

MAINSTREAMING SCALING INITIATIVE CASE STUDIES

Echidna Giving

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August 2025



MAINSTREAMING SCALING

A Case Study of Echidna Giving

by

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July 2025

A Case Study for the Initiative on
Mainstreaming Scaling in Funder Organizations

For the Scaling Community of Practice

www.scalingcommunityofpractice.com

Preface

The Scaling Community of Practice (CoP) launched an action research initiative on mainstreaming scaling in funder organizations in January 2023. This initiative has three purposes: to inform the CoP members and the wider development community of the current state of support for and operationalization of scaling in a broad range of development funding agencies; to draw lessons for future efforts to mainstream the scaling agenda in the development funding community; and to promote more effective funder support for scaling by stakeholders in developing countries. (For further details about the Mainstreaming Initiative, see the Concept Note on the COP website).

The Mainstreaming Initiative is jointly supported by Agence Française de Développement (AFD) and the Scaling Community of Practice (CoP). The study team consists of Richard Kohl (Lead Consultant and Project Co-Leader), Johannes Linn (Co-Chair of the Scaling CoP and Project Co-Leader), Larry Cooley (Co-Chair of the Scaling CoP), and Ezgi Yilmaz (Junior Consultant). MSI staff provide administrative and communications support, in particular Leah Sly and Gaby Montalvo.

The principal component of this research is a set of case studies of the efforts to mainstream scaling by selected funder organizations. These studies explore the extent and manner in which scaling has been mainstreamed, and the major drivers and obstacles. The case studies also aim to derive lessons to be learned from each donor's experience, and, where they exist, their plans and/or recommendations for further strengthening the scaling focus.

The case studies also aim to derive lessons to be learned from each organization's experience, and, where they exist, their plans and/or recommendations for further strengthening the scaling focus. The present case study focuses on Echidna Giving and its strategic effort to get more girls into better schools to live better lives. For Echidna Giving, mainstreaming scaling means considering what, where, who, and how they fund with the lens of influencing how large-scale systems — most notably governments' public education systems, but also systems of norms — operate in support of girls' education outcomes. It was prepared by Dana Schmidt, Program Director at Echidna Giving, in consultation with the Echidna Giving Program team and President Kim Wright-Violich, and with strategic inputs and advice from Lawrence Cooley.



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Executive Summary

Echidna Giving is a private funder solely dedicated to getting more girls into better schools to live better lives. It is one of the largest and fastest-growing philanthropic actors dedicated to education in lower-income countries. This case sheds light on how a relatively young philanthropic organization, which began grantmaking in 2008, has rapidly evolved its strategy, systems, and organizational principles in support of scaling impact for girls' education.

Echidna Giving has considered what, where, who, and how they fund with the lens of how to influence large-scale systems operate—most notably governments' public education systems, but also systems of norms. Echidna has focused on scaling impact, not organizations (unless the latter is a critical path to the former). Central to this approach is the following:

- Steady focus on one single issue, over the long term
- Emphasis on funding both field building and system change — two tools working on different time scales towards scaling impact
- A portfolio approach that aims to advance specific themes (early childhood education, primary foundational learning, and adolescent life skills) in specific geographies (East Africa and India) by funding strong individual grantees while identifying ways that their work ties together organizations to scale impact
- Funding actors who are proximate to the governments they seek to influence and therefore have a better chance at, and greater stake in, influence
- Taking risks, with an intentional eye towards learning and iterating
- Offering flexible support and building trusting relationships with grantees so that organizations have the flexibility to adapt what they are doing in order to maximize impact
- Hiring team members who have contextual and thematic expertise and empowering them to influence decisions

Echidna reinforces these approaches through articulating its principles, onboarding staff on how these principles show up in practice with grantees and colleagues, and reinforcing the principles as a team in an ongoing way.

Echidna's efforts have led to promising results, with several grantee partners demonstrating significant progress in influencing government approaches to teacher training, curriculum development, and policy implementation in areas like early learning and adolescent life skills. Collaborative initiatives supported by Echidna have also helped build alignment and measurement frameworks for life skills across multiple countries.

However, Echidna faces tensions between equity and scale, between quality and scale, working with governments, and enabling collaboration. Most notably, Echidna is grappling with how proactively it should lead systems change efforts while staying true to its principle of supporting partners and leading from behind.

Looking forward, Echidna is leveraging its strategic planning process, anticipated growth in funding and staff (including more proximate hires), and the shifting international aid landscape to clarify its role in enabling impact at scale. They intend to articulate specific system change outcomes for their priority areas, develop their capacity to "lead from behind" by amplifying partner voices and facilitating



collaboration, and continue experimenting with diverse funding mechanisms, including engaging directly with government entities.

This case study demonstrates that clear principles, intentionally put into practice, can help funders not only achieve strong positive feedback from grantees, but also be a cornerstone for mainstreaming scaling. Foundations have a unique role in offering long-term support and enabling learning and adaptation. Governments are not great at adaptation because they cannot move nimbly. Nor are they great at investing in innovation because of election cycles. If foundations do not stick to their strategic priorities over the long haul, they are squandering a critical comparative advantage.

Echidna Giving also shows an approach for marrying outcome-focused and trust-based philanthropy, demonstrating how trust-based practices can enhance a funders ability to achieve outcomes by giving organizations the flexibility they need to adapt to realities and take ownership over results. These are both foundational to scaling impact.



About Echidna Giving

Echidna Giving is a private funder with one sole aim: getting more girls into better schools to live better lives.

Echidna focuses on girls because of the disadvantages girls face in most parts of the world and because if you educate a girl, she will prioritize educating her children—one of the few self-reinforcing efforts in philanthropy. Investing in girls pays dividends for us all: what she learns in school can transform her life, her family, her community, and her nation for generations to come.

Echidna is one of the largest private funders in the international education space, and, in contrast to foreign aid spending, the organization's budget is growing. The organization will give away \$6 billion over the next 35 years. In the next decade, its annual grants budget will quintuple to approximately \$200 million per year. Though private funding cannot replace dollar-for-dollar aid funding, private philanthropy can help slow the potential reversal of the progress made in reducing poverty and inequality that was achieved in recent decades. Education is a linchpin in poverty alleviation.

Echidna has a strong track record with exceptionally high [scores](#) on the Grantee Perception Report, an anonymous survey conducted by the Center for Effective Philanthropy. These exceptional scores come from the organization's [principles](#) and approach, which are trust-based, respect the importance of context, provide longer-term flexible support, and are service and relationship-oriented.

Echidna also has a reputation for a positive and empowering work culture. Annual employee engagement surveys and confidential interviews with the team in March 2025 indicate that the culture is characterized by warmth, inclusivity, and intentional relationship-building.

Mission and Scope

Echidna Giving works in education across three key stages in girls' development — (1) early childhood; (2) primary school; and (3) adolescence — to support high-quality learning, increase access for out-of-school girls, and foster critical thinking on gender and power. In addition, Echidna Giving supports the girls' education field to more effectively advance equity-enhancing quality education for the most marginalized girls by strengthening leadership, advocacy, and evidence.

