Center for Universal Education at BROOKINGS

Real-time Scaling Lab Guidelines:

Implementing a participatory, adaptive learning approach to scaling

A Real-time Scaling Lab (RTSL) is a participatory, action research approach to support scaling[1] impact, developed by the Center for Universal Education (CUE) at Brookings in collaboration with local institutions around the world. The RTSL was developed for use in the education sector, although it can be adapted to support scaling processes in other sectors. This guidance is intended for practitioners, policymakers, funders, and researchers engaged in scaling and sustaining the impact of an education or other social sector initiative.

An RTSL is a process to collaboratively document, learn from, and support ongoing efforts to scale and sustain the impact of an initiative.[2] An RTSL combines ongoing documentation and analysis of the scaling journey with a series of in-person and virtual convenings and workshops that bring together a diverse group of key stakeholders to collectively plan for sustainable scale, discuss and reflect on challenges and opportunities faced as they arise, and develop and test adaptations and course corrections to scaling strategies through an iterative learning process. The lab offers concrete opportunities for peer learning and exchange, while also generating knowledge on the "how" of scaling impact. Many of the other scaling resources developed by CUE can be used in conjunction with the RTSL process.[3]

Why a Real-time Scaling Lab?

Previous research conducted by CUE[4] and the broader scaling literature[5] have identified common scaling challenges faced by education actors across contexts and areas of focus—some of which are shared by other sectors. These include a lack of evidence use in decisionmaking; limited opportunities for those involved in the delivery of an initiative to pause, reflect, and make adjustments based on learning; and that many engaged in scaling work in isolation and would benefit from sharing experiences with peers and problem-solving collaboratively. Further, research and practical experience demonstrate that scaling is not a linear process but requires ongoing iteration and adaptations to fit different contexts and local needs, mechanisms to address problems and opportunities as they arise, and space for data-driven course corrections. The RTSL approach was designed specifically to respond to these scaling needs.

1. In this document, scaling refers to a range of approaches that both expand and deepen the impact of education interventions, leading to lasting improvements in people's lives.
2. The term "initiative" is used here broadly, which may include a program, policy, approach, idea, or practice.
3. See: www.brookings.edu/scalingtools
4. Jenny Perlman Robinson and Rebecca Winthrop with Eileen McGivney, "Millions Learning: Scaling Up Quality Education in Developing Countries" (Washington DC: Brookings Institution, 2016).
5. Seminal scaling works referenced include: Rogers (1962); Myers (1984), Uvin, and Miller (1994); Moore (1999); Samoff et al. (2001); Coburn (2003); ExpandNet, MSI, and World Health Organization (2007); Hartmann and Linn (2008); ExpandNet and World Health Organization (2011); Dembele et al (2011); and Chandy et al. (2013).

What are the key principles of the Real-time Scaling Lab approach?

The RTSL approach was developed through extensive research and informed by seminal scaling literature, collective impact and adaptive learning mechanisms, and a wide range of related methodologies and frameworks, such as improvement science, systems thinking, and change management. It has been applied and refined by organizations and institutions in a number of low- and middle-income countries over the past few years. The RTSL approach is grounded in the following core scaling principles:[6]

- **Problem-driven and user-centered**: The RTSL process provides a structured, neutral space for diverse local actors to identify an urgent problem and explore how the initiative of focus can address the problem's root causes, rather than scaling a pre-determined initiative.[7]
- **Systems approach**: The RTSL considers scaling through the lens of systems as a whole and the interplay of relationships within them, power dynamics, norms, and incentives, rather than considering individual components independently. As such, the approach focuses on enacting and sustaining a change in the system, rather than growing a particular project.
- **Political and technical factors**: The RTSL process focuses on identifying and adapting initiatives and pathways to scale that are politically, economically, financially, and socially feasible within the local context, recognizing that technical strategies to maximize effectiveness alone are insufficient to sustain impact at large scale.
- **Multistakeholder participation**: Sustainably scaling initiatives requires a "winning coalition" of diverse actors to drive change forward. The RTSL brings together stakeholders with a diversity of perspectives and experiences to plan for scale, identify structural barriers hindering scaling, and address underlying causes within the system that affect scaling.
- **Adaptive orientation and data for learning**: The RTSL employs an iterative process of testing, refining, and adjusting scaling strategies based on data and new insights, with periodic moments for group reflection deliberately built in.[8]
- **Peer-to-peer learning and exchange**: An important aspect of the RTSL is engaging with a global, national, and/or local learning community of those involved in a scaling process to share experiences, reflect on common challenges and opportunities, and collectively problem-solve.[9]

When might a Real-time Scaling Lab be useful?

