



Scale or Fail?

A guide to Scaling in South Africa's Social, Solidarity and Impact Economies

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The philanthropic and social sector faces a pivotal reckoning. We are running out of resources, demands are escalating, government is abdicating responsibility, and the problems we exist to solve are growing - not shrinking. This is not the moment for incremental thinking. It is the moment for a fundamentally different conversation about what scaling really means, what it demands, and who it is actually for. This is that conversation.

Why We Cannot Continue as We Are

Let me begin with an inconvenient truth. Most of what we call "scaling" in the South African social sector is not scaling at all. It is growth with a grander vocabulary. We raise more money, hire more staff, open more offices, serve more beneficiaries - and then we call it scale. We publish glossy impact reports and attend conferences where we congratulate each other on our reach. But the problems - youth unemployment at 56.3% under the expanded definition; 18 million South Africans food insecure; public education and health systems in structural collapse - remains essentially unchanged in its magnitude. We have not dented it. We have decorated it.

South Africa is statistically one of the most unequal societies on the planet. The Gini coefficient stubbornly hovers near 0.63. The state - strained, politically compromised, and chronically under resourced - is failing to deliver. And into that vacuum, the social sector has stepped, willingly or otherwise, absorbing responsibilities that no civil society ecosystem was ever designed to carry.

Meanwhile, the resources available to the sector are not keeping pace with the problem. South Africa's total corporate social investment in 2025 was approximately R13 billion - a figure that sounds significant until you understand that the country's social deficit is measured in the hundreds of billions. The 100 largest companies account for three-quarters of that spend. International development funding is shrinking. USAID, once a cornerstone of global development financing, has all but ceased to exist as an institution. In this context, the sector faces a blunt choice: ***reimagine what it does and how it does it, or accept that it will remain permanently irrelevant to the scale of the problems it claims to address.***

"We are using Band-Aid philanthropy to address haemorrhage-level social crises. Not because the people doing this work lack compassion or intelligence. But because the sector has never seriously grappled with the question of scale - its meaning, its demands, and its limits."

This article is my attempt to build a definitive, honest, and usable guide to scaling in the social, solidarity, and impact economies - specifically through an African and South African lens. It draws on the cumulative body of work produced by Kevin Starr and the Mulago Foundation, whose contributions to the Stanford Social Innovation Review over two decades represent the most rigorous practitioner thinking on this subject in the global philanthropic canon. But it moves beyond and alongside that work, anchoring it in African realities, African case studies, and the African political economy of social change.

I will argue that most organisations should not scale. I will argue that most funders are making scaling harder, not easier. And I will argue that those brave enough to attempt real scale must fundamentally transform how they think, how they fund, and how they act. I begin with the hardest question of all: what does "scale" actually mean?

The Great Confusion: Growth Is Not Scale

Here is the single most important conceptual distinction in this entire article. **Growth and scale are not the same thing.** They do not require the same strategies. And confusing them - which the sector does, constantly and with confident vocabulary - is the principal reason why so many well-intentioned organisations plateau at local significance while the problems they exist to solve remain national or continental in scope.

Starr and Hattendorf at Mulago put it precisely: growth is doing more of what you do. **Scale is the trajectory and curve of impact over time** - specifically, the point at which that curve begins to steepen dramatically, even exponentially. Scale is about busting out of a linear trajectory. Growth is adding resources to sustain a linear one. Starr uses a provocative formulation: "Scale is a verb, not a noun." It is not a state you achieve. **Scale is a direction you pursue relentlessly, with specific strategies, specific structures, and a specific relationship between the "doer" - the entity that implements the model - and the "payer" - the entity that funds replication at a level that actually matches the size of the problem.**

Growth	Scale
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Expanding the same organisation •More staff, offices, budget •Linear increase in reach and cost •Organisation as the centre •Success = organisational size or sustainability •Funder relationship: to the organisation •Relatively lower complexity •What most NPOs actually do •Often necessary, but insufficient 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Solving a problem at the size of the problem •Replication, diffusion, adoption, policy •Impact grows faster than cost •The problem as the centre •Success = the problem is being solved •Funder relationship: to the mission •High complexity, high stakes •What very few NPOs attempt seriously •Sometimes necessary, always demanding

A crucial additional point: Starr's "Big Enough, Simple Enough, Cheap Enough" framework provides **a rigorous test for whether a solution is actually scalable.**

- **Big enough** means the problem the solution addresses is genuinely large - not a niche issue, but one affecting populations at meaningful scale.
- **Simple enough** means the model can be replicated by a capable doer without the originating organisation's presence.
- **And cheap enough** means the cost per beneficiary at scale is affordable by whoever will be paying - typically government. Solutions that fail any of these tests are not scalable in the deep sense. Recognising this early saves enormous wasted effort and resources.

The Scaling Debate - Does Everything Have to Scale?

The debate about scaling in the social sector has never been more alive. Kevin Starr's recent SSIR article "Scale Really Matters" (April 2026) responds directly to two counter-currents: the plaintive "Does Everything in the Social Sector Have to Scale?" and what Starr calls the "unhinged" position of "Scale is a Myth - Embrace the Long Defeat." These are not straw men. They represent genuine and serious intellectual positions within the field, and they deserve an honest response.