Echidna Giving concentrates its funding in four countries: India, Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania. In these countries, the organization is building a robust portfolio of grantee organizations and actively seeking opportunities that will impact educational systems and the norms that influence girls' education. Echidna also supports a modest amount of exploratory grantmaking in five countries: Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Nigeria, Pakistan, and Senegal. Echidna funds organizations working across multiple geographies when the work impacts at least some of the specific countries cited above.

Echidna Giving achieves its goals primarily through grantmaking, which focuses on funding locally led, locally headquartered organizations in its focus geographies. In 2024, Echidna granted \$32 million. Its current grant portfolio consists of 142 active grants totaling \$115 million.

Echidna's strategy is outlined in more detail [here](#).



Echidna's Journey

Over its seventeen-year history, Echidna Giving has evolved significantly. In its early years, Echidna made grants to moderately-sized international NGOs as a global grantmaker with a focus on girls' education. Today, the organization has identified specific outcomes it would like to advance in girls' education, in specific geographies, which it supports through grants to national organizations and with a team of experts in these themes and geographies. This section offers a brief overview of the phases of Echidna Giving's history. More details can be found [here](#).

Start-up Phase (2008-2016)

Echidna Giving is a relatively young organization. The founders made their first grants in the girls' education space in 2008. As engineers, they saw innovation come from rigorous thinking, analysis, and evidence. That's what led them to invest in girls' education: the clarity of the line connecting educated girls to the social, economic, and political advancement of their communities. Because that line is anything but straight, they equally believed in the power of giving local leaders the tools, resources, and community needed to create local solutions and shift systems.

In 2011, they hired Kim Wright-Violich, a senior leader with over 20 years of experience founding start-ups, growing philanthropic organizations, and creating positive, effective work cultures. Most recently, Kim had been the founding CEO of Charles Schwab & Co.'s donor-advised fund, growing that organization to \$5 billion in charitable assets.

Given limited staffing (one part-time leader and consultants), Echidna leveraged others' expertise and due diligence for granting decisions. Although grantees focused their work on low-income countries, Echidna was a global funder without any specific geographic emphasis.

Echidna Giving operated completely anonymously in the early years. However, in 2014, founders Craig Silverstein and Mary Obelnicki [signed the Giving Pledge](#) to ensure the team had access to the right tables of influence and to inspire others to give.

Professionalizing and Formalizing Phase (2016-2021)

In 2016, Echidna Giving hired Dana Schmidt as Senior Program Officer, bringing on its first full-time staff member and first team member with education expertise and professional international grantmaking experience. Dana had spent the previous decade as a Program Officer at the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, helping to develop and run a ten-year, \$125 million grantmaking initiative to improve the quality of education children receive in low-income countries. The same year, Echidna launched an Advisory Board to bring additional outside expertise and perspectives to inform its work.

In 2018, the team began work to refine and document its grantmaking strategy, leading to its first [published grantmaking strategy](#) and impact metrics in 2018. That same year, Erin Ganju joined the team, bringing experience building and scaling Room to Read as its co-founder and former CEO.

During this period, Echidna's grantmaking evolved thanks to its increased staff capacity, education expertise, and influence from the Advisory Board.

- First, the organization started funding more advocacy work and orienting itself more explicitly around its intent to "enable systems change," which was articulated as a principle in its grantmaking strategy.



- Second, the team increased its grantmaking to national NGOs and began to cluster funding among organizations in East Africa and India, where the team identified particular opportunities to advance its strategy. The team learned that concentrating resources in more specific geographies was necessary to ensure impact, given that education decisions are typically local.
- Third, Echidna articulated its aim to "provide support in a way that empowers local institutions, communities, and leaders who have the most intimate knowledge and influence, and therefore ultimately drive development."

The annual grants budget grew from \$8 million to \$22 million, and Echidna began to develop supporting systems to scale its granting, such as establishing clear grant workflows, developing a grantee database, and creating more sophisticated processes for record-keeping.

Growing Phase 2022-2027

Echidna Giving's team is now 12 members (growing to 15 by year-end 2025). This is an intentionally small staff relative to the number of grantees and dollars granted. The team prepared for growth in several important ways.

- First, in 2022, [the staff and Board](#) went through a concerted process to identify the principles at the heart of Echidna's work and how the team sought to be with each other and external partners, including grantees. The team articulated five principles underlying its work, which you can find on [this page](#) of Echidna's website and in subsequent sections of this document.
- Second, Echidna expanded its grantmaking strategy and formalized a geographic focus on a handful of countries in Africa and South Asia.
- Third, in increasing its staff, Echidna hired individuals who brought thematic and geographic expertise aligned with its expanded strategy. Dr. Sara Ruto was Echidna Giving's first hire outside of the United States. Sara brought a unique blend of nonprofit and government experience, deep familiarity with the political economy of Kenya, and proximity to our grantee partners in East Africa.

With this expanded strategy and staff to go alongside it, Echidna Giving is building towards articulating geographic-specific strategies in each of its themes (early childhood, primary foundational learning, and adolescent life skills) over the coming years. The team has drafted [an outline](#) of what these strategies will include. It anticipates that developing these strategies will help it more clearly identify opportunities for scaling impact and articulate Echidna Giving's role in this. In this sense, the team is still on a journey towards identifying the best ways that Echidna Giving can support meaningful impact at scale.

Echidna's Role in Mainstreaming Scale

Echidna Giving has long recognized that delivering the promise of girls' education requires more and better use of resources from many actors, principally from government education systems themselves. Governments are the largest funders of public education systems, which serve marginalized populations. Without their support, Echidna cannot achieve its ultimate objective of propelling long-term, sustainable impact at scale. That bias toward thinking in terms of the systemic change that its philanthropic dollars can help catalyze has influenced what Echidna funds, where it funds, who it funds, how it funds, and the way it works.



The “What”: One Issue, Long-term, through a Portfolio Approach focused on Field Building and Systemic Change

The first of Echidna Giving's principles articulates **what** the organization funds. From a scaling perspective, three critical pieces stand out. First, Echidna focuses on one issue, over the long term. Second, Echidna is committed to funding both field building *and* systemic change — two tools working on different time scales towards the same objectives. Finally, Echidna takes a portfolio approach, looking at how individual grantees add up across a given theme and geography to help catalyze change.

PRINCIPLE 1

We support organizations and work with them to build the field of, and to enable systematic change in, girls' education.

Our core function is making grants to nonprofit organizations. We default to multi-year support and the least restricted form of grant that aligns with our strategy. In addition to core grants, we invest in the success of organizations through organizational effectiveness grants and support beyond our grant dollars. E.g., we open our networks, provide advice as requested, share best practices from other grantees, increase grantees' exposure, share field resources like our monthly blog, etc. We accept that operating as a supportive grantmaker sometimes looks “boring” by traditional metrics. We share our approaches to philanthropy and create them as public goods in case others find them useful.

One Issue, Long-term

Echidna Giving has identified one clear issue area (girls' education) that animates its work. The organization does not anticipate changing this area of focus.