Scaling is a long-term and staged process, and an RTSL is not likely to be useful at every stage. An RTSL is likely not a good fit for a situation where stakeholders are exploring "what" to scale—searching for innovations or piloting initiatives—or for efforts that do not yet have a clear vision to scale. An RTSL is most useful once scaling is underway for examining questions about how to advance the process and address challenges and constraints as they arise.

An RTSL can be particularly useful at the following points in a scaling journey:

- When looking to expand and deepen the impact of an effective initiative and create sustainable change within a system, rather than implement a multi-year project and then move on.

6. These core principles are further elaborated on in the report: Jenny Perlman Robinson and Molly Curtiss, "Millions Learning Real-time Scaling Labs: Designing an adaptive learning process to support large-scale change in education," (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2018).
7. Leni Wild, David Booth, Clare Cummings, Marta Foresti, and Joseph Wale, "Adapting development: Improving services to the poor," (London, UK: Overseas Development Institute, 2015).
8. Katherine Haugh and Monalisa Salib, "What difference does collaborating, learning, and adapting make to development? Key findings from our literature review," (Washington DC: USAID, 2017).
9. While there are numerous avenues for engaging in this type of learning and peer knowledge exchange, the Global Community of Practice on Scaling Development Outcomes is an open, primarily virtual learning community focused on issues of scale and systems change, with nine current thematic and sectoral working groups: https://www.scalingcommunityofpractice.com/.

- When looking to learn more about the scaling process, build capacity for scaling and systems change, and document the "how" of the scaling process—not just the end results.
- When the scaling process for an initiative involves multiple stakeholders from diverse sectors, each of whom may have different scaling-related goals or incentives.

An RTSL is not intended to be a standalone, academic exercise, but rather a collective learning and continuous improvement approach that supports progress toward the scaling goal(s) of an existing education initiative. A scaling lab is intended to assist and support ongoing efforts to sustainably address an urgent challenge through the scaling of an education initiative by offering a structured and systematic process to plan, reflect, and make progress toward scaling goals and refine scaling strategies.

How to initiate and lead a Real-time Scaling Lab process?

An RTSL process can be initiated and led by a variety of different institutions—ranging from the institution or organization originating the initiative of focus (such as an NGO, government, social enterprise, or private sector), the institution adopting or scaling the initiative, an institution funding the implementation or the scaling process, a neutral third-party actor such as an institution with scaling expertise, or some combination working in partnership. Regardless of who serves as the initiating and facilitating institution(s), it is critical that 1) the process be strongly grounded in the local context, and 2) key government actors are actively engaged in the RTSL process, given the central role government plays in scaling and sustaining education initiatives.

The intention of the RTSL is not to duplicate existing groups or work in parallel to current systems, but rather to implement a collaborative and systematic approach to scaling and broader systems change. The RTSL can be embedded into existing structures, like working groups, communities of practice, or existing governance structures, or can be established as a standalone group. There are inherent tradeoffs to the different approaches: Embedding an RTSL process into existing mechanisms or structures may be more advantageous for developing buy-in and ongoing engagement of key stakeholders, reducing potential duplication of activities or the impression that the group is "starting from scratch," and ensuring sustainability of the RTSL approach within the system. However, setting up the RTSL as a standalone structure may allow for the lab to be nimbler and to more quickly respond to changes in the education ecosystem, avoid some of the challenges of large bureaucracies, and better enable the RTSL to disrupt the status quo with an innovation or new way of working. Ultimately, the choice should be determined by the scaling goal for the initiative and its place in the scaling journey, as well as the realities of the local context.

The RTSL approach was intentionally created to be flexible and adaptable, so that it can be tailored to the initiative being scaled and the broader context. The duration of the lab process depends on the individual initiative and can be tailored to the specific circumstances; however, experience to date suggests that a lab process should last multiple years to allow sufficient time to lay the foundations for the work of the lab, build ownership among multiple stakeholders, develop and refine scaling strategies, and have opportunities for multiple iterations of reflection and adaptation based on new data and insights.

Below follows a general outline of steps in a typical lab process.