The "Does Everything Have to Scale?" position holds that the ***pressure to scale is a filter imposed by funders, accelerators, and the social innovation ecosystem that systematically devalues deep, relational, place-based work.*** The argument is that some of the most important work done in our sector - accompaniment of people experiencing complex trauma, long-term therapeutic relationships, community organising, indigenous land claims advocacy - is irreducibly local and relational. To force it through the scaling lens is to distort it, hollow it out, and ultimately destroy what makes it valuable. Researchers studying social innovation have reinforced this view, noting that impact spreads through multiple pathways beyond simple replication, and that scaling pressure can homogenise approaches that need to be contextually diverse.

The "Scale is a Myth" position goes further: ***it argues that systemic problems require systemic change, and that the focus on scalable solutions is itself a distraction from the harder, slower, more uncomfortable work of confronting the power structures that produce inequality in the first place.*** This is the decolonial critique, and it is particularly resonant in South Africa, where the relationship between development practice and historical power is never uncomplicated.

Starr's response - and mine - is not to dismiss these positions but to be precise about what they are critiquing. The "Scale is a Myth" critique lands when applied to how scaling is often done - top-down, extractive, designed without community, indifferent to context. It does not land as a critique of scale itself. Starr's fundamental argument, updated as recently as April 2026, remains: **the problems are large enough, the resources finite enough, and the clock ticking fast enough that we cannot afford not to pursue scale where scale is possible.** But he is also newly candid about something: ***outside of market-based solutions, scaling at genuinely exponential levels ultimately requires government as both doer and payer.*** The NGO sector,

for all its innovation capacity, has never proven to be a reliable vehicle for replication at system-changing scale. This is a sobering recognition with direct implications for how we design for scale in South Africa.

THE RECONCILIATION

The honest position is this: not everything should scale. Some things should deepen instead. Some things should spread through cultural diffusion rather than organisational replication. Some things should advocate for the system change that makes scaling possible. And some things - the ones that have cracked a code worth cracking - must scale, or the problem they exist to solve will go unsolved at the magnitude it deserves. The discipline is in knowing which is which.

Four Dimensions of Scaling: A Framework for Practitioners

The literature on scaling in social innovation offers a richly differentiated vocabulary that most South African practitioners have not yet fully integrated. Beyond the binary of "scale or don't scale," there are at least four distinct dimensions of scaling - each with a different logic, a different target, and a different set of organisational capabilities required. Understanding these dimensions is essential to choosing the right scaling pathway for your specific context.

Scaling Up Vertical Scaling	Scaling out Horizontal Scaling	Scaling Deep Cultural Scaling	Scaling Across Functional Scaling
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Influencing the policies, regulations, and institutional frameworks that govern a sector. •Scaling up means changing the rules of the game so that your model - or the principles behind it - becomes embedded in government systems, legislation, or sector-wide standards. •This is systems influence from below. It requires deep policy literacy, sustained government engagement, and the patience to work at a 10-to-15-year horizon. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Replicating a proven model across new geographies, communities, or populations. •This is the most commonly understood form of scaling - taking what works in Soweto to Mangaung, or from the Western Cape to Limpopo. •It requires rigorous model documentation, quality assurance protocols, and a clear understanding of who the doer-at-scale will be. High-fidelity replication is harder than it looks. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Changing the values, beliefs, relationships, and cultural practices within a community or system. •Scaling deep is the least visible and most undervalued dimension - but often the most durable. It is what happens when a community internalises not just a programme, but a different way of understanding a problem or themselves. •Ubuntu-centred approaches to social change often operate in this dimension. Measurement is difficult; impact is profound and long-lasting. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Expanding the range of functions or services delivered by an existing network or model. •Scaling across means adding depth and breadth within an existing footprint - addressing multiple interconnected needs of the same community, rather than serving one need across more communities. •This is the integrative dimension of scaling, and it increasingly characterises sophisticated African social organisations working with complex, multi-dimensional poverty.

The critical insight is that these scaling approaches and dimensions are not mutually exclusive. The most powerful scaling strategies combine them deliberately. SmartStart, which I discuss below, operates simultaneously across all four dimensions: scaling out through franchise replication, scaling up through policy advocacy for population-based ECD funding, scaling deep by building community ownership of early learning practice, and scaling across by linking ECD delivery to maternal health, nutrition, and economic opportunity for women practitioners.

Pathways to Scale - Choosing the Right Route

Scaling is not a single strategy. It is a family of strategies, each suited to different contexts, different problems, and different organisations. The fatal mistake - and it is made constantly - is adopting the language of scaling while defaulting to the logic of growth. The doer/payer framework from Mulago remains the most useful structuring tool: for any scaling pathway, you must identify who will do the replication, and who will fund it. These roles need not - and often should not - reside in the same organisation.

1. Dissemination and Open Replication

- Other organisations replicate a proven, well-documented model.
- Requires extraordinary knowledge management and willingness to share.
- Innovation without replication, as Starr argues, is a waste of time.

2. Government Adoption

- The state adopts and finances the model at system level. The highest leverage pathway in Africa.
- Government is increasingly the only realistic doer - and payer - at truly exponential scale.
- Requires design for what government can do and will pay for.

3. Social Franchising

- A branded, quality-assured model is replicated by licensed partners.
- It balances standardisation with local ownership. Africa's most promising and underutilised pathway - and the focus of South Africa's most important scaling successes.

4. Market Creation

- Establish the conditions so that commercial actors sustainably deliver the solution.
- Appropriate when the economics can work - and when delivering at a price point the poor can afford does not destroy margin entirely.

