the fifth element

Ideas that make the difference

Emergence, resonance and pollination in practice

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"The biggest contribution of the Globalizer was that we understood that we were generating more inequality, that we were teaching everyone that we were the only ones that were able to do it, that they couldn't do it... So that changing paradigm where we said no, no, no, we're just another actor in the same bigger ecosystem. And our solution needs to be for all the children. If it's not for all the children, then it's really not a good solution."

Nathalia Mesa
AEIOTU, COLOMBIA

"There are lots of people who want to help and who want to work together. Often, I myself was the bottleneck to receiving help in the right way. It's important to understand that you're not alone — it's actually better to work together and better to give than to take."

Yuhyun Park
DQ INSTITUTE, SOUTH KOREA

"The physics of knowledge is different. When you share it, everybody becomes richer. It's not a zero-sum game. You can create equity all over the world."

Sanjeev Arora
PROJECT ECHO, USA

Quotes by Ashoka Fellows who participated in the Globalizer Strategy Accelerator





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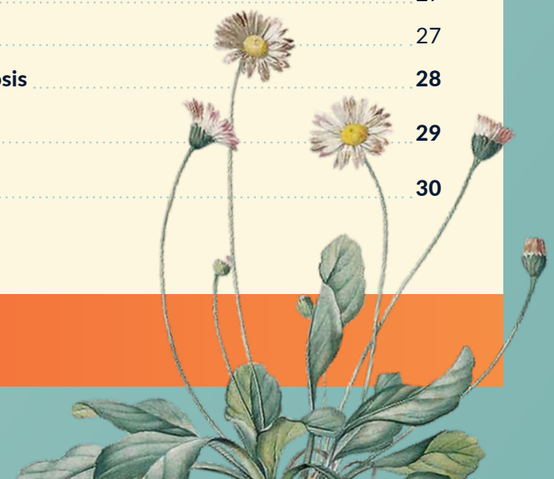
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"When a complex system is far from equilibrium, small islands of coherence in a sea of chaos have the capacity to shift the entire system to a higher order."

**WIDELY ATTRIBUTED TO ILYA PRIGOGINE,
NOBEL PRIZE IN CHEMISTRY 1977, MEMBER OF THE CLUB OF ROME**

"Seek and learn to recognise who and what, in the midst of the inferno, are not inferno, and then make them endure, and give them space."

MARCO POLO TO KUBLAI KHAN, IN INVISIBLE CITIES BY ITALO CALVINO, 1972

Asking better questions

There is a particular kind of frustration familiar to anyone working in social change. You encounter an idea: a model of community care, a methodology for urban reforestation, a protocol for coaching traumatised children. The evidence is tangible, the people behind it are extraordinary and yet the idea stays largely inside the geography and sector that produced it, falling short of its systemic ambition.

The standard response has been to ask: how do we scale what works? Businesses, institutions and civil society organisations have borrowed the industrial model of scaling one's operations and built the largest interventions we see today. Yet the gap between the reach of those interventions and the scale of the problems they are designed to address is significant. Where significant scale has been achieved without sufficient understanding of context, it has sometimes yielded damaging results and unintended negative externalities.

How, then, can we ask better questions about how to spread systems-changing ideas and interventions? Perhaps the real question is not how to grow, but how good ideas travel: not as static packages handed over, but as living things that find their own environment. We are not suggesting that the more countries an initiative reaches, the better. Rather, this paper explores how a context-aware, systems-change-oriented idea could become the seed for impact elsewhere.

This paper draws on two bodies of work we believe are in close dialogue: The Fifth Element, a Club of Rome programme that has been building a biological and relational theory of systemic change around emergence, resonance and pollination; and Ashoka Globalizer's 16 years of work with social entrepreneurs on exactly this problem: how to move ideas across contexts in ways that are both equitable and sustainable.

Together, they suggest that what looks like a strategy problem — how do we get good ideas to travel further? — is really a question about conditions, carriers and the readiness of receiving ecosystems.

*What if the spread of transformative ideas is less like logistics and more like ecology?
What if the question is not "how do we scale?" but "how do we pollinate?"*



Part I: The biological turn

From mechanics to ecology

The dominant mental model for spreading social innovations is mechanical: identify a proven solution, document and rigorously measure it, find resources to replicate it and deploy it at scale. Industrialised scaling is modernity's move applied to change-making. In Bruno Latour's[1] account, modernity detaches solutions from the relationships that produced them, treating technical fixes as stable, portable objects rather than as living outcomes of a particular place, culture and set of hands. Under this approach, the survival and growth of the organisation — its footprint, its brand, its capacity to raise the next round — take precedence over the systemic change it exists to create. For many, this ordering is not a matter of vanity but of survival: it is what keeps the organisation alive. The dynamic is both global and systemic.

Social change organisations end up competing for market share much as companies do, and this generates its own externalities, not because anyone intends harm, but because solutions engineered for replication are rarely engineered for the ground they land on. Questioning one's approach from first principles in every new context is expensive and usually comes downstream of promises already made to funders to reproduce the same outcomes elsewhere. The Fifth Element's companion paper, *Dancing with Paradigms*, locates this tendency within a broader pattern: the unreasonable effectiveness of modernity, understood as a civilisational operating system so effective at metabolising resources, and so practised at absorbing challenges without changing its foundations, that alternatives can be difficult even to imagine.[2] Under this operating system, an organisation seeking to spread impact is planted in a new context rather than growing from it. Its model, metrics and culture arrive pre-formed, designed for faithful replication rather than for mutual metamorphosis with the ecology they enter. The ecological turn this paper advocates for begins by refusing this premise.

Change in living systems is never forced and never works in isolation: it emerges from conditions, not commands. The physical chemist Prigogine, a Club of Rome member in the 1970s, offered an animating insight: far-from-equilibrium systems can reorganise to higher levels of order when small islands of coherence appear within them. This insight may not comfort changemakers who want clear theories of action, but it is more honest. It suggests that the question is not primarily what to do, but what conditions to create and how to recognise the moment when a system is ready to reorganise around something new.

With this in mind, three theories inform the analysis in this paper:





1 Criticality and emergence

Physical systems have tipping points: thresholds at which a small perturbation can trigger a cascade. The same is true of social systems. An idea that circulates for years without uptake can suddenly become ubiquitous, not because the idea changed, but because the surrounding system reached a threshold of disequilibrium. The oil price shocks of the 1970s made people more willing to listen to ideas about energy efficiency. The COVID-19 pandemic made remote healthcare models adoptable. The collapse of a fast-fashion brand's reputation made supply chain transparency suddenly attractive to competitors.

This matters for practitioners. It suggests that the work of spreading an idea is partly about patiently maintaining coherence, keeping the signal clear and alive while the system moves towards the threshold at which it can reorganise. It also suggests that timing is epistemological. The same idea, introduced before or after a system reaches criticality, is effectively a different intervention.

How do changemakers learn to sense criticality, to recognise when the system they are working within is approaching a threshold? And what does it mean to "maintain coherent presence" during the long periods when the system is not yet ready?

2 Resonance

In physics, resonance occurs when a vibrating system drives another to oscillate at the same frequency, not by force but by sympathetic vibration. We propose that this extends to how ideas move between social contexts. Resonance is the moment when an idea encountered in one context is recognised by actors in a different one as speaking to something they already know but have not yet been able to articulate.

Resonance is not translation. Translation implies a source language and a target language, an original and a copy. Resonance implies mutual recognition: the sense that two different expressions are touching the same underlying truth.

This distinction implies that ideas that spread through resonance do not need to be imposed or even explained at length. Rather, they only need to be presented in a form that allows the receiving context to recognise itself. This requires carriers who understand both the source and the receiving contexts, and avoid an "us and them" framing, favouring instead a willingness to hold multiple worldviews simultaneously rather than defending one's own paradigm against others.

What makes an idea resonate across contexts, rather than simply being recognised as interesting or useful? And what habits of mind, both in those who carry the idea and those who receive it, create the conditions for resonance rather than mere information transfer?

3 Pollination and the mycelium

The pollination metaphor introduces the importance of the receiving environment. Pollen does not redesign itself for each flower. It carries the essential genetic material while the receiving ecosystem — the specific soil, climate and community of the place it lands — determines what grows and what does not. The idea retains its essential character across contexts, while its expression emerges locally.

The paper also introduces the image of the resonating mycelium: the fungal network that runs underground between trees and plants, moving nutrients silently between organisms that appear separate above ground. The mycelium does not flower. It enables others to flower. It is the invisible infrastructure that supports the resilience and flourishing of the forest.

