

LESSONS LEARNED IN PROVIDING TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE TO PRIVATE HEALTH INNOVATORS

LEARNING BRIEF

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As countries strive to achieve universal health coverage, private companies and nonprofits are creating innovative products and services to expand health care access and protect people from financial hardship. USAID launched the Inclusive Health Access Prize (IHAP) to recognize five private innovators working to improve the accountability, affordability, accessibility, and reliability of health care for poor and vulnerable populations. In addition to cash prize awards, the winners were offered technical assistance (TA) to develop their capacity to scale up their innovations sustainably.

The IHAP Winners

[GIC Space \(Cameroon\)](#) pioneered the GICMED product, which provides access to screening, diagnostic, and treatment services for breast and cervical cancer using a portable microscope connected to a smartphone and telemedicine app. These technologies allow community health facilities to remotely screen and diagnose women, with real-time pathology confirmation where they receive care.

[mDoc \(Nigeria\)](#) harnesses technology to increase patients' access to chronic disease support services, and partners with hospitals to create integrated care solutions for people with chronic health care needs. Members access care virtually and in person from teams that help them create and achieve their health goals using digital tools, nudges, and in-person meetings.



[JokkoSanté \(Senegal\)](#) is a digital payment app that helps ensure that money for health is used as intended, by allowing clients to pay for prescriptions with points instead of cash. The application allows health programs, including those sponsored by employers for their employees, or others through corporate social responsibility programs, to buy points online for people.

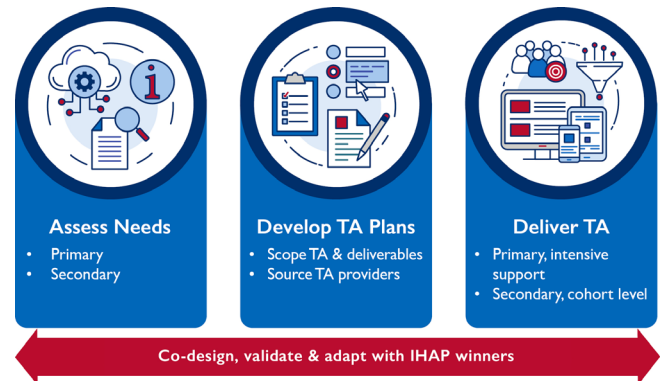
[Piramal Swasthya Management and Research Institute \(India\)](#) provides telemedicine and community outreach services, including a mobile medical van with a basic laboratory and pharmacy, that make primary health care more accessible and available to underserved populations. Its helpline improves access to health information, provides medical advice for minor ailments, and links health workers to remote areas.

[Infiuss \(Cameroon\)](#) is an online blood bank that provides hospitals and patients with quick access to blood. Infiuss created a database of hospital blood banks that enables users to use their phone (text, call, or a mobile app) to request a blood type and quantity.



Women in a rural area receive primary health care services through Piramal Swasthya’s community outreach program. (Photo: Piramal Swasthya)

TA Approach: Co-Design and Participatory Delivery



A participatory process was used to identify and validate TA priorities with the IHAP winners. This helped align support with winners’ priorities and encouraged the winners to commit time and resources to the TA.

TA needs were classified as primary or secondary needs. All primary TA focused on strengthening business models and organizational capacities to support their scale and financial sustainability. Most winners needed to validate assumptions underlying their business models before they could advance their respective strategies to achieve sustainability. Table I summarizes the primary TA and the vision of each enterprise for the future.

Secondary TA needs were addressed through support delivered to the full cohort of winners, providing opportunities to convene and learn from each other. An important initial step of the TA was a facilitated organizational capacity-building assessment, which highlighted additional areas where winners might require support. The TA activity also organized a peer learning session on partnering with USAID, and conducted an investment landscape analysis to identify potential investors relevant to the winners. TA was delivered through in-house experts and local and international partners and consultants from May 2020–March 2021.