5. Open Source / Knowledge

- Knowledge, tools, protocols, and methodologies are freely shared.
- Appropriate when the "product" is know-how rather than service delivery.
- Enables peer scaling without organisational gatekeeping.

6. Systems and Policy Change

- Advocacy changes the structural conditions that enable or constrain scale.
- Longest time horizon. Potentially the greatest leverage.
- Chronically underfunded. The missing link in most South African scaling strategies.

Social Franchising - Africa's Most Promising Scaling Pathway

Of all the pathways to scale available in the African context, social franchising deserves particular attention. It is the pathway that most elegantly reconciles two competing imperatives: **the need for standardisation and quality assurance that makes replication trustworthy, and the need for local ownership, community embeddedness, and contextual adaptation that makes replication sustainable.**

Social franchising applies the commercial logic of franchising - brand, standardised model, quality protocols, training and support systems, mutual accountability - to social purpose delivery, without the commercial profit imperative. The franchisor develops, codifies, and quality-assures the model. The franchisees deliver it, with appropriate local adaptation, in exchange for the use of the brand, training, and ongoing support. The model can be non-profit, hybrid, or market-linked. Its genius is that it enables rapid replication across a distributed network while maintaining fidelity to the core model.

South Africa has produced two of the most instructive examples of social franchising in the African development context. They are worth examining in some depth.

DEEP DIVE CASE STUDY 1 · SOCIAL FRANCHISING · ECD

SmartStart — Cracking the Code on Early Learning at Scale

SmartStart was born in 2015 from a recognition that the policy commitment to early childhood development in South Africa existed, but the mechanism to deliver it at scale did not. Over 80% of lower-income households have no access to any form of early learning for children under five. SmartStart's response was not to build a bigger organisation, but to build a franchise system.

The architecture is elegant: twelve Network Implementation Partners - established NGOs - act as regional franchisors. They recruit, train, and mentor nearly 25,000 community practitioners - overwhelmingly unemployed women - who operate as franchisees, delivering a standardised, evidence-based early learning programme in homes and community spaces. SmartStart provides the brand, the curriculum, the training system, the monitoring tools, and the advocacy infrastructure. The practitioners provide community embeddedness, local trust, and daily delivery.

The results are compelling: from 1,000 children served in 2015 to over 320,000 children connected to quality early learning by 2026, with 160,000 reached weekly across all nine provinces. Children classified as "on track" developmentally increased from 45% to 65% in just eight months of programme participation. The target is one million children annually by 2030 - a genuinely system-changing number.

What makes SmartStart instructive is not just its scale but its multi-dimensionality. It scales out through franchise replication. It scales up through sustained government engagement, including advocacy for a population-based approach to ECD funding. It scales deep by building community norms around early learning. And it scales across by simultaneously creating economic opportunity for women practitioners. The lesson for South Africa's broader social

sector: social franchising is not a programme model. It is a system architecture - and it requires a funder consortium with the patience, flexibility, and shared vision to support it through multiple phases of development.

DEEP DIVE CASE STUDY 2 · SOCIAL FRANCHISING · PRIMARY HEALTHCARE

Unjani Clinics — The Nursepreneur Model

Unjani Clinics, founded in 2010 by Dr Iain Barton, addresses one of South Africa's most acute structural failures: 84% of the population is reliant on a public health system that is chronically overburdened and under resourced, while private healthcare remains financially inaccessible. Unjani's insight was simple and powerful: the country has an underutilised asset in qualified professional nurses, and primary healthcare can be delivered more efficiently - and more humanely - by nurse-led enterprises than by doctor-dependent facilities.

The model is a social franchise in which Unjani Clinics NPC acts as the franchisor and qualified black nurses act as franchisees, owning and operating their own clinics - typically built from converted shipping containers - in low-income communities. Unjani provides 24 months of operational support funding while nurses build their patient base, then transfers clinic ownership after five years. The franchise ensures standardised, affordable services across the network while the ownership model creates genuine entrepreneurial incentives for nurses and deep community embeddedness through nurses' existing social capital in their communities.

From six pilot clinics to over 90 by 2021, with a target of 1,000 clinics by 2030, Unjani represents one of the clearest examples of a model designed explicitly for scale. Key scaling lessons include: the genius of aligning entrepreneurial incentive with social mission through ownership; the critical role of designing for what communities will actually pay for; and the complex financing challenge of funding clinic roll-out while building toward a model sustainable without donor dependency. Unjani is pioneering blended financing - including loan components for nurse ownership - as a path to this independence.

Unjani also illustrates a scaling risk: the tension between geographic expansion and cultural embeddedness. The model works in part because nurses have existing social capital in their communities. Sending nurses into unfamiliar communities reduces this capital. Scaling across new geographies requires careful nurse-community matching - a complexity that does not appear in the model documentation but is critical to real-world fidelity.

CASE STUDY 3 · GOVERNMENT ADOPTION · HEALTHCARE SYSTEMS

SHOFCO - Designing for What Government Can Do and Will Pay For

Kenya's Shining Hope for Communities (SHOFCO) began in one of Nairobi's largest informal settlements and reached over 2.4 million people across 40 of Kenya's 47 counties by 2023 - not primarily by growing its own organisation, but by designing its integrated urban services model explicitly for government absorption. Founder Kennedy Odede embodied Starr's most important dictum: design for what African governments can do and will pay for. The result was county government adoption at system level, creating impact that no NGO expansion strategy could have achieved. The lesson for South Africa is urgent: our municipalities and provincial governments are potential scalers of proven social models. Very few South African NPOs are designing with this in mind.

