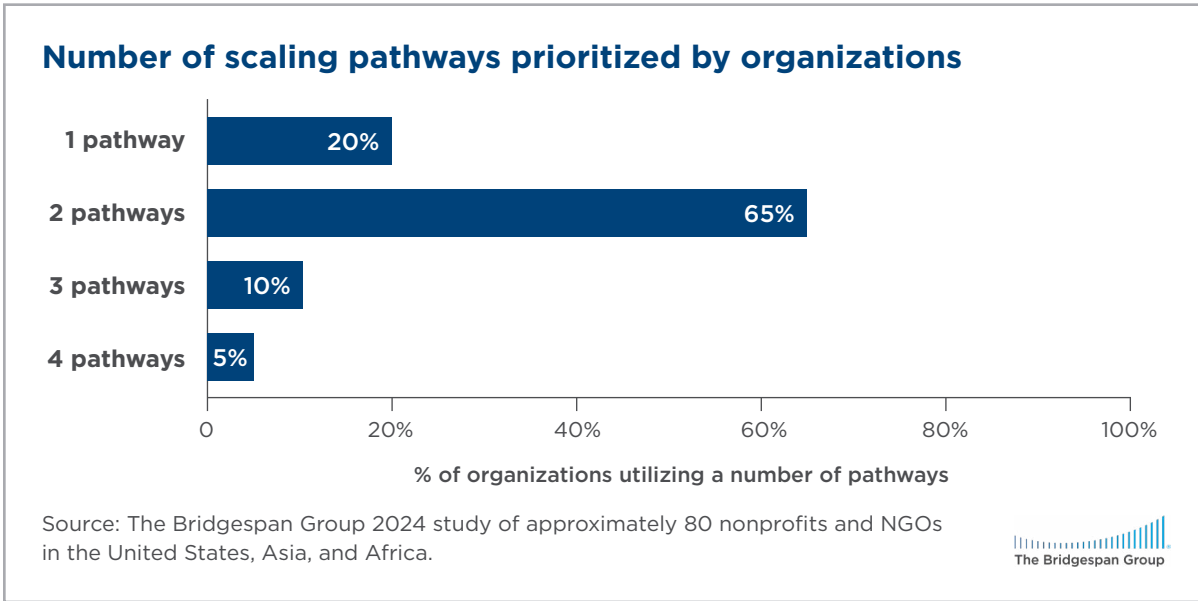


Other key findings from our research:

Organizations identify the unique contributions they can make and select their pathways based on their expertise and the role of other actors in the field. Solving social problems at scale requires substantial changes in the entrenched systems that invariably perpetuate inequitable outcomes. Different organizations will play different roles in working toward these changes. Each can make a powerful contribution by focusing on the highest-impact role it can play within the larger group of actors, while partnering with others pursuing different pathways toward the shared goal.

Carving out a specific organizational role does not **necessarily mean limiting work to just one pathway.** In fact, 80 percent of the organizations in our sample focus on more than one pathway, with most prioritizing two pathways. This makes sense, given the complexity of the problems that these organizations are trying to solve. Organizations can draw from their experiences, relationships, and credibility to define a subset of pathways that are

feasible for them to advance, and which can accelerate progress toward their vision of solving a social problem. At the same time, each pathway often requires a distinct set of capabilities and resources, so organizations are careful not to bite off more than they can chew. Relatively few organizations pursue three pathways as parallel priorities, and even fewer pursue four.