Step	Details
Lay the groundwork for the RTSL launch	
Clarify the problem and initiative of focus for the RTSL	The institution(s) initiating the RTSL should begin by identifying an evidenced-based education initiative (or components of one) in the process of scaling as the lab focus. **It is important to clearly articulate that while the lab supports and documents the process of scaling a particular initiative, the ultimate goal of the lab is to sustainably address a deeply perceived need in the local context**. Therefore, an important first step in the process is to articulate a priority challenge that the initiative aims to address, develop an in-depth understanding of this challenge and its root causes, investigate the government's key priorities related to this challenge, and explore what has already been tried to address it. While this may seem redundant for actors who already have extensive knowledge and experience working in a context, it is essential to ensure that the initiative of focus responds directly to the root causes of the priority challenge (in addition to addressing other important considerations such as demonstrating impact and scalability).[10] Early conversations should ensure all stakeholders engaged in the lab have a common understanding of the nature and scope of the problem that the initiative seeks to address (including how the initiative may benefit other sectors), as well as the details of the initiative itself.
Determine lab structure	The leading institution(s), drawing on local context and background research, determines whether the RTSL should be a standalone group or embedded into an existing structure.
Identify key personnel	Institution(s) leading the RTSL identifies an individual or set of individuals to serve as the manager of the RTSL process. • The manager should be a local senior-level individual in the sector of focus who has the network and authority to convene the essential stakeholders, facilitate lab convenings and scaling discussions, and manage outreach and follow up with key stakeholders. The manager should be deeply familiar with the context and have a strong knowledge of government operations. In addition, the manager should have the time and capacity to dedicate to this role and drive the RTSL process forward. This might be a person within the leading institution or government, or the role might be split between several individuals with complementary skills, knowledge, and relationships. Institution(s) leading the RTSL identifies an individual or set of individuals to serve as the researcher for the RTSL process. • The researcher is responsible for capturing details of the scaling process—including challenges and opportunities faced, adaptations or course corrections tested, and the results of those tests—to help inform the discussion and reflection taking place between lab members. Often this means collating and synthesizing existing data but may include collecting primary data as needed such as through key stakeholder interviews. The researcher also supports the manager in organizing and leading lab events, including setting agendas, taking notes, and conducting outreach to lab members. This might be an individual within the leading institution, the government, or an external actor, and the role can be split between multiple individuals. • A strong working relationship between the lab manager and researcher is critical. While the manager was typically a more senior individual, the collaboration works best where there was strong mutual respect and the researcher is free to speak their mind and push back when needed. The division of roles between these individuals may also evolve over time, with researchers taking on more convening activities and managers pushing forward the research agenda.

10. The Education Scalability Checklist can be a useful tool to explore issues around the scalability of the initiative of focus. See: Brookings CUE, Educate!, MSI, Pratham, STiR Education, and VVOB, "Education Scalability Checklist," (2021), https://www.vvob.org/en/news/education-scalability-checklist-resource

Step	Details
Conduct relevant background research	Leading institution(s), along with the researcher, conducts background research on the local context, including stakeholder mapping and political economy analysis (of the sector of focus as well as other relevant sectors).[11] Even for those with deep experience in the local system, this research can provide important insights on who to engage in the RTSL and what factors to consider in scaling strategies.
Identify and engage lab members	Leading institution(s), together with the manager, identifies and invites key stakeholders representing a diversity of sectors and perspectives (which may come from government, civil society, the private sector, funding organizations, teacher organizations, etc.) that are already involved or who will need to be involved in scaling the initiative to participate in the lab process. Drawing perspectives from a diversity of viewpoints can result in stronger problem analysis, avoid relying on unilateral assumptions and preconceptions, and build horizontal engagement for scaling. The exact number of lab members can vary based on the initiative and context, but the size should be limited enough to enable meaningful group discussion. In general, participants should be of sufficient seniority that they have the decision-making power to act on the learning generated through the RTSL, while still being engaged in the scaling process. In some cases where it can be difficult for senior level leaders to commit to regular meetings, it can be helpful to include mid-level leaders who can regularly engage and report back to high-level leaders. It can also be beneficial to include voices from regional and local levels, including frontline workers such as teachers and school leaders. If the RTSL process is embedded into an existing structure, consideration should be given to whether any additional stakeholders should be invited to participate in RTSL activities outside of the existing membership. Prior to the lab launch, it is important for the RTSL manager and researcher to take adequate time meet with the lab members individually and in small groups to socialize the RTSL approach, including to explain the purpose of the RTSL, receive input into the design, establish expectations and benefits of participation, and build buy-in and engagement for the process.
Launch of multiyear RTSL process	
Hold initial lab convening	The RTSL is officially launched with a convening of all lab members to align around the purpose of the RTSL, establish a common language and understanding around scaling, discuss why scaling is a challenging and long-term proposition, and build engagement for the process. It is critical in this first lab convening to give sufficient time to discussing the concept of scaling to help reach a common understanding around terminology and principles. The convening (or even a subsequent one) then focuses on articulating a key challenge in the system and its underlying causes to address and considering how the initiative of focus serves as a potential contribution to sustainably address the challenge. If all lab members are not deeply familiar with the initiative of focus, it is useful in these first gatherings to include a presentation on the initiative and its scaling progress to date.