Both images point to the same structural insight: ideas need carriers — organisms, platforms, people, protocols and institutions — that move between contexts without being captured by any one of them. They also need infrastructure: connections between isolated nodes that are not themselves visible as change agents but without which the change cannot propagate.

Who are the bees in the social ecosystems you work within? Who and what is acting as mycelium, enabling connections between initiatives that cannot yet see each other? And what would it mean to invest deliberately in the infrastructure of pollination, rather than only in the flowers themselves?

Part II: Innovations as seeds

Many of the world's most pressing problems have already been addressed, at least partially, by someone, somewhere. The solutions exist. They have been tested, refined and proven in specific communities and contexts. In that sense, proven innovations are already seeds: they carry within them the genetic material for change, shaped by the particular soil in which they first grew.

The question is rarely "does a solution exist?" It is almost always "how does it travel?"

In nature, plants faced this same challenge long before humans did. A seed that stays beneath the parent plant competes with it for light and water. Diversity and resilience depend on dispersal: on the capacity of a genetic idea to cross distance and find new soil. Over millions of years, plants and their carriers coevolved an extraordinary range of strategies for doing this. Some release pollen on the wind and trust the commons to carry it. Some build intricate, coevolved relationships with particular animals. Others alter the chemical infrastructure of an environment until new growth becomes the norm.

What follows explores six patterns through which innovations have travelled from their places of origin to contexts far beyond them. These patterns can be observed both in nature and among a global group of Ashoka Fellows who participated in the Globalizer Programme to build strategies that maximise their impact and address the scale of the problem in the system. The Fellows featured here are not illustrating theories. They are practitioners who have, intentionally and strategically, engaged stakeholders to pollinate and catalyse systemic change.

You can jump to the relevant page using the table below.

Mechanism	What it describes	Page No.
Wind: open release	Share the innovation and the knowledge needed to replicate it, and invite others to take it up. Accept that you will know neither where it lands nor what soil it finds, and that you cannot control how it is adapted.	6
Water: flow into the mainstream	Figure out how to tap into the infrastructure that already reaches a wider audience.	8
Bee: patient targeting	Build the evidence and keep returning to the institution(s) that are critical to spreading the innovation in each specific context.	11
Hummingbird: the beacon	Make the evidence and demonstration so visible and compelling that the carriers best placed to take it further come looking for you.	13
Bat: weaving across worlds	Work across systems that cannot otherwise reach one another, orchestrating the relationships needed to spreading the innovation.	17
Farmers: growth capacity	Build a community of practice, growing others' capacity to sow, adapt and tend the innovation in their own contexts.	21

One note before the examples. These six mechanisms are neither mutually exclusive nor collectively exhaustive: many of the cases draw on more than one at once, and there are certainly ways ideas travel that we have not captured. This is a lens, not a taxonomy. It is an invitation to notice patterns rather than to classify them.

If proven innovations are already seeds, carrying the genetic material for change, what is the work of the changemaker? Is it to be the plant, the pollinator or the soil?



Part III: How innovations spread

MECHANISM 1
Wind pollination: Releasing the methodology into the commons

In nature, wind-pollinated plants, including grasses, oaks, birches and many cereal crops, produce large quantities of lightweight pollen and release it into air currents without a targeted carrier.[3] The strategy trades precision for reach: most pollen lands nowhere useful, but its abundance compensates, allowing pollen that finds the right conditions to germinate. These plants invest nothing in attracting a carrier — no colour, no scent, no nectar — but instead focus entirely on portability. It is worth noting that wind pollination is not always a clean either/or strategy; some species combine wind and animal pollination depending on conditions,[4] as with all the mechanisms described here.

In social change, this pattern describes innovations whose practitioners have made the deliberate choice to strip the methodology of its institutional wrapper and release it, whether as documentation, open-source technology, training materials, or shared frameworks, trusting that others will carry it into contexts they could never reach directly.

Shubhendu Sharma / Afforestt ✧ India ➔ 30+ countries

Seed: The Miyawaki method for creating natural, wild, maintenance-free native forests.

Direct reach: Afforestt has created 20+ hectares of forest across 60+ cities in 12+ countries.

Dispersal tactics and their systemic reach:

Sharing the work publicly and inviting people to plant their own forests. Through TED and INK talks, Sharma shared the Miyawaki method and made the case that anyone could build a forest in their backyard or community. *The talks reached more than 5,000,000 viewers, many of whom wrote in to express their intention to create their own forests and request books and resources that could guide them, creating more demand than the organisation could meet directly.*

Publishing the methodology in a form laypeople could actually implement. Afforestt documented the method in a manual, contributed to Hannah Lewis's book Mini Forest Revolution and produced YouTube video tutorials, translating the material into English, Hindi and Punjabi, with Spanish, Arabic and French in development. *The tutorials have been viewed 16,000 times, and more than 100 organisations across 30+ countries are now documented as using the methodology. Incoming questions and consultation requests led to an online training and consulting model that now generates 50% of Afforestt's revenue. Opening up the method made Afforestt more central to the field, not less.*

Full case study: Shubhendu xSharma / Afforestt

Yuhyun Park / DQ Institute ✧ South Korea → global

Seed: DQ (digital intelligence) is a common language, structure and taxonomy for digital literacy, deliberately aggregated across 100+ existing frameworks so that it could serve as a shared reference rather than a competing standard. It calls for digital literacy to be considered a core competency and innovation that enables individuals to safely navigate and master technology, media and the digital world.

Direct reach: DQ Institute has worked with more than 100 organisations across 80+ countries to implement the framework, spanning governments, educators, academia, the private sector and civil society.

Dispersal tactics and their systemic reach:

Publishing everything openly for anyone to build on. DQ Institute publishes its framework, methodologies, reports and findings openly online. It also built "Powered by DQ," an AI-enabled platform that lets local partners (NGOs, ministries of education and private sector actors) design, adapt and deliver their own digital intelligence curricula and assessments aligned with the framework, at 1% of the cost. *This openness has led to widespread replication, including by organisations and governments that never formally partnered with DQ Institute. Its data and frameworks are now referenced in international standards, government policies and educational curricula across more than 100 countries. In 2020, the DQ Global Standards were adopted by the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers (IEEE) as the world's first international standard for digital literacy and digital intelligence.*

Full case study: Yuhyun Park / DQ Institute

Anita Ahuja / Conserve India ✧ India → 20+ countries

Seed: Handmade Recycled Plastic (HRP) is a proprietary upcycling technology that uses minimal heat and pressure to fuse thin plastic bags into durable, waterproof fabric without melting them, avoiding the 60 tonnes of CO_2 released per tonne by conventional recycling.

Direct reach: Over 27 years, Conserve India has diverted more than 26,000 tonnes of waste from landfills, trained over 4,000 individuals, raised incomes for waste pickers and artisans by an average of 130% and generated US$160,000+ in sales, producing 4,000 handbags a month at peak production.

Dispersal tactics and their systemic reach:

Giving away the technology, machinery blueprints included. Conserve India open-sourced its proprietary HRP technology entirely — its collection methods, sorting processes, sheet-making techniques and machinery blueprints — through YouTube videos and formal training programmes, allowing adopters to adapt and innovate freely. *Demand has come from more than 20 countries, including inquiries from Botho University in Botswana, World Vision India, the African Millennium Foundation in Nigeria and the British Council. PlastiSkul micro-factories now run on the open-source technology in France, India, Kenya and Uganda. Design schools including the Leon School of Fashion in France, UC Davis in California and the National Institute of Design in India have integrated Conserve India's materials and case studies into their curricula, engaging students in product innovation.*

Full case study: Anita Ahuja / Conserve India

MECHANISM 2
Water: Changing the infrastructure through which change flows

In nature, water pollination (hydrophily) is a relatively rare reproductive strategy, found in 31 genera across 11 families, including seagrass and freshwater plants.[5] Water is a challenging medium for carrying pollen, causing most grains to burst, while unpredictable currents can submerge plants or leave them stranded above the surface. Hydrophytic plants have evolved elaborate adaptations to make use of this environment rather than passively drift in it. Pollen forms raft-like search vehicles that are wider than a single grain, allowing it to float, while flowers sweep across the surface like tiny sails. Stigmas have evolved elongated shapes that are more likely to be struck by pollen than round ones.[5] The channel — the water — does some of the work, favouring the pollen and stigma that are best adapted to find one another within it.

In social change, this pattern can describe innovations that spread by navigating the infrastructure through which change flows: supply chains, regulatory frameworks, industry standards or policy norms. However, as with hydrophily, changing the channel is necessary but not sufficient. The innovation must be suitably shaped to navigate that channel without being submerged by it, while the receiving structures need to be appropriately shaped to catch it. If these two elements are well matched, the channel will carry the innovation everywhere it reaches.