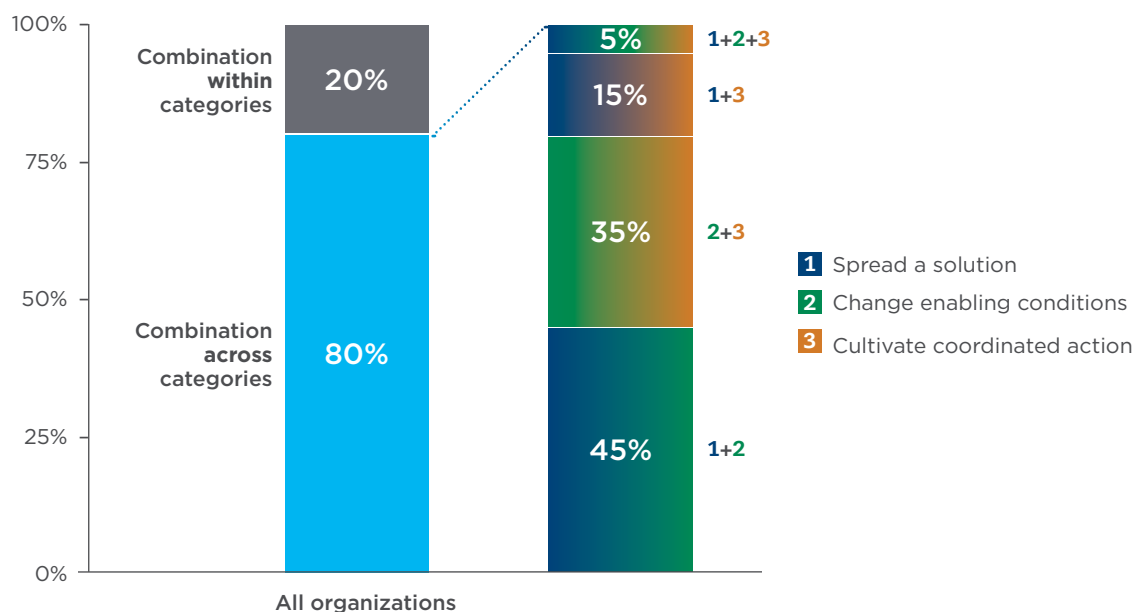


Still, identifying a unique role can mean focusing on a single pathway, as the remaining 20 percent of organizations in our sample have chosen to do. In such cases, the most common pathways selected are **create direct public access**, such as a digital platform that allows consumers to access educational content or a financial service that was previously inaccessible to them, and **provide shared tools and infrastructure**, such as a database that gives leaders across sectors new insight into how a complex system is functioning. For example, Thorn provides scaled products that help drive collaborative response and research to empower professionals working toward responding to and preventing child sexual abuse. These two pathways often involve technology and may require deeply specialized capabilities.

Most organizations pursuing multiple pathways combine them across three categories: **spread a solution**, **change enabling conditions**, and **cultivate coordinated action**. This reflects the importance of complementary efforts in driving durable population-level change.

Common combinations of scaling pathways used by organizations

Among organizations pursuing more than one pathway, a majority pursue a combination across categories.



The most common combination we found was **spread a solution** and **change enabling conditions**. For example, Nurse-Family Partnership (NFP) pairs low-income, first-time mothers in the United States with nurses who provide home visits from pregnancy through the child’s second birthday, addressing disparities in maternal and infant health and early childhood development. It has grown its impact by equipping local partners to provide this intervention. However, given the large role public funding plays in the US health care system, NFP has also worked with a range of stakeholders to advocate for the public sector to provide more funding—helping to secure a major expansion in federal funding for maternal and child home visiting. In health, education, and other fields where the public sector plays a central role, several organizations in our sample focused both on equipping other organizations and systems to deliver an intervention and on influencing public-sector actors.

Another common pairing brings together the **change enabling conditions** and **cultivate coordinated action** categories. Consider the example of ReNew2030, which seeks to drive a global shift toward renewable energy like wind and solar. The global coalition works not only to inform government policies, but also to support grassroots organizing to mobilize communities toward aligned renewable energy goals, and on

For practical guidance on choosing and pursuing pathways for solving social problems at scale, see “[Three Questions for Nonprofits That Want to Solve Social Problems at Scale](#)” on Bridgespan.org.

finance, narrative-building, and legal strategies. Organizations pursuing this combination of pathways serve as field builders or field catalysts. (For more about organizations that build and catalyze a field or movement, and how they operate, see [additional Bridgespan insights on this kind of work](#) on Bridgespan.org.)

An organization's choice of pathways is just the starting point for successful impact at scale. Nonprofits must then build the capabilities needed for strategy implementation, and they must adapt their work—and potentially their choice of pathways—as circumstances change.