11. Larry Cooley, with Tim Reilly, Nitika Tolani, Jess Ngo, and Gwynne Zodrow, "Scaling Up: From Vision to Large-Scale Change: Tools for Practitioners, second edition," (Washington DC: Management Systems International, a Tetra Tech Company, 2021).

Step	Details
Develop and/or refine a scaling goal and scaling theory of change	Lab members, facilitated by the manager, collectively articulate a shared scaling goal and scaling theory of change for the initiative. The scaling goal should be concrete, measurable, and time bound. The scaling theory of change should detail the priority scaling drivers—or levers of change—that participants determine should be tackled first to advance the scaling goal. A driver diagram[12] can be a useful resource for the development of a scaling theory of change. This discussion should take place at the beginning of the lab process—developed by all lab members or a specific subset—depending on the context and initiative. Key questions to consider: • *What exactly are we proposing to scale? Is it the full initiative as piloted, key components of the initiative, or a new way of working, etc.?* • *What is the end goal? What does success look like in 1-2 years, in 5-7 years, and in 10 years?* • *What pathway(s) do we intend to pursue to achieve this goal?* • *What are the key drivers or levers of change we need to focus on to make progress toward achieving this goal?* • *What stage of scaling is the initiative at?*[13]
Develop and/or refine a scaling strategy	Next, lab members develop or refine a scaling strategy based on the shared vision and theory of change (see the tool "Scaling Strategy Worksheet").[14] The scaling strategy should result from the lab members' collective strategic thinking and serve as a "north star" guiding the lab group's efforts. It should be a living document—to be continuously revisited and updated based on new insights, data, and learning, as well as changes in the broader environment. If a scaling strategy for the initiative already exists, it can be used as a starting point. While the exact process should be tailored to each RTSL, developing and refining a scaling strategy often takes place over several months, through small group conversations, iterations on the strategy, and discussion and validation in larger group meetings. It can be useful for a first draft to be created by a small team, drawing directly from previous RTSL discussions and existing data (such as a stakeholder mapping and/or political economy analysis). The researcher may undertake additional background research to fill gaps and triangulate information. Once an initial draft is developed, it can be brought to an all-lab convening for members to discuss and provide input on key issues. In some cases, it can be more strategic to bring a streamlined or "external" version of the strategy to this broader discussion. Lab members should then identify concrete steps to advance the scaling strategy and address challenges and opportunities in the coming months, as well as any simple measures to track whether these actions are leading to improvement. Other scaling tools might also prove useful in informing the development of the scaling strategy (see endnotes for suggestions).[15]

12. Lloyd Provost and Brandon Bennett, "What's your theory? Driver diagram serves as tool for building and testing theories for improvement," *Quality Progress* (July 2015): 36-43.
13. Example of six discrete scaling stages can be found at: International Development Innovation Alliance, "Insights on Scaling Innovation," (June 2017).
14. Jenny Perlman Robinson, Molly Curtiss Wyss, and Patrick Hannahan, "Scaling Strategy Worksheet: Planning for Scale," (Washington DC: Brookings Institution, July 2021).
15. For example, it can be helpful to conduct a baseline assessment of how far along an intervention is institutionalized—or integrated into existing national structures—to track and monitor progress over time. The Implementation Tracker can be used for undertaking baseline and ongoing assessments and informing next steps. See: Jenny Perlman Robinson, Molly Curtiss Wyss, and Patrick Hannahan, "Institutionalization Tracker: Assessing the integration of an education initiative into a system," (Washington DC: Brookings Institution, July 2021).

