Coop4Equality

Handbook

Bringing out a gender-inclusive model of high-growth and scalable social enterprises

This handbook is part of a series that aims to equip social entrepreneurs, organizations, and stakeholders with practical strategies for integrating gender awareness into their work. By fostering a gender-inclusive mindset, we can drive positive change and sustainable growth

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Handbook overview

Introduction

This is a set of 5 handbooks on gender mainstreaming and peer-learning methodologies to help Social Entrepreneurship (SE) stakeholders foster more gender-inclusive local and European ecosystems. These handbooks provide practical tools and methodologies for embedding a gender perspective in SE practices. They will remain freely accessible and available in German, Greek, Romanian, Portuguese and French.

These handbooks are part of the Cooperation for a Gender-Equal Social Economy (Coop4Equality) project, funded by the European Union's Erasmus+ programme Running until July 2026, this project aims to enhance the role of women and gender minorities in the European social economy, fostering gender inclusivity, sustainable growth, and equal opportunities.

Project Partners:
- Empow'Her Global, France
- Nova SBE Leadership for Impact Knowledge Center, Portugal
- Fundația Ashoka, Romania
- Pranado gGmbH, Germany
- Digital Leadership Institute, Belgium
- Stimmuli for Social Change, Greece

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This is handbook number 5. Apart from this handbook you may find information about the remaining 4 handbooks:

1   **Sustainably creating a gender-aware mindset in the social entrepreneurship field**

This handbook aims to empower social entrepreneurs with practical strategies to develop a gender-aware mindset, fostering inclusivity and equity in their ventures. By addressing key mindset shifts and providing actionable tools, it equips readers to overcome barriers and create lasting social impact.

2   **Reinforcing empathy-based methodologies in social entrepreneurship**

The purpose of this handbook is to provide a resource for social entrepreneurs, non-governmental organizations, and all those interested in using empathy as a foundation for developing solutions to social problems.

3   **Self-assessing the gender approach when teaching and doing social entrepreneurship**

This handbook aims at supporting and guiding members of support structures and social entrepreneurs with a specific self-diagnostic tool, as case study, and further equip them a 3-stage methodological approach, useful tips, questions and key performance indicators (at external & internal level) that can facilitate them to analyze and self-assess their progress on gender lens integration within their project or initiative.

4   **Implementing peer to peer & co-development mechanisms among social entrepreneurs**

This handbook introduces two impactful methodologies designed to foster support and growth among women entrepreneurs: cross mentoring and co-design sessions.

5   **Bringing out a gender-inclusive model of high-growth and scalable social enterprises**

This handbook equips readers with the necessary tools to critically reflect on various aspects of scaling, including the decision to scale, the reasons for scaling, and the methods of scaling. It encourages readers to reflect upon and implement gender-inclusive practices in their own social enterprises.

Key concepts

- **Business model**: A system of interdependent activities performed by an organization and its partners to create value [1]

- **Social enterprise**: Established entities with the primary goal of addressing significant social and environmental issues affecting disadvantaged individuals and communities. They often tackle problems that are not adequately managed by public sectors or businesses, offering products, services, or interventions in collaboration with and on behalf of their beneficiaries. These organizations can take various legal forms and have diverse sources of funding. While some social enterprises generate profits, others rely on external funding to cover their expenses. The term social enterprise encompasses a broad range of organizations within the social and development sectors [2]

- **Innovation**: The creation and development of ideas by organizations in uncertain conditions. The outcomes of innovations are unpredictable, but successful innovations can lead to new products, services, or interventions with the potential for positive impact. [2]

- **Scaling**: The term involves using existing products, services, or interventions to reach and benefit a larger number of people more effectively. This process generates predictable positive impact in the present. [2]

- **Post Growth Entrepreneurship (PGE)**: Redefines business as a form of activism, art, spirituality, and creative expression. This business model embraces flat growth and dismisses the necessity for investors, scaling, and exits. PGE challenges conventional entrepreneurial beliefs and reimagines business as a means for achieving pure positive impact. [4]