TABLE I. TA NEEDS AND OUTPUTS, AND WINNERS' NEXT STEPS AND VISIONS FOR SCALE

WINNER	GOAL OF TA	TA OUTPUTS	VISION FOR SCALE IN FIVE YEARS
GIC Space (Cameroon)	Standardized operating model to support replication and scale	Landscape analysis of relevant diagnostic products and business models Operations manual to support business expansion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish partnerships in Ghana, Benin, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Reach 500,000 women in rural communities. Integrate diagnostic products to screen for neglected tropical diseases.
mDoc (Nigeria)	Strengthened human resources systems to support scale and incentivize employee performance	Collaboratively defined Organizational values Performance management framework and tools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reach 1 million additional users by scaling its in-person services through partnerships with public and private health facilities in Nigeria, Ghana, and South Africa. Further streamline and enhance its digital platform and systems.
JokkoSanté (Senegal)	Stronger business model to support expansion Compelling value proposition for potential partners and investors	Market and business analysis Strategy recommendations with two-year action plan Customizable pitch deck	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Explore and test different customer segments for their innovative technology platform, intending to reach at least 3 million people.
Piramal Swasthya (India)	Sustainability strategy to support organizational goals	Business development training workshop Financial sustainability strategy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Transform the lives of 54 million people, of whom 20 million will be tribal people, through the Tribal Health Collaborative.
Infiuss* (Cameroon)	Financing strategy to support expansion in West Africa Updated value proposition for potential investors	*Infiuss was unable to participate in the co-designed TA due to personal and professional challenges.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Expand operations to serve 100,000 people across West Africa. Set up their own blood testing facility in order to reduce costs for patients.



Lessons on Supporting Innovative Health Businesses

As part of the TA provision, the activity embedded a process to intentionally capture lessons related to working with local private innovators to optimize their contributions to health system goals. This process included periodic check-ins and facilitated, semi-structured discussions with both TA recipients and providers. The activity team also conducted an anonymous feedback survey with the IHAP organizations. There were four overarching questions (see box) that aimed to capture insights in two areas: 1) challenges private innovators face in scaling and in contributing to health system goals, and 2) how to best design TA and deliver it to private health innovators.

What challenges do private innovators face in scaling and contributing to health system goals?

Access to finance: Health innovators need working capital to test and adapt their business models, hire and retain talent, and invest in new markets. This is a common need among innovators, who often enter “the missing middle,” where they lack financing to advance from the seed or idea stage to the growth stage, where they are more likely to become viable.¹ Limited access to finance impedes expansion and limits the enterprise’s potential to contribute more significantly to health system goals.

Talent gaps: Innovators typically have lean teams, characterized by gaps in organizational structures, team members serving multiple roles, and challenges attracting and retaining talent amid competition from larger development partners. These human resources gaps make it difficult to drive key organizational functions, such as business development, required for sustainability and scale.

Balancing business sustainability and health impact: Private health innovators are driven by their

Activity Learning Questions

1. What factors contribute to effective TA with private sector organizations, particularly innovative, small- to mid-sized social enterprises/start-ups?
2. What and how are IHAP winners contributing to the health sector in terms of increased health services availability, access, equity, and sustainability, as well as improved enabling environments?
3. What challenges do IHAP winners face in scaling and sustaining their innovations within broader health systems?
4. As private sector innovators, how are IHAP winners engaging and working with the public sector?

social missions to deliver health impact, including among vulnerable populations, but must create sustainable businesses to generate that impact. As is the case with many early-stage health innovators, several IHAP winners had not yet given adequate attention to generating revenue and sound business operations.

Limited visibility: Innovators often work with public and private partners at the local level—for example, through memoranda of understanding, facility service contracts, and formal and informal technical discussions. They struggle to access people in government ministries, regulatory bodies, and health implementing partners that could help them forge the partnerships they require in order to scale.

How can supporters best design and deliver TA for private health innovators?

Lessons from this work can be helpful in future efforts to support local private innovators and the health system stakeholders that seek to partner with them.