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Appendix: Eight Pathways to Solving Social Problems at Scale

Spread a solution	1 Equip other organizations and systems to implement solutions
Overview	Equip other organizations and systems, such as businesses, school systems, government departments, or communities, with a product, service, or practice from the organization's existing model. This can be done through training, coaching, technical assistance, or other kinds of ongoing support to ensure the successful adoption and implementation of the program.
Examples*	<p>[United States] HealthySteps, a program of ZERO TO THREE, is an evidence-based, team-based pediatric primary care program that promotes the health, well-being, and school readiness of babies and toddlers, with an emphasis on families living in low-income communities. HealthySteps gives pediatric practices across the United States a variety of supports to help implement its model—including in-depth guidance on team-based care and workflows, billing, electronic health records, quality improvement, and other elements.</p> <p>[Africa] Teaching at the Right Level Africa wants every child across Africa to have foundational skills so that they can have a better future. It equips governments and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in sub-Saharan Africa to deliver its evidence-based approach to accelerate children's foundational skill learning, adapting the program's design to the context of each country.</p>
Sector of focus	Government, private sector, nonprofits and NGOs
Use case	This pathway is often used when partners have the capacity to reach a significant portion of the target population and have the infrastructure to potentially replicate the program cost-effectively.
Frequency of use	45 percent of organizations in our dataset
Capabilities required	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Existing relationships and credibility with nonprofit, for-profit, or public networks, and organizations Deep expertise in program design, piloting, and implementation with model fidelity Ability to validate model either internally or through third-party research methods Heavy investment in staff to advise, train, and provide technical assistance to organizations in delivering a program, model, or intervention An inclusive and equity-oriented culture responsive to the cultural contexts of organizations being trained

* Examples describe how an organization uses this specific pathway; most of our example organizations use one or more other pathways, as well.

Spread a solution	2 Create direct public access to streamlined and low-cost solutions
Overview	Offer direct public access to a simplified version of a product or service that can be quickly adopted, but maintains high levels of impact, often using technology.
Examples	<p>[United States] Crisis Text Line provides free, 24/7 text-based mental health support and crisis intervention by empowering a community of trained volunteers to support people in their moments of need.</p> <p>[South Africa] Harambee Youth Employment Accelerator seeks to address the high youth unemployment rate in South Africa. One of their strategies is connecting young people disconnected from the workforce to job opportunities through a platform called SA Youth, which provides information for youth on jobs and connects them to skills training and mentorship.</p>
Sector of focus	Individuals and communities
Use case	This pathway is often used when cost, implementation, or other barriers have limited the share of the target population that can be reached by other methods.
Frequency of use	10 percent of organizations in our dataset
Capabilities required	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ability to build (or utilize) a publicly accessible platform to reach the target population • Consumer-oriented mass marketing strategy to ensure awareness of the platform • Ability to poll/survey consumers to measure the impact of the model either internally or through a third-party research method

Change enabling conditions	3 Influence public-sector actors to change policies, regulations, and funding
Overview	Identify core policy roadblocks or opportunities and target policy makers to drive change. This can be through a range of tactics, such as advocacy, awareness-building, research and policy briefs, policy proposal and development, litigation, lobbying, or supporting government agencies in implementing new policies and regulations.
Examples	<p>[United States] Nurse-Family Partnership aims to improve the health and well-being of low-income, first-time parents and their children in the United States by increasing access to home visitation programs delivered by trained nurses. One component of their work is to advocate for bipartisan support for all types of home visitation programs through increased and renewal of public funding streams, while collaborating with state governments to ensure equitable implementation and allocation of these resources, particularly for communities with the greatest financial need.</p> <p>[South Africa] Ilifa Labantwana works to improve access to quality early childhood development services in South Africa. Key to their strategy is advocacy, collaboration, and technical expertise, alongside a deep understanding of government to increase government expenditure for early childhood development services, including maternal and child health, early learning programs, nutritional support, and caregiver support.</p>
Sector of focus	Government
Use case	This pathway is often used when the government plays a crucial role in the field, providing funding, changing policy, or reaching a large share of the target population.
Frequency of use	40 percent of organizations in our dataset
Capabilities required	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deep understanding and processes to track government policies and regulations at all relevant levels (e.g., local, state, national/federal) • Relationships and credibility with key decision makers (e.g., policy makers, government administrators), and ability to influence those decision makers • Staff skilled in policy development, including conducting policy research, drafting policy proposals, legislation, and/or administrative rules • Flexible capacity to identify and respond to unexpected opportunities or defend against sudden threats to progress