Furthermore, internal documents call out, “Once we pick a focus area (i.e., strategy pillar), we stay the course for a minimum of 7 to 10 years.” That means Echidna has made a long-term commitment not only to girls' education but also to the themes of early childhood, primary education, and adolescent life skills. Scaling is a long-term endeavor, so having this continuity of focus on both the overall issue area and specific strategy themes is critical.

Funding Field Building *and* Systemic Change

Echidna Giving is not the organization actively working on scaling, but supports its partners in doing so. “Our core function is making grants to nonprofit organizations.” Given that it seeks to “build the field of, and to enable systemic change in, girls' education,” the organization looks for grantees whose plans are designed to work with/through the public system. Although its grantees are usually nonprofit or nongovernmental organizations, Echidna has begun experimenting with directly funding specialist semi-autonomous government institutions.

This principle also states that Echidna Giving works towards field building and systemic change. Both are essential components of scaling work. Field building means ensuring that strong organizations and leaders are working to advance girls' education, and a substantial body of evidence informs this work. In enabling systemic change, Echidna Giving looks for broader systems — especially government



systems, but also informal systems like widespread social norms — to shift and enable widespread improvements in girls' education outcomes. Echidna pursues field building as a way to build towards systematic change, recognizing that the latter often requires a long time horizon and a non-linear pathway.

Scaling for transformative change in education almost always necessitates government funding. It requires policymakers to make different decisions about where and how many resources to allocate, what to include in the curriculum, how to train teachers, etc.

Successes in changing government policies and practices result in big wins. As Ruth Levine [puts it](#), "A change in public policy can instantly scale a good idea and unleash vastly more resources than any private source could muster." However, windows of opportunity to change policy are not always open. Sometimes, you have to work to push them open. Furthermore, a change in political fortune means those policies can be overturned and brushed aside in a heartbeat.

Of course, change in government policy is not the *only* way to achieve scalable change in education. Widespread changes in norms and mindsets can significantly impact girls' education and happen outside the government system as well.

For all these reasons, investing in field building is a critical component of scaling. Field building allows Echidna to fund the organizations that will develop ideas to be ready when policy windows emerge. It also allows Echidna to fund the movement-building necessary to generate windows of opportunity and sustain change. Field building and systems change work are not at odds with one another; rather, they are tools working on different time scales towards the same objective of scaling impact.

Relatedly, as perhaps the longest-term "play" in Echidna Giving's grant strategy towards scaling, the organization funds work to develop a cadre of leaders well-poised to champion girls' education. Its theory is that strong leaders are often best placed to directly or indirectly influence change in their contexts.

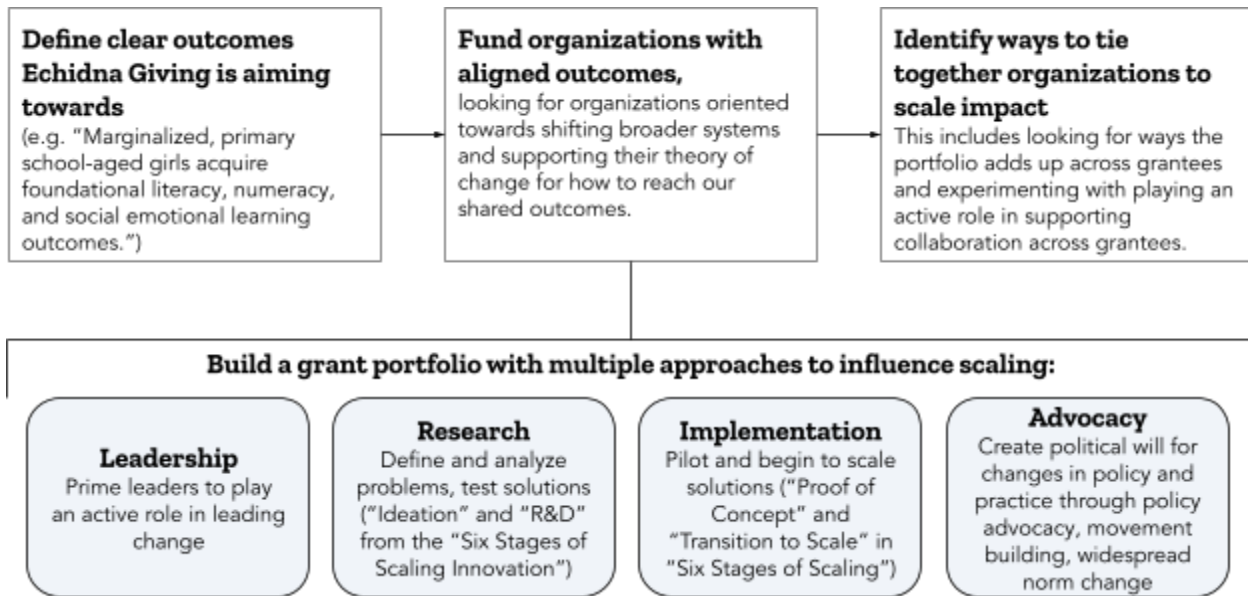
Taking a Portfolio Approach

Echidna Giving works to enable scaling at three levels:

- 1. Through individual grantees.** The team looks for organizations that have their eye on scaling impact and offer them flexible, long-term funding to support their efforts. They have also begun experimenting with directly backing semi-autonomous government agencies already operating at scale.
- 2. Through collectives of grantees.** Where Echidna sees that bringing organizations together might enable scaling, it has funded, facilitated, or otherwise enabled collective efforts. This often involves more intensive engagement of its own staff.
- 3. Across the grant portfolio in a given theme and geography.** In each of its thematic areas, Echidna's strategy seeks to catalyze broader policy and practice changes critical to advancing girls' education. The team intentionally funds across a mix of implementation, research, and advocacy efforts since a multiplicity of tactics are required to build toward systems change.

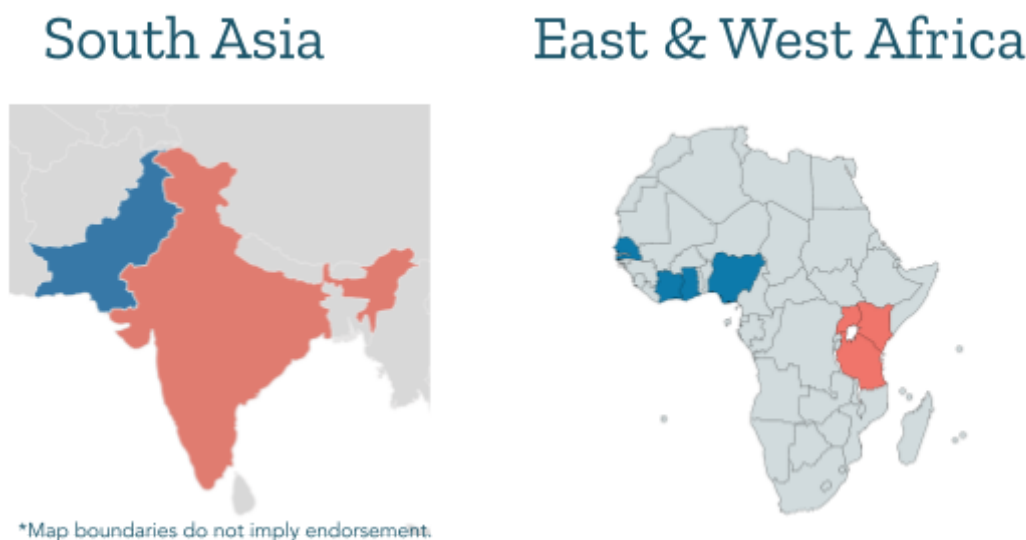
The [Results of Mainstreaming Efforts](#) section below includes some examples from Echidna Giving's grant portfolio across these different levels. The following diagram attempts to summarize what Echidna Giving funds and the range of tools its grantees use to try to scale impact.