¹ USAID, Unleashing Private capital for Global Health Innovation: https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1864/USAID_Private_Capital_508.pdf



A medical specialist uses the GICMED telemedicine platform to remotely screen a woman for cancer. (Photo: GIC Space)

Plan for longer-term engagements to deliver meaningful technical assistance to innovator teams and support implementation of new tools and strategies. It takes significant time to build trust with innovators and develop the thorough understandings of their business operations and finances required to deliver effective support. Additional time and resources would have enabled support to innovators to implement strategic guidance and new tools resulting from TA, and to monitor achievement of intended organizational outcomes. Technical support delivered over two to three years allows time to understand innovators' challenges, engage their full team, and support them in executing changes in their business models. After initial TA produces new tools or strategies, periodic check-ins with innovators can ensure teams are supported through execution without requiring significant resources.

Provide financial support for innovators to strengthen their organizations holistically, not only to advance specific programs or pilots. As is typical of early-stage social enterprises, the IHAP winner teams had limited bandwidth to engage in TA, and gaps in leadership for advancing recommendations that resulted from TA. Donors that want to support the sustainability and scale of private innovators

should provide opportunities for unrestricted funding to support the development of early-stage organizations. These resources would aid innovators in their efforts to absorb technical assistance, report on health and financial performance, and develop the systems required to manage USAID funds directly.

Design flexible, demand-driven support, complemented with external expert assessment. Private sector innovations are often advanced by small start-up teams, and effective TA requires substantial engagement from innovator leaders. To secure this level of participation, TA must align with business priorities. Further, TA providers must consider how much TA the innovator teams can absorb and be flexible about how, and how quickly, to work with innovators. While demand-driven support is critical, it should be complemented with external expertise, which can spot challenges and push innovators to improve their business models. IHAP winners found that having external experts assess their businesses and provide strategic guidance was the most useful part of the TA. This guidance provided innovators with an opportunity to take a step back from day-to-day operations and assess their business models.

“The TA helped us identify our biggest pain points as an organization and helped us navigate the process of appropriate solutions for our unique context... We are emerging with a stronger foundation for our venture to grow, a better implementation model to facilitate scale.”

—Conrad Tankou
GICSpace Founder

Leverage virtual platforms to provide more collaborative and less resource-intensive TA. Providing 100 percent remote TA in response to COVID-19 resulted in longer times to build rapport with winner organizations and to fully understand organizational challenges and team dynamics. However, the use of virtual platforms and shorter



meetings over a prolonged time period allowed broader team participation in the TA; for example, full teams and mid-level staff were able to join meetings with TA providers. The use of virtual platforms also allowed for one-off consultations with specialized experts based anywhere in the world. When business travel resumes, donors and TA providers should continue to leverage virtual platforms to allow for less resource-intensive and more inclusive TA delivery, with the understanding that this may prolong delivery timelines.

Promote visibility of private innovators by introducing them to potential partners for financing and scale. Donors and implementing partners have broad networks that can support innovators in a variety of ways. These networks include local government officials who can support enabling regulation and share government priorities, USAID missions and health projects that can pilot and build evidence for innovators' solutions, public and

private facilities that can enable innovators to expand their reach, and philanthropic and commercial investors that can provide financing. Identifying opportunities for public-private engagement should be a priority, given that public pathways may create the broadest health impact and reach the most vulnerable populations.

Create opportunities for peer learning and networking. Private innovators are often working at the local level, with limited networks and visibility into experiences outside their countries. Winner organizations expressed strong interest in learning from experiences in other geographies and multi-country landscapes to help validate their own business models. Winners also expressed interest in peer-to-peer exchange and networking with investors and partners. Donors and implementers should design TA to provide innovators with access to peer learning platforms and networking opportunities that make it easy to form useful connections.



A client logs onto mDoc, a mobile and web-based service that helps people manage their diabetes and high blood pressure. (Photo: mDoc)

The Local Health System Sustainability Project (LHSS) under the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) Integrated Health Systems IDIQ helps low- and middle-income countries transition to sustainable, self-financed health systems as a means to support access to universal health coverage. The project works with partner countries and local stakeholders to reduce financial barriers to care and treatment, ensure equitable access to essential health services for all people, and improve the quality of health services. Led by Abt Associates, the five-year project will build local capacity to sustain strong health system performance, supporting countries on their journey to self-reliance and prosperity.

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