

# SCALING DEMOCRATIC INNOVATIONS: FEATURES OF EFFECTIVE CATALYST ORGANISATIONS & FUTURE FRONTIERS

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## Executive summary

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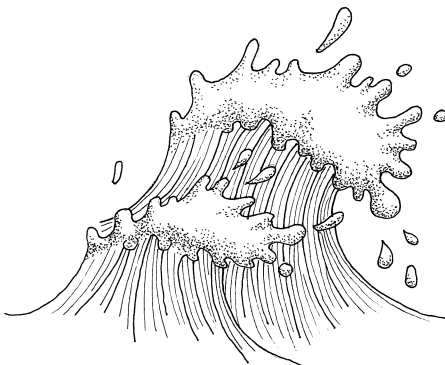
Citizens' assemblies and other democratic innovations are spreading around the world. But they do not spread by themselves. Behind every successful scaling story sits a constellation of organisations doing the essential, often invisible work of building capacity, establishing networks, advocating with decision makers, and ensuring quality standards.

These are what we call **scaling catalysts: organisations that intentionally drive the expansion of democratic innovations in their regions.**

In this paper, we make three core contributions to the field:

1. We distil **six features of effective scaling catalyst organisations**, aiming to elevate the important role they play.
2. We examine **critical tensions and trade-offs** these organisations face, and how they can navigate these.
3. We identify **five frontiers of future practice** that can further accelerate the scaling of democratic innovations and promote more deliberative cultures beyond the work of individual catalyst organisations.

This paper is for three key audiences: We offer insights for **practitioners** building similar organisations, for **funders** seeking to support this vital work, and for **researchers** identifying knowledge gaps.



# Six features of successful scaling catalysts

Feature	Description
<b>1. Explicit scaling mission</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>— <b>Mission statements</b> explicitly reference scaling, spreading, institutionalising, and/or embedding democratic innovations, including deliberative practices</li> <li>— Strategy documents outline theories of change that reach <b>beyond single projects</b></li> <li>— Activities foreground <b>network building</b> that connects actors across sectors and regions, <b>capacity building</b> that multiplies and nurtures practitioners and champions, recurring <b>evaluation</b> that generates and shares <b>learning</b>, as well as <b>advocacy</b> work that shifts political will, culture, and leadership approaches</li> </ul>
<b>2. Change is relational</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>— Cultivating connections with power holders and stakeholders is essential; scaling catalysts invest heavily in this <b>relational work</b></li> <li>— Doing so in a <b>cross-partisan</b> way and maintaining <b>strategic autonomy</b> are crucial</li> </ul>
<b>3. Strong commitment to quality</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>— Scaling catalysts carry out <b>independent evaluations</b> of their processes, publish <b>impact reports</b>, and engage in <b>dissemination</b> activities</li> <li>— The <a href="#">OECD Good Practice Principles for Deliberative Processes for Public Decision Making</a> (2020) came up repeatedly as useful and significant standards for their work</li> <li>— The <b>reasoning is strategic</b>. Poor quality assemblies do not just fail to deliver, they actively harm the field by confirming sceptics' doubts and burning political capital</li> <li>— At the same time, it is necessary to be <b>flexible based on context</b></li> </ul>
<b>4. Bridging the local and global</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>— Scaling catalysts position themselves as <b>bridges</b> – connecting international best practices and innovations to their local contexts</li> <li>— They emphasise the importance of being <b>firmly rooted in local context and culture</b></li> <li>— They make <b>global learning</b> accessible and actionable, and they <b>contribute to these knowledge flows</b> by sharing their own learnings</li> </ul>
<b>5. Dynamic leadership with interdisciplinary teams</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>— They are <b>proactive 'doers'</b> who can galvanise, deliver, and work across diverse contexts</li> <li>— Leadership have <b>business, consulting, and social innovation backgrounds</b></li> <li>— Their <b>leaders are dynamic, charismatic figures</b> who are able to inspire others</li> <li>— They have <b>strong connections to leadership</b> in government and other sectors</li> <li>— <b>Interdisciplinary teams</b> are crucial</li> <li>— <b>Deep deliberative theory expertise rarely came up as essential</b>. What mattered more: project management capacity; relationship-building skills; strategic thinking; entrepreneurial spirit; the ability to translate complex ideas for diverse audiences; and connections to organisations and scholars with expertise in deliberative theory</li> </ul>
<b>6. Physical space matters</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>— <b>Important ingredient for successful scaling</b> in some (though not all) contexts</li> <li>— The spaces serve as <b>anchors</b> – where <b>networks</b> convene, where <b>trust</b> builds through repeated in-person interaction, where the <b>work feels tangible</b> rather than virtual</li> <li>— They signal <b>permanence and commitment</b></li> <li>— When located centrally, it can embody everyday democratic engagement</li> <li>— When located more remotely, it can provide conditions for deep reflection</li> <li>— For some, the physical space also provides a <b>steady income stream</b></li> </ul>