Benefits of female leadership in growing social enterprises

Challenges faced by women social entrepreneurs and its mitigation

Women social entrepreneurs often face unique challenges, including gender bias, work-life balance issues, and limited access to funding and resources.[5] Fundraising and networking are often easier for males.[6]

Emotional capital within women-only networks helps mitigate these challenges by offering a support system and safe environment. These networks are essential for personal and professional growth, offering a space for collaboration, mentorship, and mutual support.[5] They are core to accessing job, mentorship and sponsorship opportunities, translating into economic opportunity.[11] This reinforces Coop4Equality's objective in fostering a collaborative ecosystem of stakeholders across Europe.

Impact of women-led businesses and its influence when it comes to scaling

Despite significant barriers, **women-led businesses are pivotal for economic resilience and transformation.** The social entrepreneurship sector is leading its efforts as one in two social enterprises worldwide are led by women, compared to one in five conventional enterprises where women's leadership remains less prevalent.[7;8] This may have to do with the fact that women tend to report higher levels of communal (e.g., nurturing, cooperative) characteristics.[9]

Integrating women into middle and senior management positions is crucial, as women-led social enterprises significantly contribute to economic and social development. Engaging women in business leadership roles not only provides companies with better insights into female customer preferences, potentially leading to greater business success,[10] but also increases productivity, enhances collaboration, inspires organizational dedication, and improves fairness.[12]

We cannot simply teach women to act like men. They need to show their authenticity and their community side. Even if they are competent, they need to demonstrate that they are empathetic," - Jenny Hoobler

Regarding scaling, women also have a decisive role in renovating unfair and unjust systems, reshaping dominant norms and stigmas and promoting collaborative movements through a form of impact called "scaling deep", which we will further mention in this handbook.[6]

Growth is more than financial scaling

Traditional business growth focuses on revenue, customers, and markets. For social enterprises, growth also means expanding impact (e.g., reaching more beneficiaries, creating more social or environmental value). The Social Business Model Canvas explicitly integrates this dual logic: economic sustainability and social value creation.

The SBMC consists of 12 blocks, but the core idea remains: to help social enterprises design how they create, deliver, and capture value while maintaining their mission and financial health.

he SBMC already asks: What social value do we create? With a gender lens, this expands to: For whom? Whose needs are centered?

Consider applying the following gender-sensitive questions when working with a SBMC:

- Value Proposition – Does our product/service address the needs and priorities of women, men, and other genders differently?
- Customers & Beneficiaries – Who benefits most, and are any groups excluded because of gendered barriers (e.g., access, affordability, norms)?
- Channels & Relationships – Are our outreach and communication methods equally accessible and appealing across genders?
- Key Resources & Activities – Do women and men have equal access to the resources, skills, and opportunities our model requires?
- Impact Measurement – How do we track whether our growth reduces or reinforces gender inequalities?

Social Business Model Canvas

Scaling for impact: Integrating a gender lens

Scaling is about amplifying the impact of an enterprise or initiative. It goes beyond just "getting bigger" — it includes expanding reach, adapting to new contexts, and shifting mindsets to create lasting change. For social enterprises, scaling must balance financial sustainability with social value creation. Adding a gender perspective ensures that growth strategies are inclusive and equitable, avoiding the replication of existing inequalities.

Enterprises can scale in different ways — not only by growing bigger, but also by spreading wider and going deeper in creating change.

Scaling up
Expanding reach through growth in size, resources, or market presence.
<u>Without gender lens:</u> Risks replicating existing inequalities at larger scale.
<u>With gender lens:</u> Growth strategies intentionally expand opportunities for women and marginalized genders (e.g., equitable hiring, access to finance, leadership roles).

Scaling out
Replicating or spreading the model across geographies or sectors.
<u>Without gender lens:</u> New contexts may overlook gendered dynamics, leading to low adoption.
<u>With gender lens:</u> Adaptation considers local gender norms and ensures inclusivity in replication (e.g., tailoring services for women's mobility or time constraints).