Change enabling conditions	4 Influence businesses and for-profit actors to change practices
Overview	Incentivize business and market leaders to adopt more responsible and impactful practices, most commonly by demonstrating how these changes can advance existing financial and/or organizational goals in the for-profit sector. Tactics may include making a compelling case for practice change (through sharing best practices, data, and case studies) and building sector-wide influence for business change (via campaigns and sector-wide business commitments or pledges).
Examples	<p>[United States] Year Up United is committed to expanding economic mobility for all by ending the “opportunity divide”—the divide that exists between business needs and untapped talent. It works on both sides of this divide, providing young adults, regardless of background, income, or zip code, with the skills, experiences, and support to break through barriers and launch sustainable careers. To influence for-profit actors, it collaborates with businesses and institutions to advance a skills-first approach, transforming talent, culture, and leadership best practices.</p> <p>[Global] Drive Electric Campaign partners champion smart government policies, engage business leaders, and support coalitions to accelerate the adoption of electric vehicles, leading to stronger local and global economies, cleaner air, and improved access to affordable transportation and renewable energy. Drive Electric partners help organize, align, and aggregate business leaders’ voices to accelerate corporate action and support strong government policies.</p>
Sector of focus	Private sector
Use case	This pathway is often used when the nonprofit's focus or target population closely aligns with or involves a for-profit organization, particularly in fields such as workforce development and climate.
Frequency of use	10 percent of organizations in our dataset
Capabilities required	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A compelling value proposition for for-profit actors, and/or a return on investment • The ability to communicate with and influence for-profit organizations, including staff trained in targeted mass communication • Relationships and credibility with key stakeholders (e.g., large-scale employers, employer collaboratives)

Change enabling conditions	5 Influence individual mindsets, attitudes, and norms to change behaviors
Overview	Generate awareness and reshape perception of key issues to foster widespread understanding and acceptance, and build commitment to change, laying the foundation for shifts in public actions to enable solutions that cannot be achieved entirely through changes to public, private, or nonprofit systems.
Examples	<p>[United States] The Clean Slate Initiative seeks to enable individuals who have arrest and conviction records and have remained crime-free to have fair opportunities to work, get an education, and achieve their full potential. One of its strategies is to create public service announcements and campaigns to reduce the stigma among members of the public about people living with a record, helping to create public support for state and federal legislation that will automatically seal eligible arrest or conviction records and expand who is eligible for sealing.</p> <p>[India] Educate Girls seeks to address educational disparities for young girls in rural India. Among its core strategies is training community volunteers to change perceptions around girls' education in their communities, fostering support and commitment for enrolling and retaining girls in school so that every girl can learn and thrive.</p>
Sector of focus	Individuals and communities
Use case	This pathway is often used to create sustainable, long-term change by addressing the root causes and mindsets. It is often used by organizations tackling topics like social stigmas and gender inequality.
Frequency of use	5 percent of organizations in our dataset
Capabilities required	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staff skilled in mass-market communication and media relations, including message development and data-rich storytelling • Relationships and credibility with trusted public influencers to echo your message • A credible reputation among the public, especially in the communities the organization is seeking to influence