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# Tensions, critical considerations & limitations

Whilst the organisations we studied have achieved remarkable results, they face genuine dilemmas that reveal the gap between deliberative ideals and implementation realities. These include **balancing quality with contextual adaptation, maintaining independence whilst influencing power, investing in both local rootedness and international connections, managing strong leadership alongside distributed influence, and choosing between direct delivery and ecosystem building**. The most effective catalysts navigate these tensions thoughtfully rather than resolving them definitively, with context and strategic priorities shaping which trade-offs make sense.

Two additional challenges emerged as particularly critical. First, **coordination within crowded ecosystems**: as deliberative democracy gains traction, more actors get involved—government units, civil society groups, consulting firms, academic institutions. This creates confusion about roles and ownership, risks of duplication, and potential for catalysts to be seen as "swooping in" rather than building on existing local expertise. The most effective catalysts position themselves as **bridge builders**, connecting actors and strengthening the whole field rather than competing for territory.

Second, **funding sustainability**: most catalysts survive on short-term, project-based funding that's irregular and precarious, despite scaling work requiring patient, long-term investment in relationships and infrastructure. Exceptions like We Do Democracy and SoCentral have developed blended finance models — including revenue from physical spaces — but these remain difficult to replicate in most contexts. For funders serious about scaling democratic innovation, this suggests providing **5-10 year grants supporting ecosystem building**, not just counting one-off assemblies.

## Future trajectories: Five frontiers beyond catalyst organisations

01

*Deliberative technologies*

Towards tech-enhanced democratic innovations

02

*Education*

Building deliberative muscles from a young age

03

*Legal frameworks*

Encoding participation as Civic Service Rights

04

*Community building*

Practitioner, civil servant, and assembly member networks

05

*Public communication*

Making democratic innovation visible and compelling

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# Conclusion

Deliberative democracy is at an inflection point. After decades at the margins, it is entering the mainstream — with permanent citizens' assemblies being established and governments embedding sortition into decision-making. We did not arrive here by accident. We are here because dedicated organisations did the strategic, relational, capacity-building work that makes scaling possible. **Understanding what makes these scaling catalysts effective is essential for anyone serious about democratic renewal.**

Our research carries distinct implications for different actors:

- **Philanthropists and funders** should provide patient, flexible funding (5-10 years) that supports ecosystem building — the capacity building, convenings, relationships, physical spaces, and learning infrastructure — not just process delivery.
- **Emerging catalyst organisations** need clear theories of change, cross-partisan relationships, fierce commitment to quality, thoughtful positioning within existing ecosystems, and connection to international learning whilst remaining locally rooted.
- **Established organisations** should make their ecosystem-building work more visible, document and share learnings, and expand reach through training and mentorship.
- **Government officials** must invest in civic infrastructure that enables sustained practice, not just commission one-off assemblies.
- **Researchers** face significant gaps: we need comparative analysis of what works across contexts, better theories of how practices spread and institutionalise, and systematic study of communication strategies and ecosystem dynamics.

In an era of democratic backsliding, polarisation, and institutional distrust, deliberative processes demonstrate that people, given good conditions, can govern wisely and well. But realising this potential requires **moving beyond leading organisations working in isolation to building robust civic infrastructure — the networks, norms, physical spaces, knowledge systems, legal frameworks, educational pathways, and communication channels that scale democratic innovations and sustain deliberative democracy as permanent governance features.**

Now the question is whether we — practitioners, researchers, funders, officials, citizens — will invest in building the civic infrastructure that scaling democratic innovations requires. The future of democracy may well depend on the answer.

