



# SCALING WITH GOVERNMENT:

The government's perspective  
on what nonprofits and funders  
need to do differently



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
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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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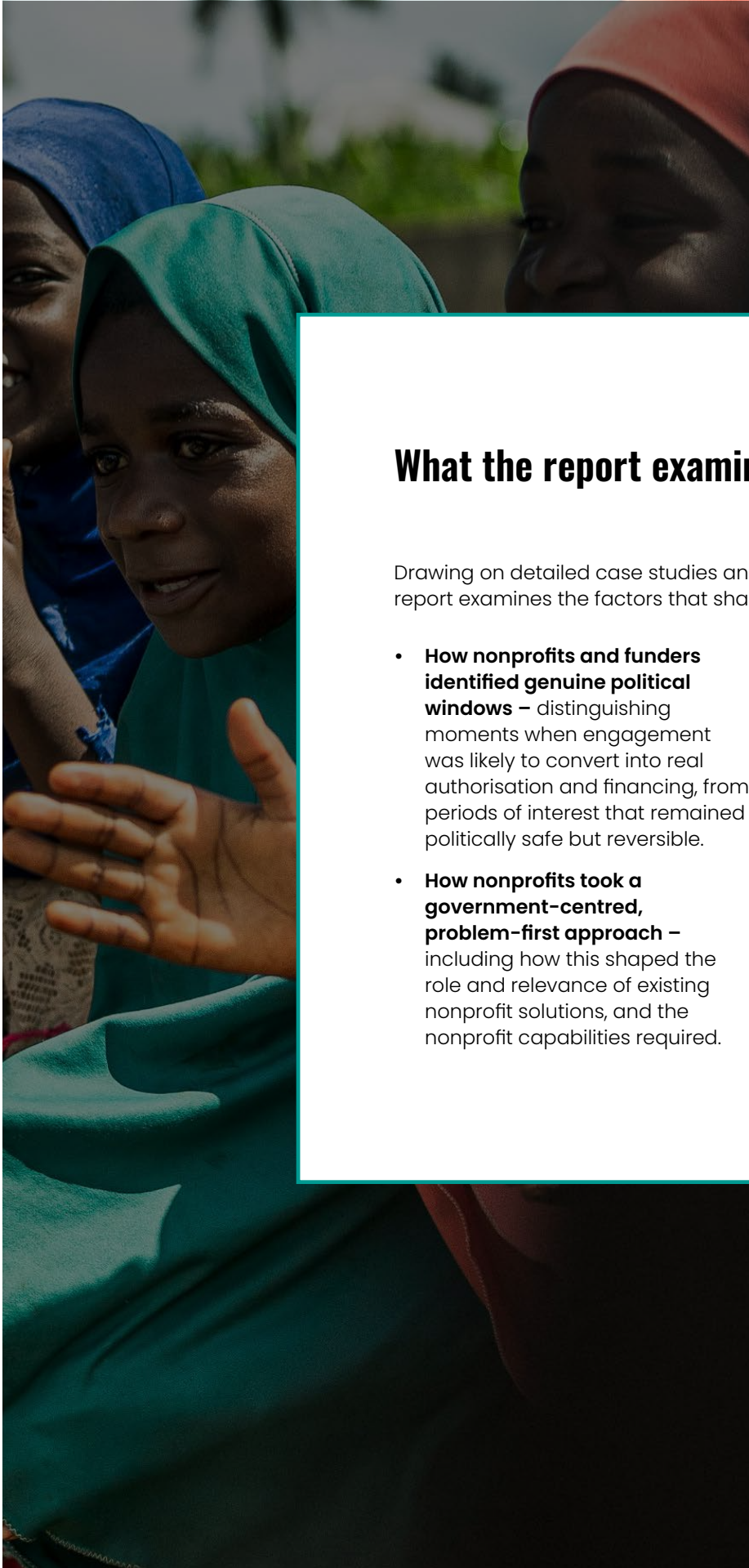
Scaling with government represents one of the most credible routes to sustained impact at scale. Yet even nonprofits with strong evidence, long-term government partnerships, and political access often struggle to move beyond pilots or partial adoption. The type of scaling with government this report focuses on – where governments authorise, finance, and sustain delivery – remains particularly difficult to achieve.