The Role of Funders - The Invisible Variable in Every Scaling Equation

I want to say something that is rarely said plainly in the presence of funders: most philanthropic funding in South Africa actively prevents scaling. Not through malice, but through structural incentives that reward the wrong things, at the wrong time horizon, with the wrong reporting requirements, and with the wrong theory of what success looks like.

Consider the typical grant: 12 to 36 months, project-specific, quarterly reporting, output-rather than outcome-focused, with renewal contingent on demonstrable activity rather than demonstrated impact. This is precisely the opposite of what scaling requires. **Scaling requires time horizons of seven to ten years minimum. It requires unrestricted funding for organisational infrastructure - the documentation, training, quality systems, and advocacy work that make replication possible. It requires tolerance for failure, because scaling involves experimentation. And it requires a funder willing to fund the ecosystem of scale, not just the implementing organisation.**

Kevin Starr's most recent thinking sharpens this point: when funders are not accountable for impact - when they fund based on activity, narrative, and relationships rather than evidence of problem-solving - it corrupts the entire market for social change. It sustains what Starr calls "zombie organisations" - entities that should cease to exist but are kept alive by well-intentioned, poorly-calibrated funding. This is not a polite observation. In South Africa's constrained funding environment, zombie funding actively crowds out the capital that should flow to genuinely scale-capable organisations.

WHAT SCALE-READY FUNDERS ACTUALLY DO

Scale-ready funders fund organisations, not projects. They invest in evidence - supporting rigorous evaluation and model documentation. They co-design scaling pathways with implementing organisations. They connect organisations to government relationships, peer networks, and technical assistance. They commit to long timelines. They are accountable for whether the problem is getting smaller. And critically, they collaborate with other funders - recognising that no single funder can finance scale alone. SmartStart's funding journey is the most compelling South African example: a consortium of funders with a shared vision, high engagement, and the reflexivity to adjust over multiple phases. That kind of funder collaboration is the exception; it needs to become the norm.

GETTING TO SCALE – APPROACHES AND PERSPECTIVES

The Strategic Perspective — Developing a Scaling Strategy

A scaling strategy is not a growth plan with larger numbers. It is a fundamentally different document, built on a fundamentally different logic. Most social organisations have never written one - because most have never genuinely decided to scale. Here is what a serious scaling strategy must contain and resolve.

The Seven Questions a Scaling Strategy Must Answer

- **Problem definition at scale:** Is the problem precisely defined, measurable, and large enough to justify a scaling investment? Can we articulate what "solved" looks like at the scale of the problem?
- **Solution scalability:** Does our model pass Starr's Big Enough / Simple Enough / Cheap Enough test? Have we been ruthlessly honest about this, or have we answered with hope rather than evidence?
- **Doer and payer identification:** Who will do the replication at scale? Is it us, government, other NGOs, franchisees, or the market? And who will pay for it? These answers must be specific, realistic, and mutually consistent.
- **Pathway selection:** Which of the scaling pathways - replication, government adoption, social franchising, market creation, policy change - is most appropriate given our model, our context, and our ecosystem relationships?
- **Theory of change for scale:** Not just our programmatic theory of change, but our scaling theory of change - the causal logic by which our current activities will produce the enabling conditions for scale.
- **Timeline and milestones:** What does success look like in three years, five years, ten years? What are the critical milestones that tell us the scaling pathway is working - or that we need to adapt?
- **Organisational identity shift:** Are we prepared to subordinate the organisation's centrality to the mission? To celebrate when others replicate our model? To shift from being implementers to being architects of scale? This is the hardest question, and the one most strategies avoid.

A NOTE ON INNOVATION AND REPLICATION

Starr's 2018 SSIR piece "Enough Innovation Already!" makes a point that deserves far more prominence than it has received in South African development discourse. The sector is obsessed with innovation - with the new, the novel, the disruptive. But the most urgent challenge in social change is not innovation. It is replication. There are already proven solutions to most of the problems we face. The bottleneck is not ideas. It is the scaling infrastructure - the organisations, funding, government relationships, and knowledge systems - needed to take proven ideas to genuinely transformative scale. Before any organisation pursues innovation, it should ask: is there already a proven model that solves this problem? If yes, the strategic question is not "how do we innovate?" but "how do we replicate, well, at scale?"

The Operational Perspective — Managing and Resourcing for Scale

Scaling does not just require a different strategy. It requires a fundamentally different operating model - different structures, different capabilities, different management systems, and a different relationship between the centre and the periphery of the organisation.

Operational Capabilities That Scaling Demands

- **Model codification:** The model must be documented with precision sufficient for a capable organisation to replicate it without the originator's ongoing presence. Starr's "software/hardware" metaphor is instructive: your model is software that must run on other organisations' hardware. Most South African NPOs have never invested in this documentation. It is time-consuming, expensive, and unglamorous - and absolutely essential to scale.
- **Quality assurance systems:** At scale, you cannot rely on the founder's intuition or the original team's institutional memory. You need explicit standards, monitoring protocols, and quality assurance processes that can be applied across a distributed network. Social franchising organisations like SmartStart and Unjani have developed sophisticated QA frameworks - these need to be part of any scaling organisation's operational infrastructure from the beginning, not retrofitted after problems emerge.
- **Leadership beyond the founder:** Many African social organisations are built around visionary, charismatic founders whose presence is integral to the model. Scaling requires institutionalising what the founder embodies - their values, their relationships, their decision-making logic - in systems, culture, and a deep management bench. This is one of the most difficult and underinvested transitions in the sector.
- **Adaptive management:** Scaling is iterative. The model will encounter contexts it was not designed for. The organisation must have the capability to learn rapidly, adapt the model appropriately, and maintain fidelity to the core while allowing legitimate contextual variation. This requires explicit learning systems, not just programme management.
- **Shared services and infrastructure:** At scale, duplicating back-office functions across multiple sites or franchise units is wasteful. Scaling organisations need to invest in shared services - HR, finance, IT, knowledge management - that can support a distributed network efficiently.