The “Where”: Countries in Need with Opportunities for Impact at Scale

As noted in the introductory section, Echidna Giving works in four focus countries (in pink on the map) and five experimental countries (in blue).



The team selected these countries based on where there was high need in terms of girls' education (both in terms of absolute numbers of girls with poor education outcomes and relative outcomes between girls and boys) and an environment conducive to working towards system change. This eliminated countries with high needs that do not have receptive or well-functioning governments.



The focus countries have policy environments favorably inclined to Echidna's thematic areas. For example, all four focus countries have education policies that prioritize teaching adolescents foundational literacy and numeracy as well as life skills. The majority of them have also put in place policies to expand access to early childhood education. This baseline of supportive policies offers the opportunity to influence improvements. Echidna is developing geographically-specific strategies for these focus countries for each thematic area. In these countries, the organization is grantmaking in a concentrated way, building out robust portfolios of organizations, and actively scoping and seeking opportunities for systems change to make a meaningful difference for significant numbers of marginalized girls.

In experimental countries, Echidna is more opportunistic in supporting a moderate amount of field-building and exploratory grantmaking without as much active effort in sourcing opportunities. Some countries in this category may become focus countries in the future, particularly where substantial opportunities arise.

Echidna selected a small enough number of countries that its team can develop familiarity with the context, build synergies across partners, and stay engaged. It picked a large enough number of countries to mitigate risk that things do not work out in any one place, to learn across contexts, and to find and fund the strongest organizations.

The “Who”: Proximate Organizations Focused on Influencing Government and Willing to Take Risks, Iterate, and Learn

Given that sustainable scale in education generally requires government adoption, Echidna Giving looks for organizations that align with its ambitions to influence governments. They believe that actors who are proximate to government have a better chance at influence — and a greater stake in it as well. In addition, they look for organizations willing to take risks, iterate, and learn. This nimble approach is required for scaling impact. Although Echidna mainly supports civil society (nonprofit, nongovernmental organizations), they are also experimenting with direct funding to semi-autonomous government bodies.

Proximate Organizations Focused on Influencing Government

Below are the aspects Echidna Giving looks for in its due diligence, as outlined in its strategy FAQ section and built out in more detail in its internal training materials. Echidna believes that "alignment with local government education system," "learning culture," "poised for greater influence," and "locally led and based" are all factors that enable scale.

	Key Characteristics	Definition
<input type="checkbox"/>	Programmatic fit for our portfolio	Working to advance gender equity through ECDE, Foundational Learning, Life Skills programming, and/or Ecosystem
<input type="checkbox"/>	Strong gender component	Already is gender responsive in their work OR shows sincere interest to integrate deeper gender lens
<input type="checkbox"/>	Alignment with government education system	Alignment with the govt education system with prioritization for vulnerable populations, including out-of-school girls
<input type="checkbox"/>	Medium to large-sized	For India: \$800K+ annual operating budget



	organization	For Africa: \$500K+ annual operating budget
<input type="checkbox"/>	Leadership	Experienced and committed management team
<input type="checkbox"/>	Learning culture	Clearly stated outcomes for the work and strategic approaches based on (or building) evidence. Clear commitment to iteratively learning through research, MEL OR sincere interest & need to build stronger research, MEL capacity
<input type="checkbox"/>	Solid implementation and operations	Experience implementing programs and a clear explanation of what tactics they are using to drive change and why
<input type="checkbox"/>	Poised for greater influence	Plans to grow their influence and impact regionally, nationally, and/or globally during the grant period
<input type="checkbox"/>	Locally-led & based	Aim for at least 60% of our grantee orgs to be based in the region and run by a local leader with deep contextual expertise
<input type="checkbox"/>	Women-led	Aim for at least 60% of our grantee orgs to be led by women

In addition to the above criteria, if an organization is seeking funds to scale its work in some way, Echidna works to understand how expanding its own efforts will lead to lasting systemic change or help the organization become more influential. The Echidna Board often emphasizes that scaling should not be for the sake of an NGO's growth, but in the service of transformational impact. Bellwether Education Partners and New Profit's "[Pragmatic Playbook for Impact](#)" is one of the frameworks that the Board uses for thinking about scale and is also a resource shared with program staff.

Taking Risks and Iterating to Improve

The path to scale involves taking risks and iterating around what works best. Individual grantees must be willing to take risks and iterate to improve, and Echidna Giving does the same in its grantmaking decisions, as outlined in its fourth principle.

PRINCIPLE 4

We are comfortable taking measured risks and prioritize learning about what is and is not working and iterating to improve.

We ask for feedback and seek to continually learn as an organization and as individuals. We recognize the value of grantees taking measured risks, even if it means they will sometimes fail. Our response to failure is measured: what matters is learning from failure, not avoiding failure altogether.

One example of Echidna taking risks with the goal of scaling is its recent foray into directly funding semi-autonomous government entities. Although most Echidna grantees are traditional nongovernmental organizations, direct funding for government agencies is a potential pathway to more immediate scale, albeit a path that comes with some unique challenges (discussed in the section below



on Results of Mainstreaming). Another example of taking measured risk is Echidna's proactive role in starting collaborative efforts, also outlined in the Results of Mainstreaming section below. Echidna will continue to learn from these early experiments about whether opportunities like this might allow more and/or faster impact.

The "How": Flexible Support and Trusting Relationships

Flexible Support through Grants and Beyond

The [interim synthesis report](#) on Mainstreaming Scaling in Funder Organizations argues that "funders carry a special responsibility to ensure that their funding practices and technical support facilitate, rather than impede, scaling by the recipients of their funds." Top of the list was that "funders typically support time-bound, one-off projects" that focus on immediate impact, not long-term results.

Echidna Giving is willing to fund organizations long-term and offer flexible support, as stated in its first principle: "We default to multi-year support and the least restricted form of grant that aligns with our strategy." Some organizations have received Echidna funding for over fifteen years. Echidna recognizes that it is critical to give grantees the runway required to influence systems change and the flexibility needed to make pivots in response to opportunities or lessons learned.

This same principle states that "we invest in the success of organizations through organizational effectiveness grants and support beyond our grant dollars — e.g., we open our networks, provide advice as requested, share best practices from other grantees, increase grantees' exposure, share field resources like our monthly blog, etc." These are additional tools Echidna uses to facilitate its grantees to scale impact.