This challenge has become more acute in recent years. Levels of Overseas Development Assistance have flattened or fallen, and philanthropic funders increasingly see their role as catalytic rather than permanent. As a result, support for nonprofits pursuing the long-term, complex and uncertain route to scale with government has become harder to secure.

Existing literature offers extensive guidance for nonprofits on how to partner with governments and influence policy, but provides limited insight into how scaling with government actually happens and the conditions that enable it – particularly from the government's perspective.

This study addresses that gap. Spring Impact, in partnership with Instiglio and LGT Venture Philanthropy, examined **12 cases across low- and middle-income countries** where nonprofits have navigated scaling with government in practice. The study draws on **30 in-depth interviews** with senior government officials and nonprofit leaders directly involved in these processes. Over half of the cases are drawn from Sub-Saharan Africa, with additional examples from South and Southeast Asia and Eastern Europe, spanning health, education, WASH, and infrastructure.

By centering government decision-makers – not just nonprofit narratives – the study surfaces how governments assess risks, make decisions, and choose when (and whether) to institutionalise change, rather than offering a blueprint for scaling with government.



## What the report examines in depth

Drawing on detailed case studies and candid government perspectives, the report examines the factors that shaped successful scaling with government:

- **How nonprofits and funders identified genuine political windows** – distinguishing moments when engagement was likely to convert into real authorisation and financing, from periods of interest that remained politically safe but reversible.
- **How nonprofits took a government-centred, problem-first approach** – including how this shaped the role and relevance of existing nonprofit solutions, and the nonprofit capabilities required.
- **What governments actually looked for in nonprofit partners** – including how credibility, political risk, visibility, and control are assessed behind the scenes.
- **How funders enabled scaling with government** – particularly in absorbing early political and fiscal risk, enabling longer time horizons, and supporting judgment about when to persist, adapt, or wait.

# KEY INSIGHTS

**01**

## **Scaling with government hinges primarily on political and institutional feasibility – not just proving solution effectiveness.**

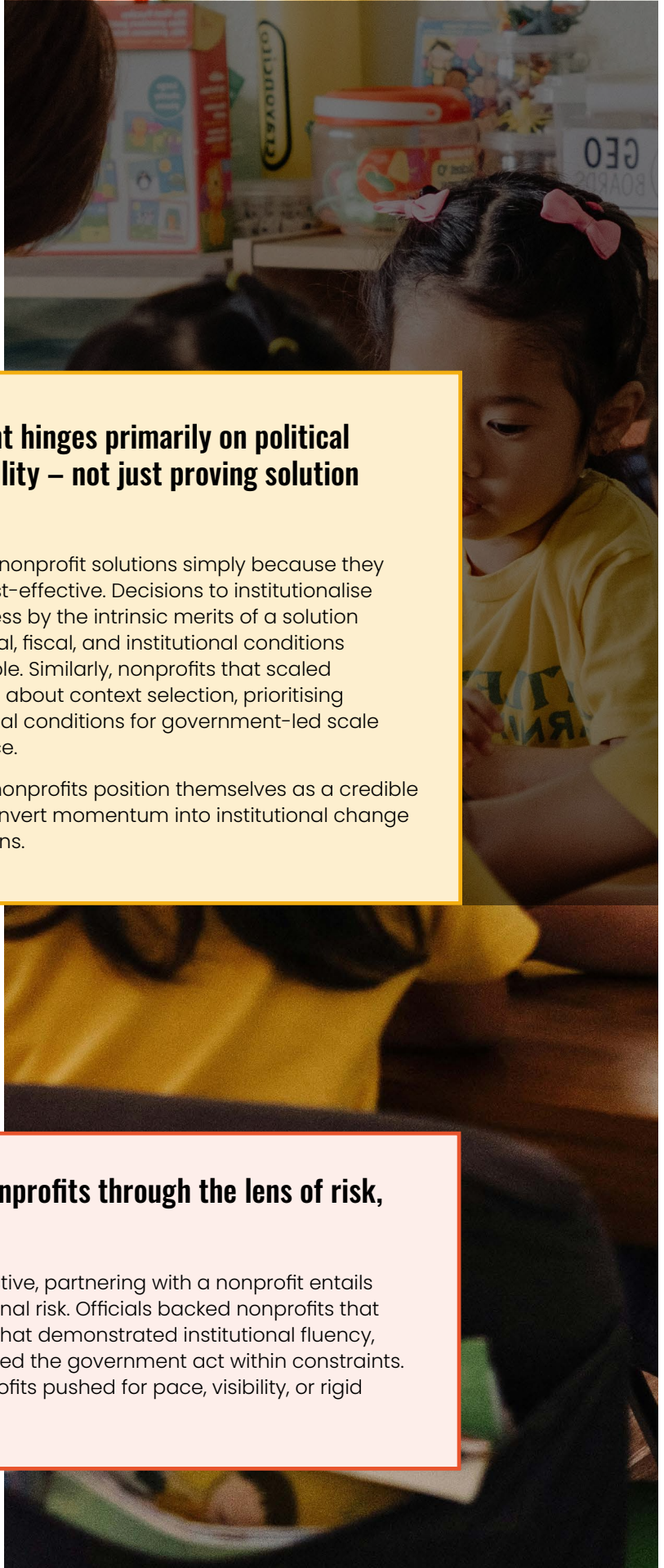
Governments did not adopt nonprofit solutions simply because they were evidence-based or cost-effective. Decisions to institutionalise interventions were shaped less by the intrinsic merits of a solution and more by whether political, fiscal, and institutional conditions aligned to make scale feasible. Similarly, nonprofits that scaled successfully were intentional about context selection, prioritising settings where the institutional conditions for government-led scale were at least partially in place.