The Programmatic Perspective — Designing and Implementing Scaling Programmes

Programme design for scale is a distinct discipline from programme design for delivery. Most social organisations design programmes for their own delivery context - their specific community, their specific team, their specific relationships. Programmes designed for scaling must be designed with the replication customer in mind from the outset.

Principles of Programme Design for Scale

- **Design for the doer-at-scale:** From the earliest stages of model development, ask: who will deliver this at scale, and can they actually do what our model requires? If the doer-at-scale is government, the model must be simple enough for a government department to implement. If it is a franchise network, it must be simple enough for a trained but non-expert practitioner to deliver with fidelity.

- **Ruthless simplification:** Every element of a model that is not essential to its impact is a barrier to replication. Beloved programme elements that practitioners value but that do not drive outcomes must be stripped. This is emotionally difficult and operationally necessary.
- **Build for adaptation:** Contextual fidelity is not the same as model rigidity. The core elements that drive impact must be non-negotiable. The peripheral elements that facilitate delivery in specific contexts must be deliberately adaptable. Designing this boundary explicitly - what is the franchise's "secret sauce" versus what is legitimately variable - is a sophisticated programmatic challenge that most organisations navigate by instinct rather than design.
- **Stage gates and phases:** Scaling programmes need explicit phase gates - moments of honest assessment where the evidence is reviewed and a deliberate decision is made to proceed, adapt, or stop. The R&D phase (proving the model), the transition phase (preparing for replication), and the scale phase (active replication) require fundamentally different activities, capabilities, and funding. Conflating them produces expensive failures.
- **Community co-design:** In the African context, programme design that does not genuinely involve the communities it serves reproduces colonial patterns of development. Community co-design is not just ethically required; it is programmatically essential. Community-designed programmes have higher uptake, higher retention, and higher fidelity because communities own the logic, not just the delivery.

The Financial Perspective — Funding Models for Scaling

Scaling requires a fundamentally different funding architecture than programme delivery. The financial models that sustain local programmes actively undermine scaling ambitions. A serious scaling agenda requires organisations and funders to engage with a range of funding instruments, each appropriate to different phases and purposes of the scaling journey.

A Spectrum of Funding Instruments for Scale

- **Unrestricted core funding:** The foundation of any scaling effort. Organisations cannot document models, build knowledge systems, engage government, or manage quality assurance without stable, flexible operational funding. Mulago's fundamental investment thesis - fund the organisation, not the project - is the starting point for any serious funder of scale.
- **Patient capital and long-term grants:** Scaling operates on a 7-to-15-year horizon. Funding that evaporates at 24 months creates planning uncertainty that makes scaling impossible. Collaborative funders like Co-Impact have demonstrated the power of long-term, pooled funding for scaling. South Africa needs more funder coalitions willing to commit to 5-to-10-year funding relationships.
- **Blended finance:** Government, philanthropic, and private capital combined to de-risk and attract investment into scaling models. South Africa's NHI framework, when implemented, could create a significant blended finance opportunity for healthcare social franchises like Unjani. Impact investment globally surpassed \$1.5 trillion in 2024 - with over 50% of investors planning to expand African portfolios. The challenge is structuring these instruments to serve social mission, not just financial return.

- **Outcomes-based financing:** Social impact bonds and development impact bonds link payments to verified outcomes. Appropriate for models with clear, measurable outcomes and willing government counterparties. More complex and costly to structure than traditional grants, but potentially powerful for engaging government as a payer at scale.
- **Enterprise and loan financing:** For hybrid and social enterprise models like Unjani, loan components can bridge the gap between donor dependency and financial sustainability. Unjani's blended financing model - combining grants for clinic establishment with loan components for nurse ownership - is an example of creative financial architecture designed specifically for scaling.
- **Revenue diversification:** Scaling organisations must reduce donor dependency over time. This means designing for revenue sources - government contracts, health insurance reimbursements, service fees structured for affordability - that can sustain.

Monitoring, Evaluation and Impact Management at Scale

Measurement at scale is a different discipline from measurement at programme level. Most South African NPOs have developed monitoring and evaluation systems designed to satisfy funder reporting requirements rather than to generate the learning needed to manage a scaling journey. This must change.