Step	Details
Implement RTSL iterative learning cycles	
Put scaling strategy into practice and document process	Once an initial strategy is agreed on, lab members put scaling strategies into practice, including negotiating unresolved issues, exploring remaining questions, and testing adaptations (see "Adaptation Tracker").[16] Throughout the process, the researcher (supported by others) collects, collates, and synthesizes data and key learnings on the scaling process, progress toward scaling targets, and strategies tested for addressing key challenges and opportunities. Where needed, the researcher and others may conduct supporting research on key issues or questions as they arise to further inform the scaling process. Documentation and data collection can take many forms—such as school observations, key informant interviews, surveys, consultations with decisionmakers, and documentation of lab convenings, as well as compiling existing programmatic and administrative data—but the purpose is to inform reflection and decisions around scaling plans and strategy. It is important to be aware of what is feasible for one researcher to collect, and identify when it may be necessary for partners to share existing data or pool resources to conduct larger scale data collection and analysis.
Reflect on emerging insights and changing landscapes, and explore key issues and unresolved questions through periodic convenings, meetings, discussions, and workshops	The RTSL manager convenes lab members periodically to reflect on the scaling process, and changes in the broader ecosystem, identify opportunities and obstacles confronted or anticipated in making progress toward sustainable scale, and propose adjustments to the scaling strategy or potential actions to address these obstacles based on data and learning. This reflection and planning can take a variety of forms, depending on the needs and structure of the RTSL. It may include full lab group periodic convenings approximately every few months for reflection, analysis, and strategic decisionmaking; smaller subgroups to focus on specific scaling issues on a more regular basis; or smaller, more focused meetings planned on an ad hoc basis. Individual members might be tasked with certain activities according to their position/expertise, and the lab manager may regularly share information about the scaling process, key milestones achieved, and critical bottlenecks faced to keep lab members informed. While the exact structure, approach, and rhythm will differ depending on the initiative, the system, and the stakeholders, ongoing examination of scaling efforts based on new data and ongoing changes in the broader environment is essential. Broad questions to discuss can include: • *What is working and not working and why? What assumptions did we make? What lessons did we learn?* • *What changes need to be made to the scaling strategy? What adjustments should be made to the initiative? Do we need to reevaluate the scaling pathway(s) or goal(s)? What has changed in the education ecosystem?* • *What actions might we introduce to address the root causes of the challenges identified or to leverage a new opportunity? What does relevant theory and research suggest? What seems plausible to practitioners? To policymakers? What addresses the systemic problems we face? What is financially, politically, and socially feasible?*

16. Jenny Perlman Robinson, Molly Curtiss Wyss, and Patrick Hannahan, "Adaptation Tracker: Learning from changes throughout a scaling process," (Washington DC: Brookings Institution, July 2021).

The RTSL is also a place to bring research and expertise together from different sources to support the scaling process. This might include inputs from external actors, such as cost experts or partners undertaking scaling in other contexts, but should certainly also offer a platform to learn and benefit from lab members' expertise and deep context knowledge in areas such as financing, curriculum development, and policy innovation. Having a variety of stakeholders in the room together—jointly analyzing problems and collaboratively exploring solutions— can both save time and increase buy-in, as stakeholders develop new ideas together in response to a commonly held-view of the challenge.

Throughout the multiyear, iterative lab process, the RTSL follows cycles of implementing scaling strategies, testing changes, and reflecting on data, followed by reflections and discussions between lab members to analyze results, learn from what works and what does not, make adjustments, and progress along the scaling pathway(s).

Where can I go for more information?

- More details on how the Real-time Scaling Labs functioned in practice, including what worked well, what challenges were faced, and what lessons were learned, can be found in "Scaling impact in education for transformative change: Practical recommendations from the Real-Time Scaling Labs" (Brookings 2023).
- More details on the Real-time Scaling Lab methods and approach can be found in "Millions Learning Real-time Scaling Labs: Designing an adaptive learning process to support large-scale change in education" (Brookings 2018)[17] and project website: www.brookings.edu/product/millions-learning/.
- Findings from the first years of implementing the Real-time Scaling Lab approach can be found in the "Millions Learning Real-time Scaling Labs: Emerging findings and key insights" (Brookings 2020)[18] and accompanying blog post "Five emerging insights on scale and systems change in education."[19]
- The CUE team can also be contacted with further questions at CUE@brookings.edu.

17. Robinson and Curtiss, "Millions Learning Real-time Scaling Labs."
18. Jenny Perlman Robinson, Molly Curtiss, and Patrick Hannahan, "Millions Learning Real-time Scaling Labs: Emerging findings and key insights," (Washington DC: Brookings Institution, 2020).
19. Jenny Perlman Robinson, Molly Curtiss, and Patrick Hannahan, "Five emerging insights on scale and systems change in education," *Brookings Institution*, June 24, 2020, https://www.brookings.edu/blog/education-plus-development/2020/06/24/five-emerging-insights-on-scale-and-systems-change-in-education/.

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