

Co-Impact: Our approach to Scale

At Co-Impact, we envision a world where all people can live fulfilling lives and systems and societies are just and inclusive. We stand for gender equality, where all women and girls¹ have the opportunity to exercise power, agency, and leadership at all levels. Across both of our Funds we expect our partners will have a positive impact on hundreds of millions of people by 2030. Our full vision, values, and approach are described in detail in our [Handbook](#).

We recognize that a powerful way to improve outcomes for people is to transform health, education, and economic opportunity systems to be more effective, just, and inclusive. Government and market systems are meant to serve millions of people and deploy huge resources – including financial, infrastructure, and human resources – but often produce poor and inequitable outcomes, especially leaving out women and other marginalized groups. This does not happen by accident; it is because bias, discrimination, and exclusion are baked into how systems are designed and managed.

Without attention to systemic equity and inclusion, problems are neither well understood nor solved at scale. By addressing these biases, and systemically using a feminist and intersectional lens, our partners help make systems work better for everyone at scale, and particularly those who have been historically excluded.

How do we understand scale?

First, scale is in relation to the size and nature of the problem. We typically consider a country as the core unit of analysis (or a state in large countries like India, with a line of sight to national level impact over time). Within this frame, we measure progress in relation to the true scope of the problem, not only as absolute numbers of the people impacted. Measuring scale as a stand-alone numerator (number of people reached) without a denominator (size of the problem) can create a misleading sense of impact. For instance, reaching millions of farmers needs to be put in perspective of the overall numbers of smallholder farmers that depend on agriculture for subsistence living.

Second, scale is understood in terms of its breadth and depth. If breadth is the size of the problem, then depth is the way to truly understand who is most affected. This means we need to ask questions like who is excluded, who gets left behind, and who is invisible in the system. We don't count what we don't see, hence numbers become relevant when everyone is visible and counted. For instance, we can only solve for land rights for all women when we understand the unique challenges of land-grabbing faced by women in some family and social structures. Through an intersectional lens, we gain a clearer insight into the root-causes of the problems that structurally and systemically exclude segments of society. Breadth and depth are further enhanced when we better understand the ways in which the problem is experienced by and manifests for different groups. For instance, increasing access for girls to secondary schools is important, but we also need to address the gendered experience in school to ensure that girls are safe, respected and can exercise agency.

Third, solving for large numbers of people downstream sometimes means working upstream. We recognize that the focus on scale does not mean identifying only those who suffer the worst consequences of a problem. Our point of analysis needs to also include where the problem begins. For instance, when a few thousand women suffer femicide in a country, we know that gender-based violence is tolerated at the national level and experienced by millions of women. Working upstream may include strengthening the law and its implementation and making legal and health services work for all women.

¹Our use of "women and girls" is meant to be inclusive of all those who identify as women and girls on the gender spectrum.

Fourth, sustained scale requires us to work on key levers within the system. The primary reason for philanthropic funding is to provide sustainable solutions to those most affected, instead of creating parallel systems or small oases of services for a few. Hence, the understanding of scale needs to include systems-level outcomes that provide a compelling narrative of what has changed in the government and/or market system in an enduring way. Concrete outcomes like a shift in policy, change in practices and procedures, introduction of new rewards or reinforcement of incentives, and/or strengthening of accountability measures etc. means the gravitational pull in the system has moved towards inclusion and equity. Similarly, if we want to advance women's leadership, the focus is not on a few women leaders and their capabilities, but changing institutional policies, procedures, practices, and cultures that affect pathways for women to enter, thrive, and rise to leadership positions in key institutions. To reach equality for all, the gradient needs to be set to equity in the systems. For instance, making employment policies to be more inclusive and less-biased based on gender, race, caste, class, or other context-relevant factors will mean better opportunities for those who most need it in society.

Fifth, sustained scale also requires sharing power. If we think of scale only as beneficiaries impacted, then our response may be neither empowering nor sustaining. If we think of scale also as true representation and leadership of those affected, then the system can be designed for inclusion of voices, experiences, and needs of those it is meant to serve. When women are equally represented in leadership positions in systems –at household, community and institutional levels – we stand a better chance to make sustainable progress towards gender equality. Nothing for us without us means that it is ultimately about the power and ability to solve, not only the solution itself. As problems and contexts evolve, institutionalizing the representation of women and other historically excluded groups at the decision-making table is a more systemic and sustainable approach to having impact at scale (compared to doing things for women or involving them in ad hoc consultations).

At Co-Impact, we bring these considerations to our understanding of scale and are evolving our grantmaking approach accordingly. In doing so, we support our program partners to develop outcomes at three levels:

- **At the people level (population-level impact),** our our program partners are supported to bring an intersectional gender lens to the problem analysis and outcomes definition (see our **Approach** to Gender Equality and Intersectionality) as well as speak to the solution in relation to the scale and scope of the problem. We support initiatives that are not only doing linear scaling but working towards systemwide adoption of reforms at scale. We also do not ask for attribution when our program partners report impact, but a compelling narrative of how their contribution makes the whole stronger than the sum of the parts.
- **At the systems level,** we we support our program partners to analyze the roots of the problem and develop a vision for the future state of the system. The systems-level outcomes include 'hard' measures like policy or regulation change and 'soft' measures such as motivation and incentives, as well as shifts in mental models and norms. Instead of asking the organizations how they are scaling, we encourage them to answer the key questions of 'who does and who pays, at scale'.
- **At the organizational level,** we support program partners to invest in their organizational capabilities to become more strategic, inclusive, and resilient organizations. We support partners to develop 'strategic coherence', i.e., to identify and focus on what matters most to change the system, and then align both internal resources and external partnerships and coalitions to focus on that goal. This is essential to achieve impact at scale because it enables partners to focus on what's needed in the ecosystem and how to make it happen, rather than growing the organization's own program or activities.

While the starting point for each program partner is different, these insights are meant to serve as a general guide for developing a systems change approach. We hope that they will help define the contours of progress and inform discussions on how to make systems more just and inclusive at scale.