Scaling Deep
Changing mindsets, relationships, and cultural norms for lasting impact.
<u>Without gender lens:</u> Cultural barriers to equality remain untouched.
<u>With gender lens:</u> Efforts explicitly address gender norms, empowering women and shifting perceptions of leadership, roles, and value.
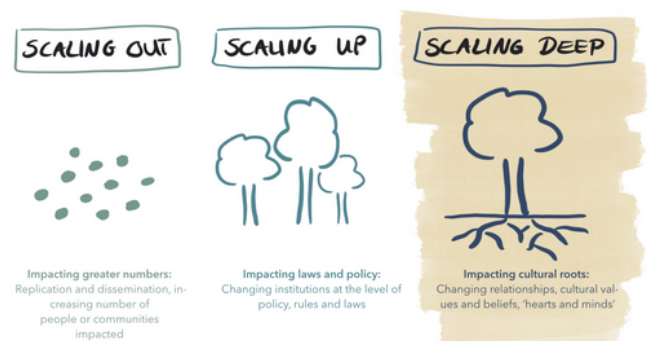
Reference: 14

The success case of Girl Move Academy (GMA)

About the Girl Move Academy
GMA is a Mozambican Leadership Academy that empowers young women through an intergenerational circular mentoring model. Its unique approach has gained UNESCO Prize for Girls' and Women's Education[3]. Find more about GMA here or in our Annexe 1.

"Girl move academy: aiming to empower young women from Mozambique to the world"
A case study on how GMA intends to scale its impact by expanding its practices. The case not only describes the Academy's operating model but explains its innovation process characterized by an experimental mindset and continuous learning approach on understanding how GMA can go from operating locally in Mozambique to offering a virtual program with global reach through it´s program MOVHERS.

- **MOVHERS**: is a global community that brings together young women changemakers around the world in sisterhood circles to expand their impact and power them to lead with humanity[13].

Anne-Laure Fayard
Advisor of the case and Chaired Professor in Social Innovation at NOVA SBE and Coordinator of the DESIS (Design for Social Innovation and Sustainability) Lab @ NOVA SBE.

Request full access to the case here
Here are some questions you can think of as you read the case:
1. What is special about GMA and its way of working?
2. Is GMA ready to scale?
3. How would you describe GMA's approach to innovation?
4. Would you continue to pursue MOVHER? Why or why not?
5. Imagine that you are an intern working at GMA. They ask you to help prepare a presentation to the team on the question of scale. What recommendations do you present?

The success case of Girl Move Academy (GMA)

Innovation steps for creating a new program:

GMA defines the program's intention
Before a framework is designed, GMA prioritizes understanding local realities, so the team engages with the target group early in the process by holding focus groups or conducting personal interviews or surveys to define an appropriate value proposition.

The team co-creates with relevant stakeholders to develop an idea and an appropriate outline for the new program. Collaboration with external experts on the subjects that the program covers is critical to developing an appropriate structure.

The final step is piloting the program to test, learn, and evaluate the results while iterating continuously to refine the program and implement it at scale.

Future Considerations
Two strategic directions:
1. Focusing on GMA's "grassroots," i.e., Mozambique
2. Aiming to reach as many girls as possible around the world

Reach out to professor Anne-Laure Fayard on LinkedIn to discuss the case disclosure

A model of high-growth and scalable social enterprises

Steps to consider when settling a high-growth model
When settling up a high-growth model one should consider all different phases as in the Girl Move Academy case:

1 **Clarify organizational identity and strategy**: Be clear about your organization's mission, values and strategic direction. View annexe 2

2 **Identify the problem space**: Deeply understand your beneficiaries' problems and needs, the factors that cause the needs of the communities you aim to serve. View annexe 2

3 **Develop Effective Solutions**: Identify the resources and capabilities required to address the problem space and to create sustainable impact. View annexe 2

4 **Avoid Innovation Pathologies**: Be aware of the potential pitfalls that can ruin your organization's efforts, make it unproductive and waste scarce resources. View annexe 4

5 **Balance Innovation and Scaling**: Manage the tension between innovation (investments that might not succeed- the "Red Zone") and scaling (expansion based on existing strengths- the "Green Zone"). This balancing act fundamentally defines an organization and its impact.[1] View annexe 3

6 **Seek impact not an exit**: Consider using impact instead of growth as the key metric (post-growth entrepreneurship), adopting a flat growth curve and rejecting the need for investors, scaling, and exits.