Strong, Trusting Relationships

Establishing strong, trusting relationships with its grantee partners is another critical tool Echidna uses in supporting scaling. The path to scale is far from simple and straightforward. Burdening grantees with demands means fewer resources to pursue their ambitious aims. If grantees do not trust funders enough to share their challenges, funders cannot help them overcome them.

PRINCIPLE 3

We invest in building understanding and strong relationships with our partners and each other

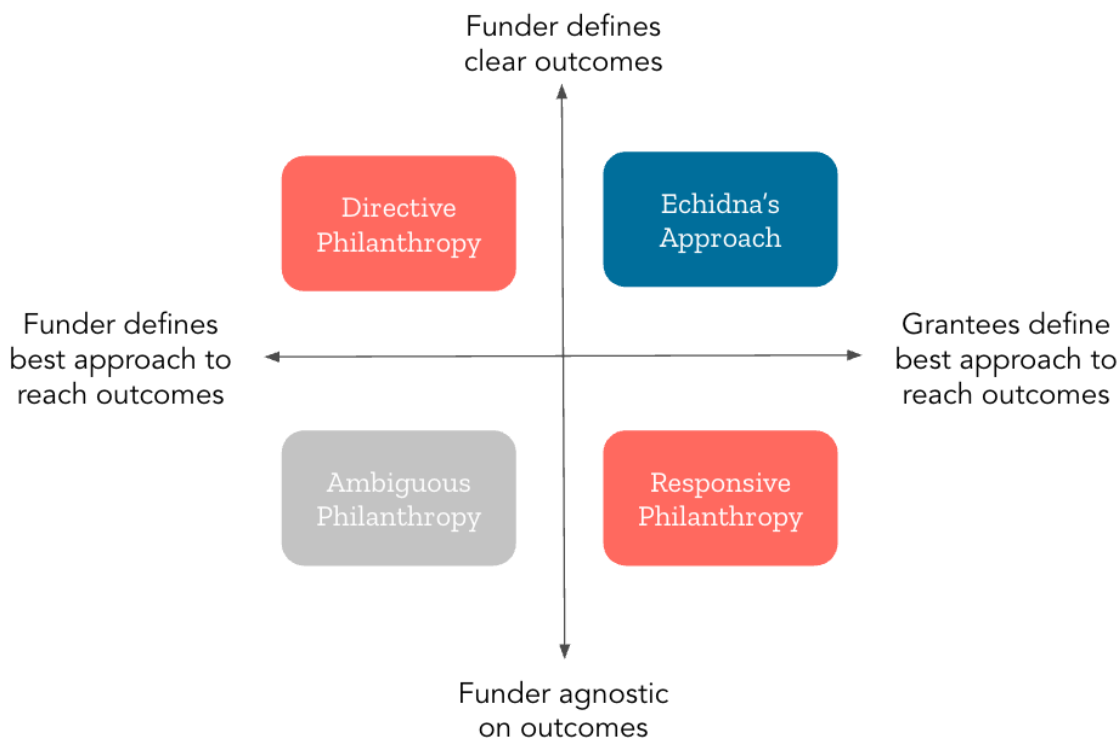
We invest time in understanding what grantees are trying to accomplish, the challenges they face, and the larger context of their work. We respect people's time and are sensitive to the burdens we place on them: we do our homework, do not ask for information that we will not use, avoid bureaucracy, offer flexibility, and take pride in our responsiveness. We share information openly and transparently, including our grantmaking strategy, list of grantees, tools, practices, and lessons learned. We communicate proactively: we actively share information with one another, we encourage grantees to express challenges, if we are worried about performance we tell grantees directly, we say no to inquiries as soon as we know that's the answer.



To some, trust-based philanthropy is antithetical to outcomes-focused philanthropy. At Echidna Giving, it is possible to marry these two approaches. Nothing in the six principles of trust-based philanthropy suggests you should not focus on outcomes. And there is nothing in an outcomes-focused approach to philanthropy that says you can't trust your grantees. Echidna Giving works to marry these two approaches together by:

- Being clear about its big-picture outcomes
- Finding organizations that share these outcomes as their own, know the context in which they are working exceptionally well, and clearly understand what they think are the best ways in their context of reaching those outcomes.
- Giving grants and support to these organizations in a trust-based way.
- Learning alongside organizations about what is working and not, why, and how to iterate to improve.

Here is Echidna Giving's conceptualization of its trust-based and outcome-focused approach:



The Way Echidna Works: A Team Expert in Theme and Context, Empowered to Make Decisions

Echidna Giving's Program Officer team facilitates scaling, given the thematic and contextual expertise they bring to the work. The organization's culture empowers them as decision-makers, maximizing on the expertise that they bring. Partnerships further advance the work.



Team Members Expert in Theme and Context

Between 2022 and the end of 2024, Echidna Giving doubled its overall staff size from 6 team members to 12. It intentionally diversified over this period, hiring three program team members based in Nairobi, Kenya, proximate to its East African grantees. This greater proximity to the work has enabled a better understanding of the context, needs, and political economy in which grantees are operating. It helps in building trusting relationships with grantee partners. It has also enabled staff to take on new roles as system orchestrators: brokering more connections for grantees, understanding the political environment, and actively facilitating collaborative work.

PRINCIPLE 2

We are guided by the ideas, knowledge, and expertise of those closest to the problems our grantmaking is helping to address.

We prioritize investing in local leadership and supporting others' visions for change rather than dictating what grantees should do. We aim to contribute without being controlling: we let grantees take the lead while also asking questions and offering advice where relevant and welcomed. We aspire to incorporate the voices of communities we seek to serve in our strategic planning processes. An Advisory Board of diverse experts in our sector provides advice and input on our strategy and work.

Echidna hires Program Officers with expertise in at least two of the following three areas:

1. Technical expertise in the thematic area they will oversee (i.e., early childhood development and education, primary foundational learning, adolescent life skills)
2. Strong networks in their geography of focus (e.g., with local civil society/NGO organizations and/or government)
3. Experience and networks in philanthropy

See [here](#) for an example of a job description for a recent program officer hire.

Echidna Giving is working towards a team structure that is a matrix of theme and geography. Each Program Officer will manage grants related to one theme in one geography. For example, there is already one Program Officer managing Echidna's Early Childhood Development and Education grantees in Africa and another managing grantees working on this theme in South Asia. They engage with one another, as well as with other team members managing different themes in the same geography. This allows staff to understand context, while also being connected by theme to understand what might be working in that theme across different contexts.

In addition to the team, Echidna has an Advisory Board of experts who offer additional expertise on context, strategy, and government operations.

Team Culture and Decisionmaking

Echidna Giving's principles dictate not only how it conducts its grantmaking but also its internal culture. Echidna aims to minimize bureaucracy and maximize the organization's ability to be responsive to



windows of opportunity. Each Program Officer holds control of the whole theme in a geography, can see how the pieces might fit together, and is empowered to bring grantmaking ideas directly to the Board.

Partnerships

Echidna engages regularly with other funders through existing networks like the [International Education Funders Group](#) and [Global Early Childhood Funders](#). The team has also proactively established coordination mechanisms across funders in the childcare space to coordinate across funders who invest in childcare from different sector lenses (child development, women's empowerment, nutrition, etc.). Team members engage with other funders to inform their due diligence and strategies, as well as to help marshal sufficient resources towards their strategic objectives.

