



# RESEARCH BRIEF

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## Scaling Up Sustainable Solutions

*Scaling up existing, small solutions which already create new economic opportunities and governance structures is an essential path forward to achieving greater global sustainability.*

### Background

Climate change, along with other environmentally destructive practices such as over-fishing and deforestation, have increased the risk of extreme weather events, food system failures, biodiversity loss and geopolitical instability across the planet. Transitioning to practices that promote long-term global sustainability is required to reverse this dangerous trajectory. Many solutions for a sustainability transition are already known and have been adopted and tested by actors in the public, private and non-profit sectors such as keeping fish catch within sustainable levels to prevent fishery collapse. Despite this knowledge, only a small fraction of market players have voluntarily adopted sustainability solutions and resistant actors often stall progress. For example, market shares of eco-certified and fair-trade products rarely exceed 20% and only a small fraction of the world's 80,000 multinational companies have played an active role investing in sustainable development in the last 20 years. Given the pace of change in climate, loss of biodiversity and other global problems, scaling up solutions is an urgent but under-studied challenge.

This brief is based on Stanford research which examined prior efforts to achieve sustainability transitions at scale and actions needed to overcome the obstacles inhibiting more widespread adoption.

### POINTS FOR POLICY MAKERS

- ▶ **Engaging coalitions of public and private sector actors who are incentivized to align their motivations is necessary to scale-up sustainability initiatives.** Pathways to scale-up may involve leveraging a dominant player's market power, integrating successful initiatives into public policy or reinforcing government-led change with private efforts.
- ▶ **Promoting successful and wider-scale adoption of current sustainability solutions involves three strategies:** improving understanding and raising awareness for a critical mass of stakeholders; creating motivation and incentives for new practices, by embedding the practices into institutional and policy standards or by modifying taxes and subsidies; and developing capabilities to implement new practices at a socially acceptable cost.
- ▶ **Realizing stakeholder benefits requires that a sufficient number of actors align their objectives to make sustainable production the norm.** Even if there are benefits from sustainable production for every stakeholder, the benefits will only be realized if all are working to reinforce the transition toward greater sustainability.
- ▶ **Creating complementary public policies is required to overcome challenges that prevent greater corporate scale up of sustainable practices.** Developing formal regulations can motivate further actions while disclosure requirements can help create transparency. Integrating public policy can also reduce demand for less sustainable products.



The research analyzes the challenges, illustrates the main pathways and then draws lessons on the importance of creating synergies among multiple actors as well as the conditions for achieving wide-scale sustainability practices.

## Challenges, Pathways, and Lessons

Although trailblazing collaborations among companies, governments and NGOs have shown real progress, significant challenges still exist: corporations must take on operational and financial risks to embark on new sustainability initiatives; governments have competing priorities, particularly with economic development; and NGOs, responsible to their supporters, can compromise only so much in collaborations with businesses and governments.

Three pathways to achieving sustainability scale-up show promise. These include leveraging a dominant corporation's market power, public policy integration and government-led efforts:

- **Market Power:** This pathway is most effective when actors with market power motivate and educate their supply chains while non-profits and governments provide information, support, incentives and legitimacy. Examples: seafood eco-certification programs; zero-deforestation commitments by large companies
- **Public Policy Integration:** After non-profit organizations or progressive actors from the private sector design and pilot voluntary sustainability initiatives, governments adopt successful elements into legal mandates. Examples: Mozambique and the Better Cotton Initiative (BCI); Bolivia's Forestry Law in the mid-1990s
- **Government-led:** Governments lead transformation reinforced by private action. Examples: deforestation in the Brazilian Amazon; Montreal Protocol

Through analysis of past efforts at scaling sustainability actions and interviews conducted with experts and practitioners, the researchers identified nine lessons that may make future efforts more effective. Among the most critical lessons are: scaling up almost always involves collaboration among public, private and non-profit actors; the alignment of incentives and motivations of all relevant actors is critical to success; and actors' roles and stakeholder interactions are dynamic and evolve as the sustainability issue(s) of a specific sector change, partly in response to their activities. Success is not an end-state; it is a continuing process.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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This brief is based on the paper “**Scaling up solutions for a sustainability transition**” published in the journal *One Earth*.

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