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Annex 1: The success case of Girl Move Academy (GMA)

About the Girl Move Academy

GMA is a Mozambican Leadership Academy that empowers young women through an intergenerational circular mentoring model. Its unique approach has gained UNESCO Prize for Girls' and Women's Education.[3]

The Girl MOVE framework, which the UNESCO prize recognized for its unique mentorship methodology, provides the backbone for all of GMA's programs. It has successfully increased the school transition rate in northern Mozambique from 20% to 90% and decreased child maternity levels from 45% to 2%. [13]

We elevate a new generation of female change makers through innovative educational programs and a circular mentorship model from Mozambique to the world.
— GMA's internal mission statement

GMA´s Programs

- **BELIEVE**: Targets girls in the last year of primary school, where they face higher risk of drop out. The main goal is to inspire them to stay in school.
- **LEAD**: For girls in school and young university students. The program is designed to unlock potential and support them in making a difference in their communities while also becoming female models for younger generations.
- **CHANGE**: For young women who have already graduated from university. It is a one-year, local, and full-time program that seeks to strengthen participants' leadership skills.
- **RISE & SHINE**: Targets women between the ages of 17 and 28 as a possible preliminary step to the CHANGE program. It is a free digital platform that promotes self-discovery based on various videos, challenges, and tools that support young women in developing their talent.

Annex 2: High-growth and scalable social enterprises

Impact Creation Logic
Successful organizations operate from a high level of relevant knowledge and little uncertainty in the following three dimensions[2]:

Consider 6 types of uncertainty, that prevents organisations from knowing whether or how they might succeed with innovations related to each dimension and help stay on a productive innovation path:

- **Mission and strategy:** Does your organization have a common and transparent understanding about your values, strategic direction and mission? [2]

  - **Identity uncertainty:** Does the innovation fit your identity and values?
  - **Managerial uncertainty:** Do you manage innovation processes productively?

- **Problem Space:** Do you deeply understand your beneficiaries' problems and needs? [2]

  - **Problem frame uncertainty:** Do you understand the problems or needs that you want to address sufficiently well?
  - **Adoption uncertainty:** Do you know whether people in communities are willing and able to adopt your innovations?

- **Resources and capabilities:** Do you know what resources and capabilities will be required to address the problem space and to create sustainable impact? [2]

  - **Solution uncertainty:** Are you able to design, build and operate effective solutions to people's and communities' problems?
  - **Unintended consequences:** Can you foresee any negative side effects of innovation?

WHAT: Problem space
• Problem Frame Uncertainty
• Adoption Uncertainty

Impact-Creation Logic

HOW: Resources & capabilities
• Solution Uncertainty
• Unintended Consequences

WHY: Mission & Strategy
• Identity Uncertainty
• Managerial Uncertainty

Annex 3: High-growth and scalable social enterprises

Consider three ways of scaling

A high-growth and scalable model doesn't necessarily mean that you should exhaustively grow all your numbers. To deliberate on what makes more sense, you may consider three ways of scaling:
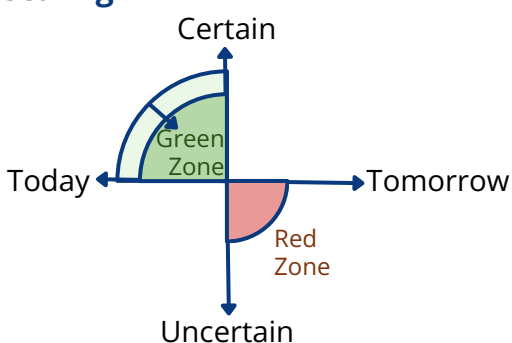
- **Scaling up:** Growing the size of the organization

- **Scaling deep:** Expanding the scope of the organization's activities

- **Scaling out:** Spreading to new geographic regions.