Simon Berry / ColaLife ✧ Zambia → global

Seed: Kit Yamoyo is an affordable, aspirational co-pack of oral rehydration salts (ORS) and zinc to treat diarrhoea, human-centred in design and built to move through existing distribution channels for easier uptake.

Direct reach: ColaLife sold 26,000 kits in rural Zambia during the 2012/13 trial year, raising correct diarrhoea treatment rates in trial areas from under 1% to 45%, and distributed 760,000 kits over its seven years of involvement.

Dispersal tactics and their systemic reach:

Going after the global standard of care instead of replicating country by country. ColaLife concluded that country-by-country replication would reach neither the scale nor the sustainability required. It approached the Diarrhoea Innovations Group (DIG), a global network of technical experts, researchers and practitioners, and made the case that what was missing was not technical innovation but policy change. It then used DIG's technical credibility and broad membership to assemble the scientific evidence, demonstrate public health need and build consensus for a formal application to the World Health Organization (WHO), submitted with 15 named authors. *The WHO updated its Essential Medicines List (EML) in 2019 to include co-packaged ORS and zinc for childhood diarrhoea. Though not legally binding, the EML strongly shapes national lists and procurement decisions worldwide.*

Building an alliance to turn global guidance into national policy. Following that success, ColaLife co-created the ORS/Zinc Co-pack Alliance (ORSZCA), an informal global alliance with a 250-member mailing list, to accelerate uptake of the new guidance by national governments and those working alongside them. *By the end of 2024, at least three governments in Ethiopia, Madagascar and Pakistan had added co-packaged*

ORS and zinc to their national essential medicines lists. In December 2024, ORSZCA was itself dissolved due to resource constraints and its function moved to the Child Health Task Force, a reminder that channels need maintenance.

"We weren't interested in globalising our organisation. We were interested in globalising our impact. Our organisation and the methodology that we developed were best applied to trying to change the system at the global level."

Full case study: Simon Berry / ColaLife

Fernando Assad / Vivenda ✧ Brazil

Seed: Standardised "bathroom," "kitchen" and "bedroom" renovation kits bundling credit, technical assistance, labour and materials. These services were marketed on the promise of a nicer home, designed to fix what harms health: ventilation, lighting, humidity, insulation and sanitation. They were delivered through an integrated physical and digital platform connecting families, social architects, material stores and financing mechanisms.

Direct reach: Business-to-customer. Over eight years, Vivenda renovated 4,000+ homes directly, 1,600 of them through renovation kits. It opened dedicated renovation stores in target communities as entry points for families and piloted Brazil's first social impact debenture for home renovations, enabling families to pay in instalments.

Dispersal tactics and their systemic reach:

Turning the delivery model into infrastructure others could use. Vivenda shifted from delivering renovations itself to building a network of 45 social architects and 73 material suppliers, connected through annual peer-learning events, a digital platform for project management, budgeting and financing, and a physical presence inside local building material stores under the "Vivenda inside" brand. *The platform helped 7,000 people renovate 2,000 homes in two years, a 78% increase on direct delivery.*

Letting companies run their own programmes on Vivenda's network. Vivenda enabled companies to launch their own renovation programmes using its vetted network, operational know-how, digital tools and training for their staff and local partners. *Eight companies, including Gerdau, Cyrela and Lorenzetti, renovated a further 2,000 homes, reaching 7,000 more people. Gerdau's programme spanned 12 cities and some companies created financing mechanisms larger than Vivenda's own.*

Rebuilding the organisation so that governments could contract it. With Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) funding and technical support, Vivenda did the legal and administrative work to contract with governments as a social business rather than an NGO, adapting its platform to meet public procurement and compliance requirements. *This led to a contract with the city of São Paulo for 5,000 renovations in one year, as well as disaster response support to local governments after floods in southern Brazil.*

Working inside the policy process to shape a national programme. Vivenda spent years building trust with the Ministry of Cities, Caixa Econômica Federal, presidential advisors and public bank leadership, earning a seat in strategy sessions to co-design a federal home improvement policy. There, it advocated for technical guidance and supervision for families, and for tools to control how resources were used. *It contributed to the design of a federal credit line for home renovations, with planned investment of up to 40 billion reais (approximately $8 billion), creating infrastructure that operates entirely independently of Vivenda.*

Full case study: Fernando Assad / Vivenda

Mariana Incarnato / Doncel ✧ Argentina ➔ 11 countries

Seed: Direct transition support for young people leaving alternative care (e.g. foster or group homes), combined with placing their voices at the centre of policy and practice reform.

Direct reach: Doncel worked with more than 2,000 young people in Argentina between 2005 and 2017, providing support for young people transitioning out of alternative care.

Dispersal tactics and their systemic reach:

Building a regional network designed to run without a centre. Doncel co-created the Red Latinoamericana de Egresados de Protección with Fundación TIA in Bolivia, Proyecto B in Chile and Ascep in Colombia, deliberately structuring it as a horizontal network. Member organisations are encouraged to invite others, while annual in-person meetings and co-created action plans build trust and alignment, and a membership fee model ensures commitment. Youth committees were established in each country, with elected representatives holding real seats on the executive committee and power over the network's agenda, advocacy and research. *The network now spans 30 member organisations across 11 countries and is recognised as the regional reference point for care leavers and a platform for amplifying young people's voices, providing the go-to resource for policymakers seeking youth input, both regionally and in-country.*

Generating the regional evidence base that did not exist. Doncel made research a standing component of the network's annual plans. *This produced a six-country study on transitions from alternative care to independent life; a country-by-country book published with the Universidad de Monterrey, drawing contributions from organisations across nine countries; and the first regional mapping of care leaver activism across Latin America and the Caribbean, with care leavers themselves forming part of the project team. This study enabled an undeniable recognition of the problem, inviting and influencing governments and stakeholders across sectors to act.*

Putting care leavers themselves in front of legislators. Armed with that evidence, the network ran targeted advocacy campaigns in each member country, with youth representatives speaking at parliamentary hearings and at the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, leveraging partnerships with UNICEF and Hope and Homes for Children for legitimacy and access. As a result of the evidence and advocacy, *new laws have been passed in Argentina, Colombia and Peru specifically addressing transitions out of alternative care, while other countries have raised the issue on national agendas.*

Full case study: Mariana Incarnato / Doncel

MECHANISM 3

Bee pollination and flower fidelity: Patient evidence-building until the system recognises what is already there



In nature, many insect pollinators, particularly bees, tend towards flower fidelity: restricting visits largely to a single flower species during a foraging bout.[6] Honeybees, for example, show fidelity to a single plant species within the same foraging bout.[7] This behaviour likely benefits plants by ensuring pollen reaches the right species rather than being lost across many. However, flower fidelity is not absolute. A 2023 field study of bumblebees found that only 23% of foraging trips remained fully constant over six weeks, with preferences shifting as floral resources changed.[8] Fidelity appears to reflect an adaptive strategy rather than a fixed behaviour. The plant's reproduction benefits from the bee's fidelity, while the bee benefits from greater foraging efficiency. Some bees, however, show fidelity to a target irrespective of reward, a pattern resistant to experience even when an alternative would offer a significantly better return. Persistence is not always evidence of a strategy working. Sometimes it is just a habit that has outlived its usefulness.

In social change, this pattern describes innovations that spread through the slow, patient accumulation of credible evidence, repeatedly knocking at the same institutional doors until the standard changes, after which the change propagates automatically wherever the standard applies. Over time, this can pay off as the relationship between context and innovation becomes mutually beneficial: the institution gains a workable standard, while the innovator gains wider reach. However, persistence is not proof that a strategy is working. Without fresh evidence that the expected returns are still achievable, going back to the same door again and again can become a habit rather than a strategy.

Nani Zulminarni / PEKKA ✧ Indonesia

Seed: A grassroots organising model for women-led families, entering through savings-and-loans groups — "because it answered basic daily financial needs" — then building into leadership training, small business development and spaces for women to take action on healthcare, education, domestic violence and local budgets.

Direct reach: PEKKA works across 27 provinces, 187 districts and 2,037 villages. It has supported over 100,000 women-led families and cultivated more than 5,000 volunteer community leaders.