Cultivate coordinated action and amplify power	6 Mobilize coalitions to align and advance shared goals
Overview	Coordinate stakeholders and actors within a field through a range of support, including the establishment of a shared agenda, unified standards, setting clear and measurable objectives, and fostering collaboration through networking and convenings.
Examples	<p>[United States] PolicyLink is a national research and action institute that is working to build a future where all people in the United States can participate in a flourishing multiracial democracy, prosper in an equitable economy, and live in thriving communities. A key strategy is working with coalitions of partners from communities, government, philanthropy, and corporations in support of these goals.</p> <p>[Global] ReNew2030 seeks to combat climate change and promote sustainable development by accelerating the transition to renewable energy. ReNew2030 mobilizes a coalition of stakeholders—including governments, businesses, youth leaders, and faith-based communities—to increase global wind and solar capacity five times as much in the countries responsible for over 80 percent of the power-sector emissions.</p>
Sector of focus	Government sector; private sector; nonprofit/NGO sector
Use case	This pathway, often utilized by organizations called field catalysts , focuses on mobilizing and energizing multiple actors working on a common problem to collaboratively pursue shared goals for equitable systems change.
Frequency of use	20 percent of organizations in our dataset
Capabilities required	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deep understanding of the field, including existing actors, infrastructure, and resources • Ability to convene field actors to facilitate relationships and coordination • Relationships and credibility with a broad set of relevant field actors to foster coordination (and potentially coalition-building) • Access to (or ability to create) field-wide communication channels, likely requiring expertise in technological systems

Cultivate coordinated action and amplify power	7 Provide shared tools and infrastructure to improve decisions and performance
Overview	Create resources and platforms, including resources, guides, and toolkits, that analyze field-level data, which can generate actionable insights. This enables decision makers and/or the general public to make informed decisions that drive positive outcomes, while remaining open to different actors enacting a diverse set of solutions and policies based on these tools.
Examples	<p>[Global] Global Fishing Watch seeks to end illegal and harmful human activity in the world's oceans. The organization uses satellite technology and artificial intelligence to track and analyze vessel movements in near real time via its publicly available map. By focusing on transparency and technology, Global Fishing Watch seeks to empower governments, organizations, and the public to act against destructive practices and transform ocean monitoring, management, and enforcement.</p> <p>[Global] Project ECHO (ECHO) provides training through a digital, live mentorship model, builds front-line worker capacity through the dissemination of best practices, and enables continuous improvement across domains such as health care, education, and economic opportunity. ECHO's sustainable scaling model empowers partners (NGOs, ministries of health, and other organizations), who connect experts with front-line workers, and drive systems change to improve lives worldwide. For example, ECHO has been implemented across a range of priorities, such as literacy in childhood, agricultural livelihoods, and non-communicable diseases like cancer and diabetes.</p>
Sector of focus	Government, private sector, nonprofit/NGO sector, individuals/the public
Use case	This pathway is often used when there is a shared challenge or market failure in the field (e.g., lack of information, technology, etc.) that is preventing progress toward change.
Frequency of use	25 percent of organizations in our dataset
Capabilities required	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deep understanding of the problem and the field, including barriers to solving the problem, existing actors, infrastructure, and resources • Access to (or ability to build) platforms to disseminate information and tools to actors in a field, likely requiring expertise in technological systems • Relationships and credibility with a broad set of relevant field actors • Technical staff trained in rigorous research methods and data analysis

Cultivate coordinated action and amplify power	8 Mobilize movements and communities to drive self-directed change
Overview	Harness existing efforts within the target population to foster collective action among stakeholders and amplify community-driven solutions. This pathway empowers communities to take the lead in determining the solutions, policies, and practices they want to change.
Examples	<p>[Global] Tenure Facility seeks to secure land and forest rights to combat climate change through enhanced local governance and land protection by Indigenous Peoples and other traditional rural communities. By offering substantial grants, along with training and technical support, it helps these communities to advocate for their land rights in ways that are most relevant to their local contexts.</p> <p>[India] SEWA Bharat is a grassroots women's enterprise support system for self-employed women workers from the informal economy in India. SEWA Bharat supports nearly three million members to work toward the goals of full employment and self-reliance. It helps members develop and access a wide range of services such as savings and credit, health care, childcare, and insurance.</p>
Sector of focus	Individuals and communities
Use case	This pathway is often used when there is already a clearly defined constituency that shares a common identity and interests, enabling effective collective action to address their needs.
Frequency of use	15 percent of organizations in our dataset
Capabilities required	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Core set of catalytic supports or resources that are valuable to the movement • Ability to engage, convene, and organize a clearly defined constituency • Ability to communicate the interests of a constituency to decision makers and/or support a constituency in communicating their own interests • Credible reputation among constituents for accurately representing community interests

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