Concrete Actions to Mainstream Scaling

The section above alludes to key actions taken at Echidna Giving to mainstream scaling. Echidna Giving puts a mainstreaming approach into practice in three critical ways: through its organizational principles, during its staff onboarding process, and through the organizational culture that it cultivates.

Principles

Echidna's five organizational principles are covered in detail in the prior section. In addition to the quoted principles above and on its website, Echidna has an internal document that outlines in some depth how its principles show up in its grantmaking and the ways the team engages internally.

During each monthly all-staff meeting, the team reflects on recent examples of the principles in practice, discussing sticking points, or otherwise reinforcing the principle in practice. In addition, staff reflect on how they are putting Echidna's principles into practice during annual performance reviews.

Onboarding

Echidna's onboarding materials and process cover these principles in depth. Over the course of three months, new staff receive extensive guidance on Echidna's operations, strategy, and grantmaking process. The onboarding materials serve as an ongoing reference guide for staff on the organization's approach.

Culture

Echidna works hard to cultivate an organizational culture that both promotes its principles and enables impact at scale. This starts with who and how Echidna hires. The organization looks for individuals whose approach aligns with its principles and who have not only technical experience but also strong interpersonal skills. Once onboard, Echidna cultivates a non-hierarchical structure in which team members are empowered to own their areas of work and make critical decisions. The team works collaboratively to develop strategies and offer ongoing opportunities to learn across geographies and from other expertise on the team.



Results of Mainstreaming Efforts

Echidna's grantmaking approach has resulted in a number of grantee partners making substantial progress towards scaling their impact. This has happened with individual grantees as well as collective efforts. The team's experiences have led to a few important shifts: funding more advocacy, making larger grants, and shifting more resources to local organizations. It has also shed light on persistent challenges to mainstreaming scale: navigating tensions between scale and equity and between quality and scale, dealing with governments, avoiding funding cliffs, determining how hard to press a thumb on the scale as a funder who seeks to elevate grantees, and the lack of incentives to collaborate.

Examples of Impact through Funding Individual Grantees

At the level of individual organizations, [Sabre Education](#) has made significant inroads towards transforming the way the government in Ghana trains preschool teachers. Through concerted partnerships with Right to Play and the Ghana Education Services, they have: designed a play-based teacher-training manual, tested it through pre-service and in-service teacher training, and proven its efficacy in classrooms through an evidence partnership with IPA. In late 2024, the Global Partnership for Education Board of Directors approved \$110M in grants and co-financing to the Government of Ghana for education "system transformation." A significant portion of these resources will be channeled towards improving pre-primary education and scaling Sabre's model and learnings.

Echidna Giving provided Sabre Education with flexible funding that allowed it to evolve beyond funding individual schools and teacher training in specific districts to this national vision in partnership with other organizations. When FCDO abruptly ended its grant funding to Sabre, Echidna offered supplemental resources to keep their work going. Echidna coordinated with other Sabre funders like ELMA Philanthropies and funded complementary players in Ghana like [IPA](#) and [Lively Minds](#) that have jointly helped alongside Sabre to advance the early childhood agenda with the government there.

In India, state and national governments have proactively invited several of Echidna's grantees to help translate policy into practice. States have openly invited input on curriculum and teacher training from grantees like the [Language and Learning Foundation](#), [Dream a Dream](#), and [Study Hall Educational Foundation](#), each of which have strong, evidence-based models and with rich practitioner expertise.

The same is true of [Breakthrough](#), an organization we began funding in 2018. They built strong evidence that their program working with young people in schools has shifted adolescents' gender norms and behaviors. Echidna increased its funding in 2023 to be a core funder, along with Co-Impact and others, of Breakthrough's Gender Equitable School Fund, which is working towards scaling up their impact. In particular, they have made significant strides towards incorporating a gender lens in curricula, teacher and principal training, and state monitoring efforts in both Punjab and Odisha.

In Senegal, Associates in Research and Education for Development ([ARED](#)), has been a pioneer in implementing bilingual education programs in Senegal to improve children's literacy and math abilities. Their groundbreaking work in this area, initially funded by the Hewlett Foundation, showed such promising results that it played a highly influential role in convincing the Ministry of Education in Senegal to take up bilingual education nationwide. Now, with funding from Echidna Giving, their Ndaw Wune remedial program is feeding into the national harmonized remedial program of the Ministry of Education.



Experimenting with Semi-Autonomous Government Agencies

Late in 2024, Echidna's board approved two grants to the Centre for Mathematics, Science, and Technology Education in Africa (CEMASTEА), an entity established in 2003 to provide in-service training for math and science teachers in Kenya. One of these grants was brokering a partnership between CEMASTEА and another grantee, Basic Needs Basic Rights, which is working to scale up resiliency training for adolescents across Kenya. CEMASTEА offers the teacher training structures, partnerships, and mandate to facilitate teacher training nationwide. Basic Needs Basic Rights offers an effective adolescent life skills curriculum that helps CEMASTEА fulfill its mandate to prepare Grade 7 and 8 teachers in the competency-based approach. The partnership thus provides a win-win for the two organizations and, hopefully, teachers and students across Kenya. A second grant would allow CEMASTEА to build out an approach to preparing teachers for gender-sensitive early grade math instruction.

Unfortunately, as of this writing, both grants have been complicated by the fact that the Government of Kenya recently announced its intent to dissolve nine State Corporations, including CEMASTEА, which is likely to merge with other teacher training bodies in Kenya. The long-term future of this work is, at present, uncertain, underscoring the uncertainty that comes along with funding for scaling, particularly in rapidly developing political environments.

A second experiment in this realm is a grant to the National Gender and Equality Commission, a constitutional body in Kenya that seeks to advance gender equality and protect the freedoms of marginalized populations. Echidna's support will allow them to conduct research on the status of girls' education for marginalized communities and use it to inform policy decisions.

Examples of Impact through Collaborative Efforts

Echidna Giving has helped to stimulate two collaboratives for life skills — one in India ([Life Skills Collaborative](#)) and another in East Africa. Each of these has brought together organizations working on life skills to build alignment around which life skills are critical in those contexts and how to measure them in contextually relevant ways.

In East Africa, for example, the Action for Life Skills and Values in East Africa ([ALiVE](#)) is a collaborative of 30+ life skills organizations working in Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania focused on understanding, assessing, and enhancing context-relevant life skills and values. Echidna (alongside Wellspring Philanthropic Fund, Imaginable Futures, Porticus, and LEGO Foundation) funded the establishment of ALiVE in 2020. During the initial phase, the ALiVE collaborative developed and implemented contextualized, household-based assessment tools to measure four life skills (problem-solving, collaboration, self-awareness) and one value (respect) among adolescents ages 13-17. The work undertaken was aligned with regional government moves towards embedding life skills into curricula. The findings have elicited increased regional interest in locally-led life skills work. The collaborative is now working towards embedding the assessment of life skills and values in the education systems of Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda. They are also working to enhance the capacity of key government education departments to assess and translate curricula aspirations into practice in national education systems in Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda.