Dispersal tactics and their systemic reach:

Counting the women the state could not see. Catalysing women alone could not address the magnitude of the problem, because women-led families are not being accurately acknowledged in government data. Women-led families make up 75% of Indonesia's poorest households, yet fewer than 2% receive the cash transfers they are legally entitled to. Marriage law names the man as head of household, services are gated by documents these women lack, and the data system counts "households" rather than "families." As a result, a divorced or widowed daughter returning to her parents' home can disappear from the count. PEKKA conducted its own community census in 2012, using the government's own methodology in the same villages at the same time. *It found that 24% of families were women-led, against the government's figure of 12%, producing evidence that could not be dismissed on grounds of method, place or timing.*

Finding a government official who already recognised the problem. Rather than take that evidence directly to central government, PEKKA looked for a willing institutional partner and found a district head in West Kalimantan who was frustrated by gaps in his own public service data on stunting and prenatal care. They co-designed and ran a pilot with his team, supported by UN Pulse Lab and Telkomsel, iterating the system through focus group discussions with his officers. *He established a dedicated data unit in his office and embedded PEKKA's inputs into the district's own digitised system. Other West Kalimantan district heads, seeing their peer's results, began adopting similar approaches.*

Showing what the government's existing system could already do. PEKKA built Klik PEKKA: single-day district clinics where community women leaders gather civil registration, religious affairs, and social affairs officers under one roof. People who arrive without documents leave with ID cards, birth certificates and formally registered marriages. The model was deliberately framed not as a parallel system but as a demonstration of what the state's own system could already deliver. *Three districts have since built Klik PEKKA into their own service delivery, funding it from local budgets and running it as their own initiative. In total, 18 district agencies, 2 universities and more than 10 other stakeholders have collaborated, and PEKKA now participates as a formal consultant in Indonesia's national "one big data" system.*

Full case study: Nani Zulminarni / PEKKA

Albert Mollah / Access Bangladesh Foundation (ABF) ✧ Bangladesh

Seed: Employment training and placement for people with disabilities, in a country where only one in three people of working age with disabilities finds meaningful work.

Direct reach: ABF has trained and supported 4,285 individuals with disabilities into employment since 2009.

Dispersal tactics and their systemic reach:

Going after the count that kept the population invisible. ABF identified why the model could not scale: employment for people with disabilities sits outside the national employment target, only 2 of 140 social protection schemes include them, and a tax incentive for companies that hire them goes largely unused because employers lack awareness. Underneath all this lies a data discrepancy: the 2011 census recorded 1.41% of the population as disabled, while the 2016 Household Income and Expenditure Survey put the figure at 6.94%. This meant that the population with disabilities appeared too small on paper to warrant policy attention or funding. So ABF worked closely with the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics to include 11 types of disability in the census questionnaire and build training modules for enumerators, supervisors and master trainers. It also ran an awareness campaign with media partners designed to be accessible to people with disabilities and endorsed by the prime minister, and trained more than 127 grassroots organisations to prepare family members to respond accurately when census officers came. *The questionnaire was changed, but the census still reported only 1.43% of the population as disabled. ABF's own grassroots survey identified where the process had broken down: data collectors were not properly gathering the information or asking the disability questions. The team continues to work with the government on accurate data collection and inclusion of people with disabilities in national policies, programmes and social protection schemes.*

Full case study: Albert Mollah / Access Bangladesh Foundation

Arbind Singh / NASVI ✧ India

Seed: Organising India's street vendors into unions and a national movement, combining grassroots organising, policy advocacy and legal action. This work won the Street Vendors (Protection of Livelihood and Regulation of Street Vending) Act 2014, which recognised vendors' rights in law for the first time.

Direct reach: The National Association of Street Vendors in India (NASVI) has 900 affiliates and over 1 million members across 25 states, with up to 1.5 million vendors now in its network.

Dispersal tactics and their systemic reach:

Replacing anecdote with numbers policymakers could not dismiss. The approach had been largely reactive: protests, letters, and qualitative accounts that policymakers dismissed as isolated incidents. "*We always used to have that qualitative data (that eviction is going on, harassment is going on), but we never used to have the numbers.*" So NASVI went after the numbers, and rather than relying on online forms that would have excluded most vendors, it mobilised frontline workers to conduct in-person interviews in a Delhi pilot, building trust and improving accuracy by explaining the purpose of the research and reassuring vendors about confidentiality. *The findings were stark: over 90% reported regular harassment and bribery even when holding official vending certificates; bribes of 500 rupees or more, sometimes a full day's income, consumed 5–7% of monthly earnings, and some faced demands six to ten times a month.*

Taking the evidence to the public and to the ministry. NASVI publicised the findings through press outreach and the #VendingWithDignity campaign, partnering with celebrity chefs and using storytelling and crowdfunding to humanise vendors. It then brought the same evidence to the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs and into a Supreme Court petition. T*he campaign reached over 4.4 million people, and the ministry issued new circulars instructing police not to harass certified vendors. NASVI also shaped the design of the PM-SVANidhi scheme, successfully arguing for credit-based support over one-off grants. By July 2022, over 6.5 million street vendors had received loans, gaining working capital and formal recognition from government and banks, while NASVI helped more than 3 million vendors obtain Certificates of Vending.*

Full case study: Arbind Singh / NASVI

MECHANISM 4
Hummingbird pollination (the beacon flower): Making the model so visible and compelling that long-range carriers are drawn in

In nature, hummingbird-pollinated flowers have evolved a distinctive set of traits: bright red or orange colouring, a narrowly tubular shape, elongated reproductive organs, copious nectar, no scent and no landing platform for insects.[9,10] Hummingbirds, in turn, are unusually effective long-distance pollen carriers. They groom less than bees, so they lose less pollen and deposit it gradually across many flowers. Their flight range also lets them pollinate much farther than most insects. This relationship is considered an example of coevolution, though direct proof is elusive since it is hard to establish which trait drove which.[9] The match is not absolute: hummingbirds visit a wider range of flowers than the classic red-tubular archetype suggests.[9]

In social change, this pattern describes innovators who concentrate their resources on building the most visible, credible demonstration they can, not to spread the model themselves, but to draw in the allies, peers and partners who will carry it into their own contexts.



Arbind Singh / NASVI ✧ India

Seed: Project ECHO's "move knowledge, not people" model connects specialist hubs at academic medical centres to community providers in rural clinics, prisons and underserved settings through videoconference. Providers co-manage real patient cases in weekly teleclinics until the local provider can handle them alone. This is not telemedicine: the treating provider keeps full responsibility, which is what makes the model replicable across any disease area or geography.

Direct reach: ECHO proved the model on hepatitis C from a single hub at the University of New Mexico, where nearly 30,000 people were infected and only 5% could access treatment. Patients treated through ECHO in rural clinics and prisons achieved outcomes equivalent to — and in some cases better than — those seen by specialists in person, thanks to the multidisciplinary expertise of each teleclinic.

Dispersal tactics and their systemic reach:

Making evidence the currency in a field where scepticism ran deep. ECHO built outcome measurement into its model from the outset as a core operating principle, rather than an add-on, based on the deliberate judgement that evidence would be its most powerful currency. Until then, finding partners had been an intensive, person-by-person effort; searching, as Arora puts it, for "*needles in haystacks*." The 2011 publication in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, co-produced with the University of New Mexico, Presbyterian Healthcare Services and the University of Iowa, changed the economics of adoption entirely. *"Once the publications started coming out, it wasn't looking for needles in haystacks anymore. It was going on top of a big haystack with a big magnet, and the needles came flying to us. Sceptics became converts. Governments that had watched cautiously began to move. Funders who think in systems (not outputs) took notice." Today, 700+ peer-reviewed publications validate the model across disease areas and geographies, arguably giving ECHO one of the strongest evidence bases of any community health intervention globally.*

Removing every barrier so that those attracted by the evidence could act. ECHO then made adoption as frictionless as possible, sharing the model, training and iECHO platform for free. The Institute shifted from operator to enabler, training partners to become independent before stepping back. *Adoption came in three waves: first by universities, then by NGOs, and finally by governments. Today, 1,400+ hubs operate across more than 200 countries and territories, with 2–3 million healthcare providers trained and approximately 225 million patients having received better care. India alone holds 400 hubs, over a third of the global total, after the government embedded ECHO into every National Health Mission programme in every state. During COVID-19, both the Indian and US governments made ECHO their training infrastructure of choice, with nearly $200 million in US federal funding to deploy it across nursing homes and vulnerable facilities. And because entry was free, partners funded themselves: "literally billions of dollars were raised by our partners to fund their own operations." The model is now being explored in agriculture, education and environmental health.*

Full case study: Sanjeev Arora / Project ECHO



Wietse van der Werf / Sea Ranger Service ✧ Netherlands → 6 countries

Seed: Recognising sea rangers as maritime professionals by training unemployed young people from coastal communities to deliver contracted offshore environmental services aboard custom-built, low-emission sailing work ships, making ocean management financially self-sustaining while creating maritime career pathways.