It is therefore essential that nonprofits position themselves as a credible and ready option, able to convert momentum into institutional change when a political window opens.

**02**

## **Governments assess nonprofits through the lens of risk, not impact alone.**

From a government perspective, partnering with a nonprofit entails political, fiscal, and reputational risk. Officials backed nonprofits that reduced this risk: nonprofits that demonstrated institutional fluency, respected process, and helped the government act within constraints. Trust weakened when nonprofits pushed for pace, visibility, or rigid fidelity of their solution.



## 03

**Scaling with government requires a shift in mindset for nonprofits – from asking how to scale their solution through government, to how they can partner with government to solve problems at scale.**

Successful nonprofits started by developing a deep understanding of the government's problem, and worked with government to shape a scalable response within existing government constraints, including workforce structures, budgets and political priorities.

In most cases, nonprofits had existing solutions which served as credible starting points and brought innovative ideas, but were significantly adapted to fit government systems and realities. Full adoption of a solution with minimal change was very rare. In some cases, no predefined solution was taken up at all. Instead, nonprofits drew on their expertise to support governments to develop or strengthen their own approaches.

Nonprofits' willingness to adapt their solutions – or set them aside entirely – is central to whether scaling with government is possible.

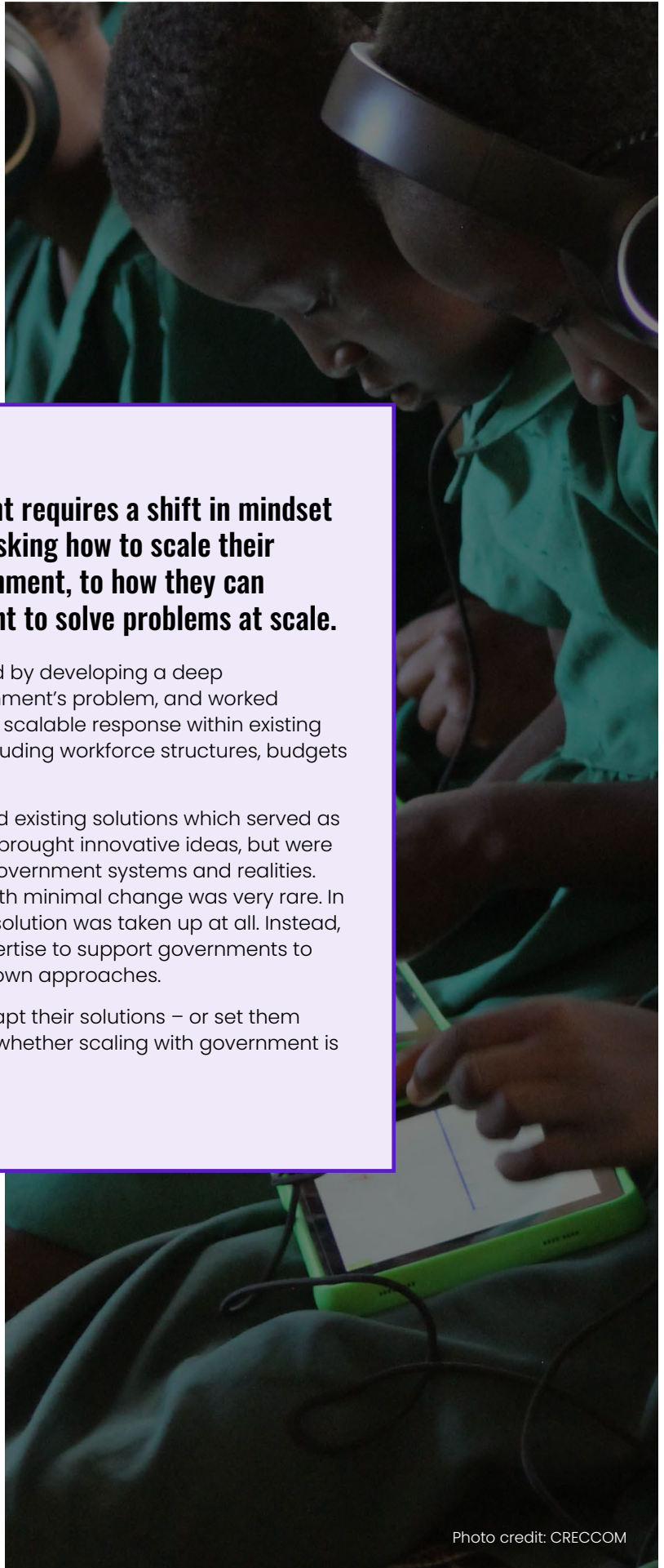
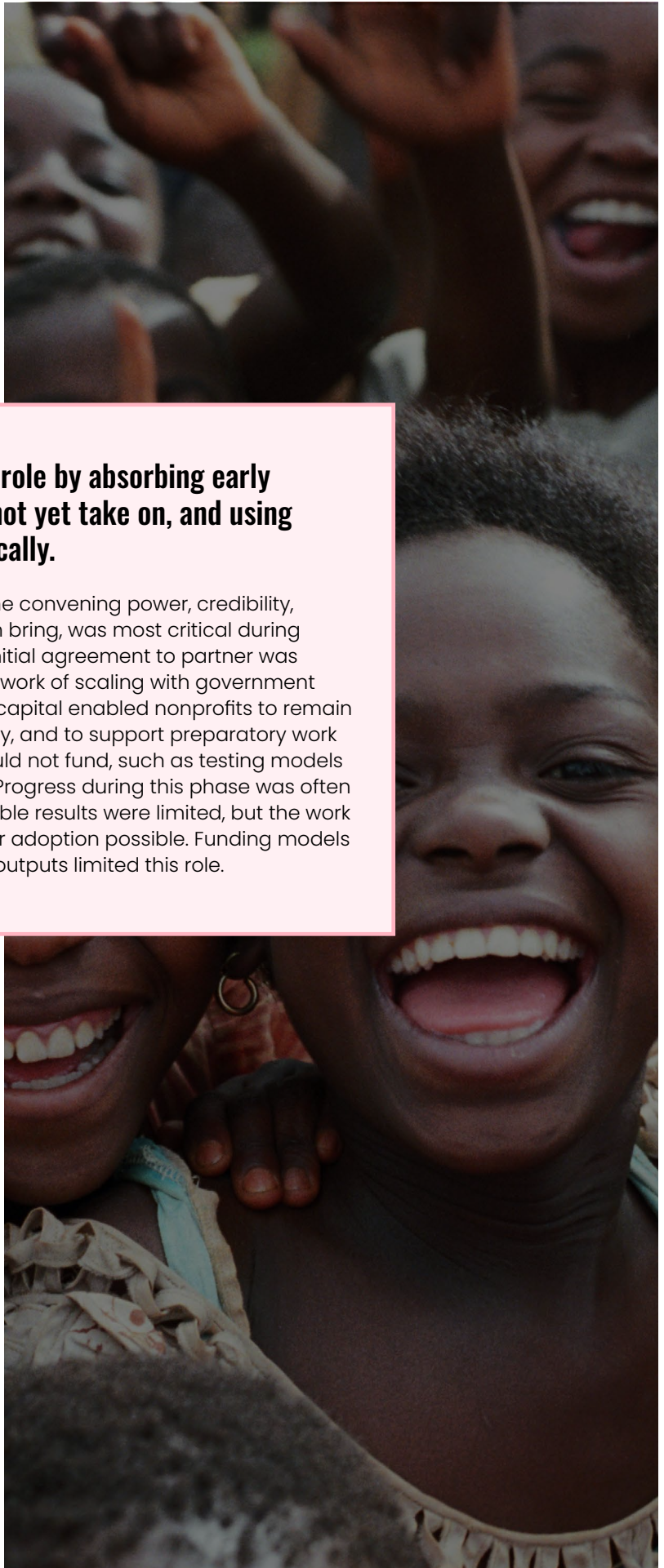