Shifts over Time

Echidna's experience has caused the team to make a few shifts in its practice over time.



Funding More Advocacy

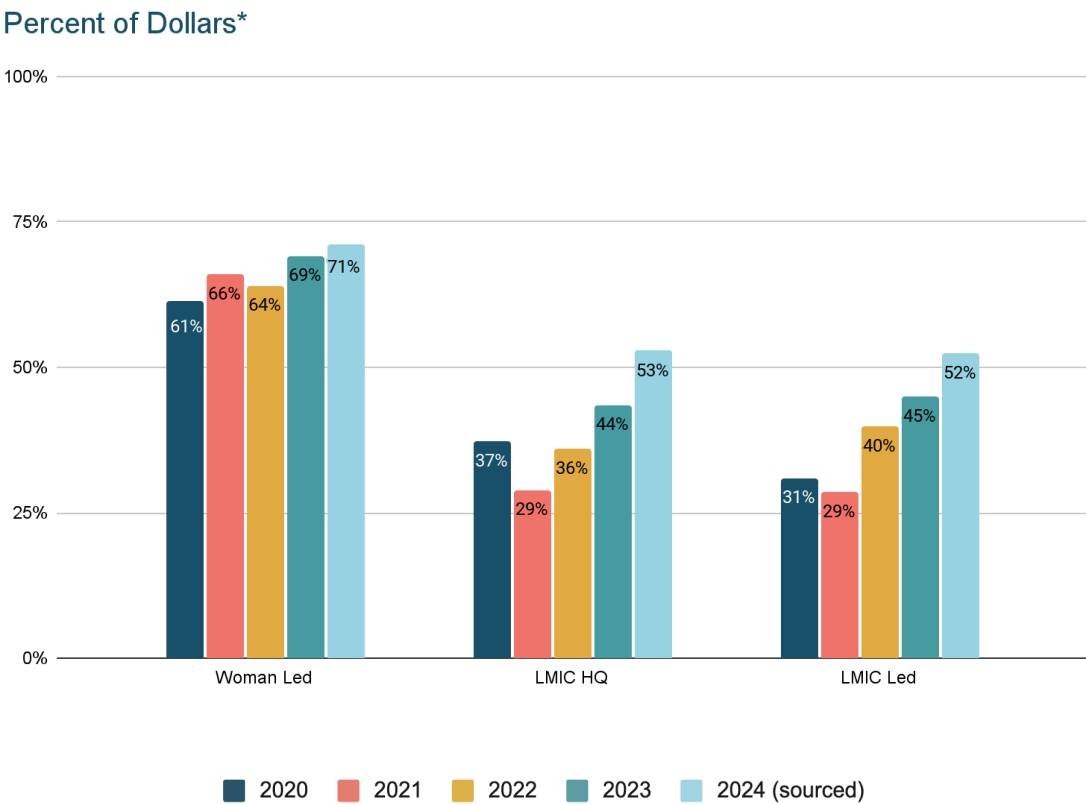
Echidna has increased its appetite for funding advocacy work. Just because an organization is doing good implementation work, or even proving the impact of that work, does not mean that governments will suddenly and magically scale it up. Strategic, intentional efforts are needed to shift government policy and practice. Good advocacy is part of the mix.

Offering Larger Grants

Echidna has also increased its appetite for making larger grants in both absolute size and as a proportion of an organization’s operating budget. When the team sees opportunities for broader influence, they are willing to lean in and make more substantial grants — even if that means Echidna being willing to make a bigger bet absent other funders. For organizations that show promise, Echidna is willing to provide a significant infusion of resources so that fundraising is not their main obstacle to building momentum.

Funding Locally-Led Organizations

Between 2020 and 2024, Echidna has grown the proportion of grant dollars going to organizations headquartered in low or middle-income countries from 37% to 53%, and the number of organizations led by leaders from low and middle-income countries from 31% to 52%. These organizations are best placed to understand politics and build local ownership and engagement, both critical enablers of scale.



Challenges

These experiences and more have shown the Echidna Giving team both the promises of mainstreaming scaling work, as well as the significant challenges.

Tensions between Scale and Equity

As outlined in the [interim synthesis report](#) on Mainstreaming Scaling in Funder Organizations, the “potential tension between scale and equity and inclusion” is a live one for Echidna given its mission to support girls’ education.

PRINCIPLE 5

We Believe In The Value Of Diversity, Equity, And Inclusion. Our Work Focuses On Gender Equity For Marginalized Populations, But We Continuously Examine Our Practices And Approach In Light Of This Commitment.

Achieving diversity in our hiring, our decisionmaking, and our culture, is a priority. We recognize that there is a correlation between funding and power. We question our power and privilege and work to cede it to communities we hope will thrive. We recognize and try to correct for our biases as an organization based in the United States. As we learn more, we will seek to improve in every dimension, including with respect to integrating best practices in diversity, racial opportunities, and inclusion into our operations and approach.

Government education systems are not set up to serve girls alone (nor should they be). Therefore, much of the work Echidna supports to influence systems involves embedding a stronger gender lens into work that is scaling. But it is easy for this gender lens to get diluted or lost entirely as a program scales in a system aligned with prevailing gender norms. This challenge is even more acute when it comes to reaching girls who are marginalized because of their gender and other intersecting identities like caste, religion, and disability.

As Echidna moves towards reaching the last mile of girls who are still out of school — and therefore often difficult to identify, geographically scattered, and otherwise hard-to-reach — scaling can easily gloss over these marginalized communities. This is especially true given that government systems tend to be predominantly male-led and reinforce patriarchal norms. Echidna seeks to balance the ability to fund organizations working in communities with a deep understanding of gender with the desire to scale impact. Does Echidna need to specialize in either deep work or scaling work, or can the team effectively do both and draw on the deep work to scale?

Tensions between Quality and Scale

Echidna also observes tradeoffs between scale and quality. For example, in the early childhood space, a key objective for Echidna is to get more children access to high-quality early learning opportunities. The research is clear about the tremendous long-term payoffs of investments in the early years. Nevertheless, many countries face severe fiscal constraints. Making the space for investments in childcare or pre-primary education is hard to do, and families with few financial resources cannot pay for the level of



quality that young children deserve. What tradeoffs should the team be willing to make regarding the quality of their early learning experiences to make them affordable enough to scale?

Working with Government

Working with the government is necessary if scale is the intent, but it brings unique challenges. If you don't work with the government, you simply cannot reach scale in the education sector. If you work with the government, you're subject to rapidly changing political priorities (as with the CEMASTEIA example above) and working with actors you may not fully respect (or where respect is not mutual), etc. Wins can disappear in an instant.

Funding Cliffs

Grantees working to scale often hit a funding cliff before they succeed and Echidna is not resourced to get them over this cliff. The team has seen many organizations with good ideas take off in the early years with substantial innovation funding or funding from a large challenge grant. But they often hit a cliff — they are no longer the new "it" innovation to fund, or the challenge grant ends, or their programs end up being too costly for the government to take on — before they have pulled in a sustainable source of government funding.