Direct reach: A total of 208 young people have come through the programmes, and Sea Ranger Service has delivered 32 contracts across 6 European countries, 25 of them with government agencies and 23 for work those agencies had never previously contracted externally. Two ocean-going vessels are now operational, with roughly 70% of income coming from contracted work.

Dispersal tactics and their systemic reach:

Meeting the industry's own standards rather than asking for green exemptions. Sea Ranger Service rejected the premise that green alternatives mean compromise and spent seven years with the Dutch Shipping Inspectorate to establish an entirely new commercial vessel classification, without ever requesting a regulatory exception and partnering with established commercial shipbuilders for credibility. *The vessels achieved 94.3% fuel reduction and 94.4% CO_2 reduction against motorised equivalents. The new classification now allows other shipbuilders to design to the standard, enables governments to specify it in procurement, and gives insurers a framework to build appropriate coverage.*

Building legitimacy by winning over the most traditional institutions. Sea Ranger Service secured a collective contract signed by four Dutch government ministers in 2018 and a multi-year framework contract with the Port of Rotterdam, the largest industrial port in the Northern Hemisphere. Rather than relying on environmental advocates, it had Navy veterans train the rangers through annual bootcamps emphasising discipline and safety. In April 2025, Queen Máxima christened the flagship vessel (*"with the Queen's presence confirmed, many directors of offshore companies attended too"*), and in November 2024 the organisation received cross-party recognition in the House of Lords. For UK expansion, Sea Ranger Service targeted South Wales strategically, where The Crown Estate wanted to demonstrate that offshore wind development could benefit coastal communities. *Over 300 young people applied within 2.5 weeks of The Crown Estate contract, and first-year Royal Netherlands Navy recruits now spend four months sailing on Sea Ranger ships during training. The Crown Estate strengthened its policy requiring all offshore wind developers to employ young people not in employment, education or training for 10% of their workforce, operating independently of the Sea Ranger Service. "Even if our organisation ceased operations tomorrow, the requirement remains." In total, 17 offshore companies are now directly engaged in delivering social value criteria. As van der Werf puts it, "There was a noticeable change from people tapping me on the shoulder sympathetically for the social impact initiative to reaching out for commercial support instead. It went from a sympathetic initiative to a market driver."*

Full case study: Wietse van der Werf / Sea Ranger Service

Andrés Rubiano / Meditech ✧ Colombia → 15 countries

Seed: Beyond One Option for Treatment of Traumatic Brain Injury: A Stratified Protocol (BOOTStraP) provides resource-stratified trauma guidelines that tier recommendations across three levels of resource complexity and cover the full pathway from prehospital care through emergency department, neurosurgery and ICU. The guidelines were co-created with the prehospital responders, emergency staff, surgeons and ICU teams who would use them, rather than translated downward from high-income standards.

Direct reach: In Colombia, Meditech convened five medical associations across eight specialities to build the protocol, working with the Colombian associations of neurosurgery, emergency medicine specialists, intensive medicine and critical care, and prehospital care university programmes. Implemented across an urban teaching hospital, an urban mid-size hospital and a rural health centre, it demonstrated a 20% decrease in in-hospital mortality among severe traumatic brain injury patients — a finding first published by Meditech scientists in Injury in 2014.

Dispersal tactics and their systemic reach:

Doubling down on rigour against a bias that attached to origin, not evidence. The foundational BOOTStraP position paper, published in the *Journal of Neurosciences in Rural Practice* in 2020, drew immediate editorial responses from the All India Institutes of Medical Sciences (AIIMS), the National Institute of Mental Health and Neurosciences (NIMHANS), Northwest General Hospital in Pakistan and MGM Medical College, each independently recognising the framework as a model for their own low- and middle-income country (LMIC) context. But the obstacle to wider adoption was ideological rather than logistical: *"When you generate science from LMICs, it is not well received. When you develop guidelines from high-income settings, they are more easily accepted worldwide. But when we said this started in Colombia, Latin America, people started generating a lot of possible explanations for why it didn't work, because it was created in an environment that does not have a lot of resources."* The response was to pursue peer-reviewed publication in leading journals in the field, build a research collaboration network with globally recognised centres, and co-author 11 recommendations for equitable global trauma guideline development with Johns Hopkins, the University of Maryland and the University of Washington, positioning the methodology as the new standard. *The foundational paper has accumulated 84 citations with a Field Citation Ratio of 17, well above the field average. By 2025, the methodology had been carried in the* Brain and Spine Journal and World Neurosurgery, *and the research collaboration network built around these publications now spans 26 institutional partners across three continents. The World Federation of Neurosurgical Societies, the American College of Surgeons Committee on Trauma and the Coalition for National Trauma Research have named it a model for equitable guideline development.*





Letting adoption in a high-income country do what publication alone could not. The turning point came not from scientific rigour, but from adoption on the ground: *"When they start using it, they realise the importance of that, and they accept it." The clearest signal was a coalition of North American trauma practitioners who began following Meditech's process and funded Rubiano's travel to their region to learn from him. The methodology developed in Colombia, for Colombia, was imported by the very ecosystem that had questioned it. For the first time in its history, the Brain Trauma Foundation is considering resource-based stratification for the fifth edition of its international guidelines, and Colombia will host the International Neuro-Trauma Society Congress (the first time outside North America, Australasia or Europe) with Rubiano elected society president for 2026–28.*

Facilitating the process locally rather than exporting the protocol. When replicating elsewhere, Meditech ran the same consensus exercise in each country, so that each built its own protocol: *"They developed their own protocols based on their own system, but using a template we generated in our early exercises."* The organisation identified local champion medical associations that were already trusted within their health system and often connected to the government, and used AI to reduce the time needed for evidence synthesis from roughly six months to one week per exercise. *Consensus exercises have now been completed in Brazil, Ecuador, Paraguay and Peru, with Argentina and Bolivia planned for 2026 and India, Indonesia and the Philippines in active planning. In total, 200 professionals across 27 organisations in 15 countries have engaged with the process, producing five national and two international consensus protocol documents. Five organisations have approached Meditech this year to apply the methodology to at least five new health conditions.*

Full case study: Andrés Rubiano / Meditech

MECHANISM 5

Bat pollination (long-distance, cross-ecosystem): Bridging worlds that other carriers cannot reach

In nature, nectar-feeding bats are among the most remarkable long-distance pollinators. More than 500 tropical plant species depend on them.[11] The longest-range nectar bat, *Leptonycteris yerbabuenae*, forages up to 30 miles from its roost.[12] Plants along migratory bat routes "flower in sequence along a sort of 'nectar corridor'," timing their bloom to match the bats' passage. Bat-pollinated flowers coevolve specifically to attract nocturnal visitors: they are typically pale or white in colour, making them visible against dark skies, night-blooming, with a musky or fermented scent and copious nectar.[13] These encounters are the product of deep, mutual co-adaptation over evolutionary time.

In social change, this pattern describes changemakers who bridge sectors, geographies or ideological worlds that rarely speak to one another, carrying ideas across divides that more specialised actors cannot cross. The relationships are deep and co-adaptive: both parties are changed by the encounter.



Vincent Lagace / Nuup ✧ Mexico → 4 countries

Seed: Technical assistance and advisory services for smallholder farmers transitioning to regenerative production, paired with the finance and market connections that make the transition viable.

Direct reach: By 2024, Nuup had reached or impacted 12,765 small-scale farmers across Mexico, primarily in the honey, strawberry, dairy and coffee value chains.