    When scaling it is important to consider you should always pilot your ideas first and adopt a Lean approach before getting to attached to your initial vision on scaling
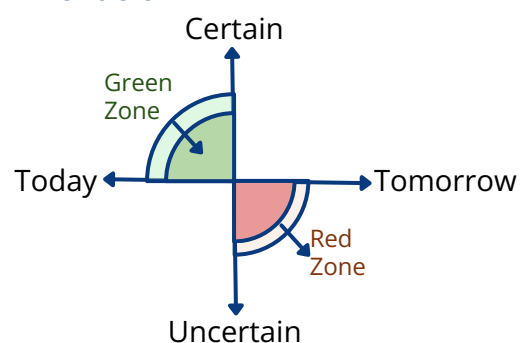
Balance innovation and scaling

Scaling means that organisations enhance their strengths or improve their processes, creating immediate and predictable benefits and positive impact. On the other hand, innovating outside a knowledge base may lead to failure due to the unpredictable nature of its outcomes. So, when scaling, it's key to consider the correlation between scaling and innovating in a way that aligns with each social enterprise´s goal.

Scaling

Certain — Today — Tomorrow — Uncertain

Green Zone / Red Zone

Innovation

Certain — Today — Tomorrow — Uncertain

Green Zone / Red Zone

Annex 4: High-growth and scalable social enterprises

Phases

- **Phase 1: Ideas.** Creation, communication, ideas evaluation
- **Phase 2: Piloting.** Experimenting, designing
- **Phase 3: Scaling.** Adoption of successful innovation outputs
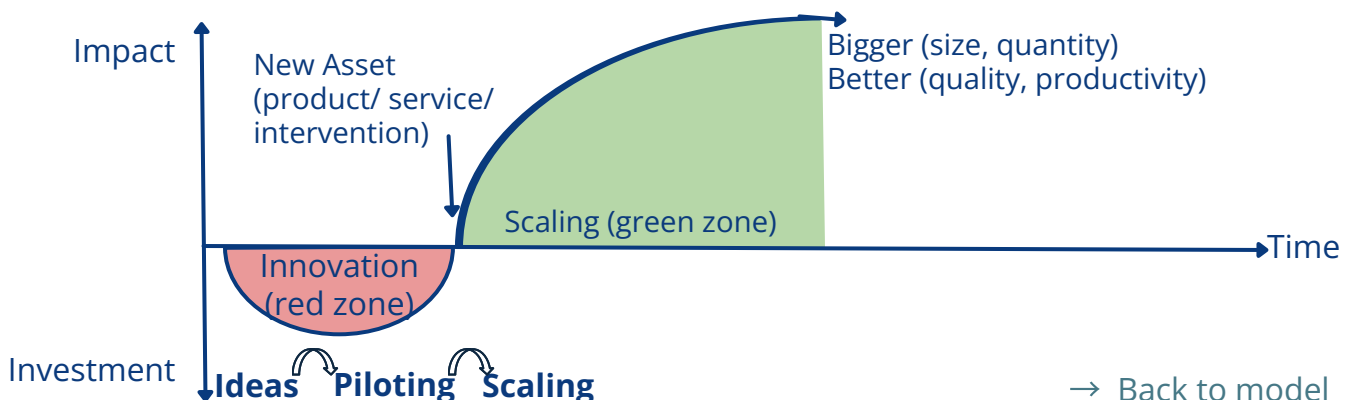
Pathologies

Phase 1: Ideas
- Ideas never get started
- Too many bad ideas (investing scarce resources in bad ideas that never create much impact)

Phase 2: Piloting
- Stopping too early (premature withdrawal of resources for experimentation and piloting)
- Stopping too late

Phase 3: Scaling
- Scaling through productivity increases
- Scaling through adding resources (resources may not always be the best option)
- Scaling through replication
- Scaling through knowledge transfer

Impact

New Asset
(product/ service/
intervention)

Bigger (size, quantity)
Better (quality, productivity)

Scaling (green zone)

Time

Innovation
(red zone)

Investment

Ideas Piloting Scaling

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