What Measurement for Scale Actually Requires

- **Measure the problem, not just the programme:** The fundamental measure of scale is whether the problem is getting smaller. Track the prevalence of the problem - not just your reach into it. If youth unemployment in your target areas is not changing despite growing programme reach, the model may not be addressing root causes at sufficient depth or scale.
- **Minimum necessary data:** At scale, complex monitoring systems become operational burdens that franchisees and replicators cannot sustain. The discipline is to identify the minimum set of indicators that tell you (a) whether the model is being delivered with sufficient fidelity, and (b) whether it is achieving the outcomes it was designed to achieve. Everything else is overhead.
- **Fidelity monitoring:** At scale, model and mission drift is inevitable without explicit monitoring. You need to track whether the core elements of the model - the non-negotiables - are being delivered consistently across the network. SmartStart's ECD Connect platform, which provides digital monitoring across its franchise network, is an example of technology-enabled fidelity monitoring at scale.
- **Real-time learning systems:** Scaling organisations operate in complex, dynamic environments. By the time a formal evaluation is completed, the context may have changed. Real-time learning systems - rapid feedback loops, peer learning networks, adaptive management protocols - are essential for scaling organisations to adjust their models as they go.
- **Contribution vs attribution:** At scale, it becomes increasingly difficult and increasingly irrelevant to claim attribution for outcomes. When government adopts your model, when other organisations replicate it, when policy changes based on your advocacy - the

outcomes are the result of many actors, not just yours. Sophisticated impact management at scale focuses on contribution - demonstrating your role in a chain of change - rather than attribution, which becomes methodologically untenable and politically counterproductive.

- **Cost-effectiveness and unit cost tracking:** The economic case for scale rests on the premise that impact grows faster than cost. This must be tracked explicitly and honestly. If unit costs are not declining as scale increases, the scaling model may be fundamentally wrongly or inadequately designed or the market assumptions may be wrong.

The Systemic Perspective — Ecosystem Thinking for Scale

No organisation scales a social problem alone. Every successful scaling story in the African context has been an ecosystem story - a story about the alignment of multiple actors, institutions, resources, and enabling conditions over a sustained period. Treating scaling as an organisational challenge, rather than an ecosystem challenge, is one of the sector's most persistent and costly errors.

The ecosystem for scale includes: the implementing organisations that deliver the model; the funders that provide patient, flexible capital; the government institutions that provide the policy, regulatory, and financial environment; the knowledge and learning infrastructure that documents, evaluates, and disseminates what works; the technical assistance providers that build organisational capabilities; and the communities that provide the legitimacy, participation, and ultimately the ownership of scaled solutions.

Starr's critique of systems change language - captured in his 2021 SSIR piece "We're Beating Systems Change to Death" - is worth engaging here. His argument is not that systems thinking is wrong; it is that "systems change" has become so semantically broad as to be almost meaningless, and that using it as a substitute for identifying a specific, scalable solution to a specific, measurable problem is a way of sounding ambitious while committing to nothing. The resolution is to use systems analysis - understanding the system - as the diagnostic lens, and scalable solutions as the strategic response. These are complementary, not competing, approaches.

THE ECOSYSTEM ARCHITECTURE

The African Union's 2025 10-Year Strategy on the Social and Solidarity Economy represents the first continental-level attempt to create a policy ecosystem for scaling social impact. South Africa's G20 presidency under "Solidarity, Equality and Sustainability," and the Schwab/Motsepe Foundation report on the State of Social Enterprise in Africa, are creating an enabling environment that the social sector must actively engage - not observe from the margins. The ecosystem is being built. The question is whether scaling-ready organisations exist to populate it.

Costs, Risks and Unintended Consequences Nobody Talks About

Every conference panel on scaling celebrates the upside. This section does the opposite. Scaling at genuinely transformative levels carries real costs - financial, human, relational, and strategic - that must be named honestly and planned for explicitly. Failure to do so is not optimism. It is negligence.

1. Mission Drift	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> As organisations scale, pressure to reach new geographies and satisfy diverse funders pulls them away from the specific, deep work that made them effective. Scaling demands a rigorous mission discipline that most organisations have never had to exercise.
2. Model Fidelity Collapse	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What works in Soweto may not work in the Karoo without adaptation. Scaling without explicit fidelity protocols produces hollow replication - the shell of a model without its animating logic. The track record for high-quality replication in the social sector is, as Starr says, pretty dismal.
3. Founder Dependency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Many African social organisations are built around charismatic founders whose presence is integral to the model. Institutionalising what the founder embodies is extraordinarily difficult and almost universally underinvested.
4. Community Displacement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Top-down scaling can undermine the community ownership and local legitimacy that made an intervention effective. In post-apartheid South Africa, where power dynamics in development remain deeply contested, this is not a minor risk.
5. Premature Scaling	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Organisations frequently scale before the model is genuinely proven. The evidence base is thin, the theory of change is underspecified, the operational infrastructure is inadequate. The result is expensive failure at scale - which consumes resources and damages reputations across the ecosystem.
6. Government Absorption Risk	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Government adoption is the highest-leverage pathway - and the most politically fragile. A change of minister, a budget cut, a policy reversal can undo years of embedding. Designing for government resilience - building the model into multiple institutional owners, not a single ministerial champion - is essential.
7. Crowding Out Innovation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A dominant scaled solution can crowd out the experimentation needed to find better solutions. Scale can calcify thinking as easily as it can amplify impact. The ecosystem needs both scalers and innovators - and funders who understand the difference.
8. Financial Fragility at Scale	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Scaling increases absolute dependency on funding before revenue diversification is achieved. A single large funder exiting can collapse a scaling organisation. Financial architecture for scale must include diversification planning from the beginning, not as an afterthought.

Who Should Scale — and Who Should Not

Not every organisation should scale, and not every problem can be scaled. This is not a failure of ambition - it is an honest reckoning with organisational reality and problem complexity. The

question "should we scale?" is not answered by aspiration. It is answered by evidence. Use the assessment tool below to guide the conversation.