Dispersal tactics and their systemic reach:

Orchestrating credit rather than becoming a lender. Nuup established itself as a trusted advisor to both sides of a historically adversarial divide — farmer organisations and major food companies — and then used that position to build infrastructure that neither could have built alone. It launched Coa, a blended finance platform co-created with The Nature Conservancy, Dalberg and Aceli Africa, with support from USAID and the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. Coa deliberately does not lend; instead, it orchestrates finance, facilitating credit through 11 accredited local financial institutions while providing liquidity guarantees, capacity building, financial strengthening for agri-SMEs and origination incentives rewarding inclusive, climate-resilient loans. *Coa achieved a 34x multiplier: roughly $200,000 in incentives mobilised $7 million in private sector credit in its first year, directly benefiting over 6,900 smallholder farmers.*

Using corporate sustainability commitments as the door into smallholder sourcing. On the buyer side, Nuup works with major food companies on traceable, sustainable sourcing, using their environmental and traceability commitments as the entry point to strengthen smallholder engagement, often combining funding across their sustainability, sourcing and foundation budgets. *In 2024, Nuup collaborated with over 124 food buyers and farmer organisations, including Grupo Altex domestically and Danone, Mars and Diageo internationally.*

Spinning the technology out so it could scale on its own terms. Nuup spun off its digital solution as Sirio, a standalone social business, following a co-creation process with three coffee cooperatives in south-eastern Mexico. *Sirio raised $500,000 from the IDB as a recoverable grant linked to social and environmental impact targets, and now serves over 40 cooperatives and 15,000+ farmers across Guatemala, Honduras and Mexico, with expansion planned to Colombia and Peru.*

Full case study: Vincent Lagace / Nuup

Francesca Fedeli / FightTheStroke ✧ Italy → 60+ countries

Seed: Motor outcome-based rehabilitation for children with cerebral palsy, grounded in mirror neuron research and the discovery that peer-led therapy could drive remarkable progress, with families as active partners rather than passive recipients. The approach is delivered through Mirrorable, a digital platform using tailored video content.

Direct reach: An active community of 1,200+ families and 100 young adults with cerebral palsy in Italy.

Dispersal tactics and their systemic reach:

Abandoning the attempt to scale its own platform. FightTheStroke tried first to scale Mirrorable horizontally into other fields and it did not work. What replaced it was a strategy of embedding the methodology in structures that others already existed. As Fedeli put it, *"It was not a matter of patenting our idea, but we were also happy that others could 'steal' our idea and make their own path."*

Building the ecosystem with institutions that already had the research capacity. FightTheStroke built MIRROR-LABS, a virtual lab matching family-identified problems with researcher-led solutions, with IRCCS Istituto Giannina Gaslini in Genoa, Politecnico di Milano and Università Bocconi in Milan. It also co-created the first Italian Centre for Perinatal and Children Stroke with Gaslini Children's Hospital, giving families free day-hospital screening, diagnosis and rehabilitation plans. *The pilot's credibility attracted leading researchers and clinicians across Europe and Australia, resulting in an invitation to co-create the Artificial Intelligence in Unilateral Cerebral Palsy (AINCP) Consortium, which secured a €6 million EU grant for a clinical trial integrating evidence-based, patient-centred rehabilitation into national healthcare systems across participating countries.*

Joining existing initiatives rather than building parallel ones. Rather than founding new structures, Fedeli used existing ones — 23 networks and alliances including the Eisenhower and Global Good Fund fellowships, the boards of five organisations, an alliance with the International Cerebral Palsy Society, and the Valuable500 directory founded by another Ashoka Fellow — and advocated from within each. *The International Cerebral Palsy Society alliance alone extends the reach of FightTheStroke's methodology to organisations in more than 60 countries.*

Building a peer community that could run without her. FightTheStroke built a peer learning community on social media where more than 1,200 families in Italy, and many more internationally, connect and support one another. Over time, experienced parents took on mentorship roles, answering questions and guiding others through challenges they had already faced, and the community evolved to include offline gatherings and specialised sub-communities for young adults with cerebral palsy navigating the transition into adulthood. *As Fedeli puts it, "Every day there is someone who says, 'I have this problem,' but I do not need to answer anymore because the community now answers." Families moved from being passive recipients of information to becoming active advocates and peer leaders, making the community genuinely self-sustaining.*

Creating and disseminating knowledge to keep drawing new allies in. FightTheStroke published across every available channel: a long-selling book, a YouTube repository of expert video interviews, keynote talks, peer-reviewed scientific publications, supported theses, the More than Palsy campaign to shift the storytelling around disability, and Call4Brain-TEDMED events bringing together medicine, science and technology. Its reach includes *4,000 copies of* Lotta e sorridi; *the story featured in 10 further books; 135 expert video interviews; 100 keynotes across some 500 events, from TED Global Edinburgh to Ciudad de las Ideas Mexico; 13 scientific publications; 30+ supported theses; and 6 Call4Brain-TEDMED events attended by 1,000+ people. The MirrorHR epilepsy research kit has 16,000+ downloads, translated into 21 languages and made freely available in 61 countries.*

Full case study: Francesca Fedeli / FightTheStroke

Nicole Rycroft / Canopy ✧ Canada → global

Seed: Forest-friendly fibre that redirects high-impact supply chains in fashion, packaging, and publishing away from ancient and endangered forests, while accelerating commercial-scale demand for circular alternatives like recycled textiles and agricultural residues.

Direct reach: Canopy started by working with publishing houses in Canada to transition to forest-friendly materials. By 2003, 32 of Canada's leading publishing houses, including Random House Canada, Penguin Canada and McClelland & Stewart, had committed to eliminating ancient forest fibre from their books.

Dispersal tactics and their systemic reach:

Turning collective purchasing power into pressure on producers. Rather than placing the burden on individual consumers to stop purchasing materials that endanger forests, Canopy recruited brands into formal public commitments to eliminate endangered forest materials and controversial fibres from their supply chains. It also convened a select Leaders Working Group of "activist" clothing brands to drive the agenda directly with viscose producers and technology enterprises developing alternative solutions. *In fashion, 950 brands now hold formal commitments, including H&M, Inditex, Levi's, C&A, Zara, Aditya Birla and Unilever, representing $2 trillion in collective annual revenue and significant supply chain influence.*

Assembling a deal no single party could have constructed. Viscose producers were structurally locked into the existing system: mills had already invested in forest fibre, secured long-term wood supply contracts, built deep pulping expertise and established vertically integrated operations. No brand, government or investor could unlock this system alone. So Canopy orchestrated a three-way value proposition in which each party supplied what the others needed: brands agreed to long-term relationships and premium pricing for first-to-market viscose; producers gained market access, market share and long-term fibre agreements with farmers and municipalities; governments and investors provided dedicated funds, tax incentives and policy support for new circular infrastructure. In total, *29 artificial cellulosic fibre producers have signed formal policies to end sourcing from critical forests, and 38 Next Gen Innovator Partners have signed policies with Canopy. The supply side ended up changing because the demand side did. With supporters and conservation allies, Canopy has played a pivotal role in securing conservation gains across 39.2 million acres of Canada's boreal forest, ancient and endangered forests in Indonesia, and North America's temperate rainforests.*



Full case study: Nicole Rycroft / Canopy







MECHANISM 6
Farmers: Actively seeking, adapting and cultivating ideas across distance

In nature, over roughly 10,000 years, across multiple independent centres (the Fertile Crescent, China, Mesoamerica, the Andes, sub-Saharan Africa), humans have transported seeds deliberately, selected for qualities suited to new soils and adapted varieties to specific climates and communities.[14,15] An important nuance, highlighted by recent research, is that early agricultural dispersal was not purely intentional. Spengler[15] argues that plants evolved to recruit humans as dispersers, and that much early selection was unconscious, shaped by harvesting and replanting patterns rather than deliberate breeding. The relationship was coevolutionary: humans changed plants, while plants changed human societies. It was a process of mutual transformation.

In social change, this pattern describes situations in which the initiative lies at least partly with the receiver rather than the sender. A community, institution or practitioner actively seeks out an innovation, chooses to adopt it, adapts it thoughtfully to local conditions and cultivates it to flourish in their specific context. This includes train-the-trainer strategies, where the focus is not on spreading seeds but on creating new cultivators.



Suresh Kumar / Institute of Palliative Medicine (IPM) ✧ Kerala, India ➔ 53 countries

Seed: Community-based palliative care grounded in the recognition that community members without extensive medical education can provide significant comfort and psychological support to the dying and their families.

Direct reach: IPM supports over 2,500 families annually and has cared for a total of 75,000 patients in their final stages of life.