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## 04

**Funders play a decisive role by absorbing early risks governments cannot yet take on, and using their influence strategically.**

Philanthropic funding, and the convening power, credibility, and access that funders can bring, was most critical during the early phase – after the initial agreement to partner was reached, but before the real work of scaling with government could begin. Patient, flexible capital enabled nonprofits to remain engaged through uncertainty, and to support preparatory work governments valued but could not fund, such as testing models within institutional contexts. Progress during this phase was often slow and non-linear, and visible results were limited, but the work was essential to making later adoption possible. Funding models that prioritised rapid, visible outputs limited this role.



These insights point to a pattern – scaling with government is not primarily a technical challenge of proving effectiveness; it is a political and institutional process in which governments weigh risk, control, feasibility, and timing.

**This has profound implications for how nonprofits and funders operate.** Nonprofits often start and gain traction by being technical experts – bringing a defined solution, a theory of change, and evidence of impact. When the ambition is to work with government, these capabilities remain necessary, but they are not sufficient.

Where scaling with government succeeded, nonprofits played a different role. They acted as institutional partners rather than just solution advocates. They invested in understanding government incentives, internal constraints, fiscal realities, and authorisation processes. They adapted their models to fit administrative systems. They moderated demands for pace, visibility, and fidelity. This required new capabilities: political judgement, institutional fluency, long time horizons, and comfort with ambiguity.

And supporting these shifts requires a different kind of approach to funding – one that is patient, open to ambiguity, and has realistic demands of what progress looks like.

Across the 12 cases, when nonprofits and funders were able to make this shift and the conditions aligned for scaling with government, the impact was outsized. In Nepal, around 17 million people benefit from more than 11,000 trail bridges built as a result of a partnership between the government, Helvetas and the Swiss Development Cooperation. Since 2023, the government has authorised, funded and managed the national trail bridge programme independently. In India, the government has scaled the world's largest mobile messaging service, a maternal and child health solution co-developed with BBC Media Action, to 23 states/union territories, serving tens of millions of mothers. While pursuing scaling with government is never easy and always carries risk, when it works, the long-term impact can be extraordinary.

The central question, therefore, is no longer “How do we persuade governments?”; it is:

**What problem is the government trying to solve, how do they actually make decisions – and how do we position ourselves to make institutional change possible when conditions align?**