Scale Readiness Self-Assessment Tool

Scaling Readiness Assessment

Use this tool before committing to any scaling pathway. Score each dimension 1 (not ready) to 5 (fully ready).

DOMAIN A: Model Readiness

Readiness Indicator	Score (1-5)	Evidence / Notes
Core intervention is clearly defined and documented		
Theory of change is explicit, tested, and evidence-based		
Impact evidence exists from multiple contexts or cohorts		
Minimum viable model (non-negotiables) is identified		
Adaptable elements of the model have been defined		
Cost structure is understood and documented		

DOMAIN B: Organisational Readiness

Readiness Indicator	Score (1-5)	Evidence / Notes
Leadership team has scaling experience or access to coaching		
Financial management systems are audit-ready		
Data and M&E systems can support scale reporting		
Governance structures can oversee greater complexity		

HR and talent pipeline exists for scaling roles		
Legal and compliance structures are scaling-ready		

DOMAIN C: Ecosystem Readiness

Readiness Indicator	Score (1-5)	Evidence / Notes
Target communities have expressed demand and ownership		
Implementation partners exist or can be developed		
Policy environment is neutral, enabling, or reformable		
Funding ecosystem is potentially supportive of scale		
No dominant competitor or conflicting programme present		
Cultural and contextual factors have been assessed		

SCORING GUIDE: 15-25 = Emerging Readiness | 26-60 = Conditional Readiness | 61-75 = High Readiness for Scale

The Challenges - What This Article Will Be Challenged On

I publish this article knowing it will provoke disagreement. I welcome that. Here are the strongest objections I anticipate, and my honest responses.

1. The Decolonial Challenge

- **"Your scaling frameworks are imported from North American philanthropy and reproduce colonial epistemologies."** This is the most important challenge.
- My response: the critique is valid about how scaling has often been done, not about scaling itself. Ubuntu-centred, community-led, African-designed approaches to scale are not just possible - they are the only legitimate form in this context.

2. The Complexity Challenge

- **"Social problems are too complex for scalable solutions. You are oversimplifying."** Social problems are complex.
- But complexity is not a reason to abandon scalable solutions - it is a reason to design them carefully, adaptively, and with deep contextual intelligence. Complexity and scale are not opposites.

3. The Small Organisation Challenge

- **"This framework only applies to well-resourced organisations. What about small, grassroots groups?"**
- Small organisations are often where the best solutions are developed. They are the R&D lab of the social sector. The question for them is not "should we scale?" but "how do we get the evidence and relationships that enable government or larger organisations to replicate what we've discovered?"

4. The Government Trust Challenge

- **"You assume government is a reliable scaling partner. South African government is not."** Government in South Africa is fragile, politically volatile, and capacity-constrained. These are real constraints.
- Designing for this reality - not for an idealised government - is the discipline. It means building model robustness into multiple institutional champions, not a single relationship.

5. The Measurement Challenge

- **"Your measurement demands are unrealistic for under-resourced NPOs."**
- This is fair as a critique of some measurement cultures. My position is not measurement maximalism - it is measurement appropriateness. Minimum necessary data that actually drives learning and accountability. No more, no less.

6. The 'What about Deep Work' Challenge

- **"Not everything should scale. Some things should just be done, deeply and well."**
- Absolutely correct. And I say this explicitly in the article. The discipline is in knowing which is which - and not letting scaling pressure devalue the deep, relational, place-based work that is irreducibly local and profoundly important.

What Else Should You Consider — The Blind Spots

In honest self-examination, here are the elements I have addressed partially but that deserve fuller treatment in subsequent work:

- **The role of technology and digital infrastructure** in enabling scaling in low-bandwidth, high-mobile contexts
- **The specific challenges of scaling in rural South Africa**, where the Unjani and Smartstart models are largely urban or peri-urban

- **The gender dimensions of scaling** - who leads scaled organisations, who benefits, and who is excluded
- **The racial economy of South African philanthropy** and how legacy power dynamics shape which organisations get scaling capital
- **The role of diaspora philanthropy and Pan-African funding** in resourcing continental-scale ambitions
- And the **emerging question of AI and data infrastructure** as enablers of monitoring and quality assurance at scale.

A Manifesto and Roadmap for the Brave

A Scaling Manifesto for Africa's Social Economy

1. **Start with the problem, not the organisation.** Define success as the problem being solved, at the size of the problem. Build everything - strategy, structure, funding, measurement - from that definition.
2. **Prove before you replicate.** Invest in evidence. Be ruthlessly honest about what works, in what contexts, for whom, and at what cost. Ambiguity at this stage becomes catastrophe at scale.
3. **Innovate when necessary; replicate when possible.** The most urgent challenge in the social sector is not innovation but replication. If a proven model exists, the strategic question is how to replicate it well - not how to invent a new one.
4. **Know which dimension of scaling you are pursuing.** Scaling up, out, deep, and across are different strategies. Choose deliberately. Pursue multiple dimensions where the model supports it.
5. **Choose your pathway deliberately and design for your doer.** Who will do the replication, and can they actually do what your model requires? Build everything for them - documentation, training, quality systems, incentives.
6. **Design with communities, not above them.** Scaling without community agency is imposition with a budget. Ubuntu is not incompatible with scale. Properly understood, it is the animating spirit that scale must serve.
7. **Design for what government can do and will pay for.** Outside of market solutions, government is the only realistic vehicle for exponential scale. This is not a comfortable truth. It is the truth nonetheless.
8. **Funders: become the patient capital you wish to see.** Long-term, unrestricted, accountable-for-impact funding is not a luxury. It is the minimum viable funder position for a scaling agenda. If you are not willing to change, you are part of the problem.
9. **Measure what matters - the problem.** Track whether the problem is getting smaller. If it is not, be honest about why, and be willing to change - the model, the pathway, or the strategy.
10. **Know when to stop.** The goal is not institutional immortality. It is a world with fewer problems that need solving. If the problem is solved - or if the model is not solving it - have the courage to say so.