Dispersal tactics and their systemic reach:

Assembling a group of leaders who could carry the work in their own contexts. Communities from different countries and states in India had been inviting Kumar to work with them to build palliative caregiving capacity. He had already been travelling across Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Indonesia, Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Thailand to raise awareness and train communities. To ensure that community capacity-building did not depend solely on him, IPM co-created a Global Volunteer Group of influential palliative care leaders drawn from St Christopher's Hospice in London, the National Public Management Centre in Iran, Khon Kaen University in Thailand, the Palliative Care Association of Sri Lanka and the Palliative Care Society of Bangladesh. These leaders spread death literacy and palliative care through university programmes, medical conferences and events in their own countries, and the initiative expanded into the Global Palliative Health Doctors Network. *The Global Volunteer Group has been active in 53 countries, including Iran, Kenya, Lebanon, Rwanda, Sierra Leone and Sudan, and the Doctors Network now includes more than 600 palliative care physicians from 60+ countries. Kumar and IPM believe the work will continue with or without them through this self-organised group.*

Training practitioners who then train the next intake. The Group co-created a global Fellowship programme with palliative care leaders in London, Dhaka and Pondicherry, built with an integrated mentorship component so that successful trainees go on to guide incoming participants. *The Fellowship has equipped over 550 people from more than 52 countries with the knowledge and skills to organise and run palliative care services in their own regions. Participants include doctors (70%), nurses (20%) and people from other professional backgrounds (10%). More than 50 mentors from 25 countries have now mentored Fellowship trainees.*

Full case study: Suresh Kumar / Institute of Palliative Medicine











Nneka Mobisson / mDoc ✧ Nigeria → 26 countries

Seed: An e-health model for chronic disease in African health systems that delivers AI-enabled virtual self-care coaching through mobile and web platforms, equipping people with digital health literacy, self-efficacy and agency, while generating actionable data to strengthen the systems around them.

Direct reach: mDoc's programmes had supported over 11,000 patients by 2020.

Dispersal tactics and their systemic reach:

Building community hubs with local allies rather than opening branches. mDoc established six NudgeHubs across Nigeria with community allies: low-cost, community-based sites delivering digital health education and linking patients to care. These hubs use an omnichannel approach across the CompleteHealth platform, web-based tools, USSD, Telegram and WhatsApp, helping patients grow comfortable with the technology and confident using it daily for their own health decisions. The model was grounded in published prevalence and photo-voice studies, so that interventions stayed contextually responsive. By 2024, *mDoc's programmes had reached and supported over 130,000 members.*

Building provider capacity alongside service delivery, not after it. mDoc built the clinical, quality-improvement and digital/AI capacity of healthcare providers and policymakers in parallel with its own service delivery, rather than treating capacity building as an afterthought, co-creating the Tele Education for Clinicians and Leaders in Africa (TeCLA) programme with Project ECHO, Making More Health, Jacaranda Maternity, the Chronic Drugs Medical Scheme (CDMS), Farm Alert and Sustyvibes. The programme uses online lectures, case-based learning, shared best practice, peer networks and global resource libraries to drive learning across African countries and enable providers to offer specialist-level care. *As of 2025, the initiative had empowered over 14,000 healthcare providers, drawn mainly from 26 countries across Africa, who have in turn supported 18.36 million patients to date.*

Full case study: Nneka Mobisson / mDoc

Vishal Talreja / Dream a Dream ✧ India

Seed: The Creative Life Skills Approach offers a relational pedagogy built on safety, play and empathy, delivered through trained adult facilitators, resting on the conviction that a caring adult equipped with the right approach provides greater and more lasting impact than any curriculum. *"The real unit of change was never the programme. It was the adult."*

Direct reach: Dream a Dream has reached 138,379 young people directly through programmes in Karnataka, via five Thriving Schools and two permanent Thriving Centres.

Dispersal tactics and their systemic reach:

Shutting down replication to protect the mindset behind the model and focus on a learning lab. By 2016, Dream a Dream worked with 30 partner organisations across four states. However, the programme was spreading while its mindset was not. Life skills spread without integrity risked being absorbed into the very mental model Dream a Dream sought to disrupt, reframed as employability training or behaviour management. By 2021, the initiative made a conscious decision to end replication efforts, replacing them with a learning lab: five schools and two community centres serving as permanent spaces to test the theory of change and keep it true to its principles. *The reasoning cut to the core of Dream a Dream's philosophy: the real unit of change was the adult, and an adult could only shift through a transformative experience, not a training manual handed to a partner NGO three states away.*

After ending the replication efforts, Dream a Dream leveraged the learnings from the lab to work on the tactics below.

Training government teachers on the condition that the state owns the work. Dream a Dream would only partner with governments willing to own the programme themselves — *"our role is essentially to develop the concept, provide our expertise, and then train the teachers, building capacity and master trainers."* Across 2023–2025, partnerships with seven state governments — *Delhi, Jharkhand, Karnataka, Nagaland, Punjab, Telangana and Uttarakhand — trained 22,731 teachers and stakeholders across 17,291 schools, reaching 2,171,592 young people. Delhi's Happiness Curriculum alone reached a million children almost immediately, opening the social and emotional learning space nationally; Nagaland's co-created Thriving Progress Profile is embedded in the state board's assessment architecture; Jharkhand's Project Sampoorna was named one of 12 global finalists for the Transformative Partnerships Award. The national Diksha platform has trained a further 64,000 teachers.*

Building the evidence and the narrative to shift what education is for. Dream a Dream invested in measurement rigorous enough to travel: the Dream Life Skills Assessment Scale developed with UK clinical psychologists, peer-reviewed publication, and co-published measures with Brookings and the Life Skills Collaborative. Alongside evidence-building, it pursued a parallel translation strategy through op-eds, media, podcasts, global convenings and the book *When We Thrive, Our World Thrives. Dream a Dream was selected as the only Indian organisation in a Harvard Graduate School of Education seven-country case study on 21st-century skills innovation.*

Convening a field around a shared conviction. Dream a Dream created Change the Script, an annual residential that brings together social entrepreneurs, NGO leaders, academics, school leaders, policymakers and young people, designed to provide a transformative experience for participants. Rather than functioning as a conventional conference, it models the very pedagogy it advocates in classrooms. *Change the Script has engaged 219 practitioners, 39 policymakers, 8 researchers and 45 young people across 8 editions, with Ashoka Fellows including the Miss Hungary Foundation now co-building the field internationally.*

Full case study: Vishal Talreja / Dream a Dream

What we can learn across all six pollination mechanisms

Fellow & Organisation	Country							Dispersal tactics
Shubhendu Sharma / Afforestt	India	✓						Delivered public talks inviting anyone to plant their own forest; published the methodology through a manual, a book chapter and multilingual video tutorials.
Yuhyun Park / DQ Institute	South Korea	✓	✓					Published the framework, methodologies and findings openly online; enabled partners to design and deliver their own curricula through the "Powered by DQ" platform at 1% of the cost.
Anita Ahuja / Conserve India	India	✓					✓	Open-sourced all HRP technology via video and formal training, including collection methods, sorting processes, sheet-making techniques and machinery blueprints.
Simon Berry / ColaLife	UK		✓			✓		Targeted inclusion in the WHO Essential Medicines List rather than pursuing country-by-country replication; built a global alliance to drive national uptake of the new guidance.
Fernando Assad / Vivenda	Brazil		✓			✓		Converted the delivery model into platform infrastructure others could use; enabled companies, contracted with governments and co-designed federal policy.
Mariana Incarnato / Doncel	Argentina		✓	✓		✓		Built a deliberately horizontal regional network; generated previously unavailable regional evidence; put care leavers themselves directly in front of legislators.
Nani Zulminarni / PEKKA	Indonesia			✓	✓			Ran a parallel census using the government's own methodology; found a district head who already recognised the problem; built Klik PEKKA as a demonstration within the existing state' system.
Albert Mollah / Access Bangladesh	Bangladesh			✓				Worked with the Bureau of Statistics on the census questionnaire and enumerator training modules; trained 127+ grassroots organisations to prepare families to answer accurately.
Arbind Singh / NASVI	India		✓	✓				Conducted in-person vendor surveys to replace anecdotal evidence with qualitative data; presented findings to the ministry, supported a Supreme Court petition and mobilised public campaigning.
Sanjeev Arora / Project ECHO	USA	✓		✓	✓		✓	Embedded outcome measurement from the outset and published in the New England Journal of Medicine; removed barriers so those attracted by the evidence could act.

Fellow & Organisation	Country							Dispersal tactics
Wietse van der Werf / Sea Ranger Service	Netherlands		✓		✓		✓	Met commercial maritime standards without asking for green exemptions; won over the most traditional institutions; successful case study with the British Crown Estate has led to local youth employment becoming a key criterion in all their contracts
Andrés Rubiano / Meditech	Colombia			✓	✓	✓	✓	Pursued peer-reviewed publication against origin-related bias; let adoption rather than endorsement carry the argument; exported the process, not the protocol.
Vincent Lagace / Nuup	Mexico					✓		Orchestrated credit through 11 local financial institutions rather than lending directly; used corporate sustainability commitments as the entry point into smallholder sourcing.
Francesca Fedeli / FightTheStroke	Italy	✓			✓	✓		Abandoned the attempt to scale its own platform and embedded the approach in existing structures, including 23 networks and alliances, five boards and a self-managed peer community.
Nicole Rycroft / Canopy	Canada		✓			✓		Turned collective brand purchasing power into incentives for producers; assembled a three-way value proposition no single party could have constructed alone.
Suresh Kumar / Institute of Palliative Medicine	India					✓	✓	Replaced individual leadership with a Global Volunteer Group operating in local contexts; built a Fellowship where trainees go on to mentor new cohorts.
Nneka Mobisson / mDoc	Nigeria						✓	Established six NudgeHubs with community allies; built provider capacity of more than 14000 healthcare providers to adopt telehealth to reach 18.36 million patients through the TeCLA programme.
Vishal Talreja / Dream a Dream	India		✓			✓	✓	Shut down replication to protect the model's underlying mindset; transitioning from a replication strategy to becoming a laboratory to influence the education system; trained government teachers on the condition that the state assume ownership of implementation.