How Much to Lead as a Funder Who Seeks to Elevate Grantees

Echidna struggles with how to lean into systems change work without veering from its principles. The team aims to support and amplify *existing* efforts and momentum in the space by giving support to strong actors with their own solid theories of change and approaches to work. But where there are gaps in these efforts and something else is required to make a bigger change, how should a funder committed to leading from behind intervene?

Encouraging Collaboration

Echidna Giving has found that, generally, no one organization is poised to scale impact on its own. And yet, nor are they incentivized to collaborate, given they often compete against one another for funding. So, reaching a place where organizations can come together is a first-order challenge. A second-order challenge enables organizations to agree on a specific, focused, realistic set of shared goals and policy or implementation "asks" of government around scaling. And a third-order challenge is evaluating the effectiveness of the collaborative and whether the effort is proportional to the impact. Furthermore, pulling off a collaborative effort often means collaboration not only among nongovernmental organizations but also among a group of funders. In these environments, it can be hard to hold funder power at bay and ensure that collaborative efforts are grantee-led.

The Future:

As Echidna Giving looks to the future, three internal and external factors offer the team opportunities to think strategically about its approach to scaling impact:

1. **Strategy development.** As noted above, the team is actively working to articulate geographic-specific strategies in each of our themes (early childhood, primary foundational



learning, and adolescent life skills). Through this process, they will work to identify opportunities for scaling impact and articulate Echidna Giving's role in this.

2. **Changing the architecture of aid.** As we write this case study, dramatic shifts are underway in the larger international aid architecture. The United States has terminated 90% of the grants and contracts at the United States Agency for International Development. Seven other major European donors have also significantly scaled back their own international aid. These shifts raise fundamental questions about the evolving role of philanthropy in advancing education goals.
3. **Grant and staff growth.** Echidna will continue its significant growth trajectory in the coming years, building towards a roughly \$200 million annual grant budget. Its increased financial and human footprint, including hiring more staff based in countries where our grantees are active, will open up new opportunities for influence.

In light of these, the team has been grappling with the following questions:

- **Philanthropy's Role in a Shifting World Order:** How does the current geopolitical environment reshape Echidna's approach? What opportunity does it offer for Echidna to support greater local ownership? Does Echidna have a greater responsibility to step into leadership gaps? Should it play a more active, organized role in engaging with governments? What role can it play in ensuring critical data is collected and used to sustain accountability for development progress?
- **Promoting Country Ownership and Reducing Aid Dependency:** How can Echidna support national governments and local organizations in leading development efforts?
- **Sustaining Gender Equity Gains:** How can Echidna ensure that gender-focused progress is not lost amid shifting funding priorities? What does effective grantmaking look like that is focused not only on progress but also on not losing ground?
- **Orchestrating Change:** How proactive should Echidna Giving be in developing a comprehensive strategy for system change, bringing people together to ensure advancement towards impact at scale, filling gaps, and offering direct leadership?

The team does not have perfect clarity on the answers to all of these questions. What they do have clarity on is remaining true to Echidna's existing principles even as they move into this new area. As noted in the previous section, the idea of taking a proactive leadership role sits somewhat in tension with Echidna's principles of supporting organizations and backing *their* strategies (principle 1) as well as being guided by the ideas, knowledge, and expertise of those closest to the problems our grantmaking is helping to address (principle 2). How far out in front does Echidna Giving want to position itself versus enabling grantees?

That said, Echidna recognizes that the world is not black and white, and the team can consciously navigate these tensions. In doing so, the team has several tools they would like to draw on and develop.

First, the team will push itself to develop thematic strategies for each geography, articulating whether and what system change outcomes they hope to enable through their grantmaking. Where they see opportunities for impact, the team will analyze the conditions necessary for system change in these areas and identify where our grantmaking can make a difference.

Second, Echidna will build its muscles and toolkit to be able to offer leadership without centering its own ideas or work. In other words, it will continue to find ways to "lead from behind." This might include leaning into strategies like:



- Providing a megaphone for people and organizations doing work that is not yet as influential as it could be.
- Exposing organizations to new ideas, offering them opportunities (and resources) to learn to further refine work in their own contexts. When their interest is genuinely “sparked,” offer them resources to try new things and to adapt their strategies.
- Facilitating opportunities for actors to come together and jointly strategize. Create and resource spaces where comprehensive system change strategies can be developed by the communities most invested in these changes. Help to coordinate and resource action against these strategies.
- Casting a wide net to identify leadership that we can support, not only with the nongovernmental organizations we traditionally support, but also being open to finding and supporting innovators inside the government who, with resources, could make faster progress.

Third, and related to the last bullet in the list above, Echidna will further experiment with pushing the boundaries and working with semi-autonomous government agencies. Although this case study has highlighted some of the risks of this approach, there are parallel challenges in funding nonprofits. For example, retaining good leaders is not a challenge unique to governments. As Echidna further explores this work, the team will need to think about the best vehicles for accountability and whether they need to develop systems to manage high-risk grants through processes like spot audits.

Finally, Echidna will develop a comprehensive set of analytical tools, learning resources, and knowledge resources to offer its team more systematically, informing their strategy work. Currently on Echidna’s priority list are the following:

- Develop guidance on how to measure the success of scaling work. Echidna has a clear sense of how grantees measure impact on beneficiary outcomes, but not of “the enabling conditions needed to achieve sustainable impact at scale.” The program team has already spent time developing guidance on how to measure the success of advocacy. Simple guidance on how to measure the success of scaling work would be a nice complement to this resource.
- Refine Echidna’s due diligence tools to include guidance around indicators that an organization has structured itself, its staffing, and its strategy in ways that will maximize the chances of system influence.
- Sharpen the team’s analysis of the role of movement building in enabling system change.

These are some of the priorities that will animate Echidna’s work in the years ahead.

ECHIDNA’S LESSONS FOR OTHER FUNDERS

Based on Echidna’s experience to date, the following reflections might be helpful to other foundations working on scaling:

1. Outcome-focused and trust-based philanthropy need not be in tension with each other. In fact, trust-based practices enhance our ability to achieve outcomes by giving organizations the flexibility they need to adapt to realities and ownership over results. They are foundational to scaling impact.



2. Foundations have a unique role in offering long-term support and enabling learning and adaptation. Governments are not great at adaptation because they cannot move nimbly. Nor are they great at investing in innovation—especially not innovation that will take a long time to bear fruit—because of election cycles. If foundations do not stick to their strategic priorities over the long haul, they are squandering a critical comparative advantage.
3. Field building and scaling work are not at odds with one another; they are tools working on different time scales towards the same objectives.
4. A core component of scaling is learning—what works, how to incentivize adoption, etc. So, if we want to incentivize scaling, we have to incentivize learning, which requires funding organizations in ways that incentivize learning and structuring internal ways of working to incentivize learning as well.
5. There is value in having a diverse portfolio of organizations. Some doing deep work with communities to understand issues of marginalization; others focused on content and training; and still others who emphasize system strengthening. This balance allows organizations to do what they do best, to learn from and build off each others' work, and to explore multiple pathways to impact.
6. Sometimes success does not come in the form of major advances, but in the form of maintaining ground and preventing backsliding in the face of opposing forces.