"Innovation without replication is a waste of time. Scale without community is imposition. And funding without accountability for impact is, at best, expensive charity - and at worst, an active obstacle to the change we claim to seek."

The Courage Scale Requires

I want to end not with a framework, but with a feeling - because that is ultimately what this is about. Scaling in the social economy requires a particular kind of courage: the courage to subordinate institutional survival to mission, to tell funders what they do not want to hear, to design for communities rather than for donors, to celebrate when others replicate your work and call it their own, and to be honest when something is not working at the scale of the problem you claimed to be solving.

South Africa - and Africa more broadly - stands at a rare convergence of conditions. The African Union's first continental strategy on the social and solidarity economy. South Africa's G20 presidency. The maturation of impact investment infrastructure. The emergence of home-grown, African-led philanthropy. The growth of social franchising as a demonstrated scaling pathway. These are not casual signals. They are a genuine window.

Windows close. The question is whether we have the strategic clarity, the organisational courage, the funder patience, and the community trust to walk through this one - and to do it in a way that actually reduces the problems we exist to solve, rather than simply perpetuating the organisations we have built to address them.

That, in the end, is the only question that matters.

Join the Conversation: Deep Engagement - Your Perspective Matters

This article is designed to provoke, to be challenged, and to grow through engagement. Please share your response - whether you agree, disagree, have a case study to add, or a dimension of scaling you think has been missed. This is a living document, and your contribution makes it better.

Practitioners, funders, community leaders, researchers, and policymakers: your experience and perspective are essential to this conversation.

This article engages with the body of work produced by Kevin Starr and the Mulago Foundation in the Stanford Social Innovation Review, including: "The Doer and the Payer" (2015), "Big Enough. Simple Enough. Cheap Enough." (2019), "Your Software, Their Hardware" (2020), "Nowhere to Grow" (2020), "We're Beating Systems Change to Death" (2021), "Enough Innovation Already!" (2018), and "Scale Really Matters" (April 2026). It draws on data from Trialogue's 2025 Business in Society Handbook; the World Economic Forum's 2025 analysis of the African Social and Solidarity Economy; DGMT and SmartStart's published documentation; peer-reviewed research on Unjani Clinics (Szerb, Kivleniece & Aggarwal, Journal of Organization Design, 2021); the Open Society Foundations' 2025 lecture series; SSIR's "Does Everything in the Social Sector Need to Scale?" (Kak, 2026); and IPASA's 2023 SmartStart Collaboration Case Study. All opinions, arguments, and editorial judgements are the author's own and are offered in the spirit of advancing honest, critical, and productive dialogue about scaling in Africa's social economy.

Other Social Franchise Models operating across Africa to consider:

Leading Social Franchises by Scale

- **Jibu:** A leading social franchise operating across multiple African countries (Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania, Uganda, Zimbabwe) that capitalizes entrepreneurs to provide affordable drinking water. It has over 1,080 distribution points in Africa.
- **CFW (Child Health Centers):** This network of local franchisees provides essential medicines and treats diseases that cause 70-90% of illness and death in their communities, serving over 2.3 million people, particularly in East Africa.
- **AFRIpads:** Based in East Africa, Impact Africa Industries (creators of AFRIpads) has sold over one million reusable sanitary pads to low-income women, utilizing a widespread distribution network to improve health and education.
- **Easy Solar:** A major provider of pay-as-you-go solar lighting and charging systems in Sierra Leone and beyond, focusing on providing renewable energy to households without grid access.
- **Silulo Ulutho Technologies:** A prominent South African social enterprise that bridges the technology gap for township schools and communities by providing IT training and services, with multiple franchises in operation.
- **Reel Gardening:** A patented, easy-to-use biodegradable seed tape that empowers individuals to grow food, frequently used for food security initiatives.
- **SolarTurtle:** A "secure rural electrification business" that converts shipping containers into solar-powered micro-utilities for schools and businesses, particularly in areas prone to theft.
- **Ground Up Barista Academy:** An initiative that trains unemployed people in South Africa, functioning as a social enterprise, often with a mobile division to create jobs.

Key Sectors in African Social Franchising: Social franchises in Africa are typically concentrated in sectors that align with UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs):

- **Health and Medical Care:** Providing affordable medicines and primary care (e.g., CFW).
- **Water and Sanitation:** Offering safe, affordable drinking water (e.g., Jibu).
- **Energy and Lighting:** Providing off-grid solar solutions (e.g., Easy Solar).
- **Education and Job Training:** Providing skills and vocational training to unemployed youth (e.g., Silulo, Ground Up)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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For more evidence of her work, visit the Next Generation website or download her latest research reports on trends and insights for the social, solidarity and impact economies in South Africa. Read more on this topic in our Social Innovation Knowledge Hub.

The information shared in this article is part of the 2026 Impact Leadership Masterclass: **Pathways to Scale**. For more information about our upcoming Masterclasses or to apply visit our website to download our Training brochure.