What we can learn across all six pollination mechanisms

In almost every case, subtraction proved more impactful than addition. Afforestt gave away its method. ColaLife abandoned country-by-country replication. Vivenda stopped renovating homes itself. Nuup refused to become a lender. ECHO shifted from operator to enabler. Dream a Dream abandoned a replication network of 30 partners across four states. Kumar dismantled his own indispensability.

Across the cases documented here, most describe a moment of giving something up. This suggests that the harder question for a changemaker is not which mechanism to reach for, but what they are willing to stop doing.

Criticality and emergence

Many of these approaches are the product of a system reaching a threshold of disequilibrium at the moment when a coherent signal becomes available.

ColaLife's evidence from Zambia had been available for years before it began to influence WHO policy, but a specific combination of shifting global health priorities and champions inside the institution created the conditions for the initiative to emerge. Dream a Dream's life-skills approach had circulated for years before government school systems became interested, and when they did, the team had to navigate the difficult question of whether the system was ready to receive the idea with integrity, or whether it would absorb and distort it.

This reframes what social entrepreneurs are doing in the long years before their idea "breaks through." They are maintaining coherent presence — keeping the signal alive, building relationships, honing the methodology — while the system moves towards its threshold.

The human gap as a spread problem

The "human gap" — the dissonance between what humanity knows and what it does — can be seen in the local problems that every practitioner described in this paper is working to bridge.

The gap between knowing that diarrhoea is preventable and having the right treatment reach a rural village in Zambia. Between knowing that forests can be planted in city backyards and having that methodology reach 100 organisations in 30 countries. Between knowing that women-led families are systematically undercounted and having that knowledge change a national census. Between knowing that dying patients deserve dignity in community and having that capacity exist across Asia.

In every case described here, the Ashoka Fellows are bridging the human gap as it manifests in a specific local context. The question of how ideas spread is, at its deepest, the question of how those bridges get built beyond the first crossing: how local knowledge becomes field-level knowledge, and how field-level knowledge becomes global norm.



Conclusion: An invitation to mutual metamorphosis



The Fifth Element's vision of change seeks to go beyond collaboration towards metamorphosis. "Mutual metamorphosis," as the programme terms it, describes collaborative learning processes that transform all participants. It is not the transfer of a solution from one party to another, but a process in which both the carrier and the receiver are changed by the encounter.

Looking across the cases in this paper, the quality of mutual transformation is visible in the moments practitioners describe as decisive. Sharma released his methodology and discovered that he had become more central to the field, not less. Talreja brought his replication effort to zero and discovered that depth, not breadth, was the path to systemic change. Kumar recognised his own limits as a travelling carrier and built a network that would outlast him.

In each case, spreading the idea required a transformation in the person and organisation carrying it. This runs counter to every organisational instinct towards brand protection, intellectual property and institutional survival.

But ecological pollination requires precisely this. The flower does not own the pollen it releases. The mycelium does not claim credit for the mushrooms it enables. The bee carries pollen it did not produce to plants it will never tend. And farmers, planting seeds carried across continents, are themselves changed by the act of cultivation: learning what this soil wants, what this community needs, and what grows here that would not grow there.

What would it mean for your organisation to be the mycelium rather than the flower? To measure success not by what you have built but by what you have made possible elsewhere?

These examples point to a different logic of organisational identity, impact measurement and success in a world where the challenges exceed the capacity of any single organisation to respond.

The world in which these practitioners have been working is one of fragmenting systems, accelerating crises and a vast gap between what humanity knows and what it does. What they have found, again and again, is what Calvino's Marco Polo found in the inferno: that which is not inferno. The mother in Italy who is not just addressing something for her child, but also for all those who face it. The forest planter in India who trusts the method to travel. The care leaver in Buenos Aires who becomes an advocate for careleavers across multiple countries.

These are the islands of coherence. The question is whether they can resonate with one another, and whether we can build the mycelium that connects them.





A note on research methods and limitations

Our collaboration uses the "pollination" lens of The Fifth Element, a Club of Rome programme, to draw insights from collaborative systems-change strategies developed by Ashoka Fellows through the Globalizer Strategy Accelerator to codify different pollination mechanisms.

All case study data is drawn exclusively from the Ashoka Globalizer Systems Change Research Lab's Case Study Library. AI was used in the initial summary of the cases for this paper and has been reviewed by one of the authors. Learn more about the Club of Rome AI use policy here: https://www.clubofrome.org/ai-policy/

This paper draws on case studies produced by the Ashoka Globalizer team, documenting the impact of the strategies of social entrepreneurs who participated between 2011 and 2025 across sectors including healthcare, education, housing, circular economy, legal rights and digital literacy. The case studies were crafted by interviewing the social entrepreneurs 5–15 years after they participated in the strategy accelerator, and mapping their self-reported impact to the strategy decks they prepared during the programme.

The pollination science draws on peer-reviewed and authoritative sources cited in the paper.

The authors acknowledge the inevitable partiality of this analysis. Cases drawn from one programme in one period are not a representative sample of social innovation globally. Many vital traditions of grassroots organising, Indigenous knowledge systems and community-led transformation (traditions that The Fifth Element is explicitly committed to learning from) are not represented here.

The six mechanisms described in this paper are offered as a lens, not a taxonomy. They are neither mutually exclusive nor collectively exhaustive. This paper is a starting point for further inquiry, not a conclusion.

About the organisations

The Fifth Element

The Fifth Element is an initiative of The Club of Rome, grounded in its legacy of systems thinking and long-term foresight. It brings to life The Club of Rome's strategic goal of making sense of complexity and catalysing transformational change by acting as a living platform, connecting people, ideas and initiatives across cultures and disciplines.

Ashoka

Ashoka has spent over 40 years building a network of more than 4,000 leading social entrepreneurs, known as Ashoka Fellows. The Globalizer Strategy Accelerator supports them to identify the systemic root causes of social and environmental problems and design collaborative systems-change strategies. The Globalizer Systems Change Research Lab distils insights from advanced changemakers into open knowledge products, including the Globalizer Case Study Library and the Ashoka Systems Change Masterclass: a self-guided online course that teaches the methodology.



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"When approaching new partners, you can't ask them to hire somebody new or pay for this or build that. Instead, we have always worked our programming into existing infrastructures to remove implementation barriers toward swift adoption."

Kendis Paris
TRUCKERS AGAINST TRAFFICKING, USA

"People don't collaborate because it's efficient, they collaborate when they see the value and the outcome is worth the complexity. In systems change, that value has to be more than metrics, it has to be impact at scale. The opportunity to shape something consequential — to be integral to a solution that will outlast them."

Nicole Rycroft
CANOPY, CANADA

"It was not a matter of patenting our idea, but we were also happy that others could 'steal' our idea and make their own path."

Francesca Fedeli
FIGHTTHESTROKE, ITALY

"When you are not pushing your idea, interacting with others sometimes refines it to a point that it's a totally different idea — not the one you brought in. Since I don't own the programme, [the co-creating partners] also think they own the programme and are free to bring in more people, and that's how it is expanding. Partners are comfortable bringing more partners."

Suresh Kumar
INSTITUTE OF PALLIATIVE MEDICINE, INDIA

"When you generate science from LMICs, it is not well received. When you develop guidelines from high-income settings, they are more easily accepted worldwide. But when we said this started in Colombia, Latin America, they started generating a lot of possible explanations for why it didn't work, because it was created in an environment that does not have a lot of resources."

Andrés Rubiano
MEDITECH FOUNDATION, COLOMBIA

"We weren't interested in globalising our organisation. We were interested in globalising our impact."

Simon Berry
COLALIFE, UK / ZAMBIA

Quotes by Ashoka Fellows who participated in the Globalizer Strategy Accelerator



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