

Innovation Ecosystem Approaches: A Learning Brief

Key Insights from the Research & Innovation Systems for Africa (RISA) Fund

August 2025

The Problem with Traditional Approaches

After decades of Challenge Funds and single-solution approaches, the development sector is shifting toward **ecosystem strengthening** – supporting the broader environment that enables innovation to flourish. This learning brief combines foundational guidance with insights from four years of the RISA Fund’s work across six African countries.

Ecosystem approaches take longer and are more complex, but generate wider, more sustainable impact. RISA’s experience demonstrates both the transformative potential and practical implementation realities of this approach.

Development agencies spent years chasing breakthrough innovations like M-PESA through Challenge Funds. Between 2000 and 2014, this approach attracted £850 million across three donors, creating hundreds of competing funds in countries like Kenya.

Results were often disappointing. Only a tiny fraction achieved meaningful scale, while the same “usual suspects” repeatedly won funding. The fundamental flaw was assuming financial support alone could drive sustainable impact.

M-PESA’s success wasn’t just about technology. It was about ecosystem conditions that enabled it to thrive. When tried in South Africa without these conditions, it failed.

WHAT IS RISA?

Research and Innovation Systems for Africa (RISA) Fund is a UK International Development programme that strengthens research and innovation ecosystems, focusing on six countries: Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, Rwanda, and South Africa.

RISA supports locally driven pathways from research to commercialisation, helps build stronger national research institutions, and facilitates access to finance so innovations can thrive.

Key Insight:

It takes an ecosystem to scale an innovation. Just as companies need R&D capacity, countries need strong innovation ecosystems to systematically generate and scale solutions. This led FCDO to launch RISA as the UK government’s first systematic effort at strengthening innovation ecosystems.

28
PROJECTS
**RECEIVED
GRANTS**

£23
MILLION
**MOBILISED
BY GRANTEES**

Why Invest in Ecosystem Strengthening?

RISA's experience underpins the need for adopting ecosystem approaches:



Longer-term, sustainable impact:

Strengthening ecosystem relationships and processes spreads benefits across multiple innovators. RISA facilitated over 80 joint initiatives and mobilized \$37 million – impact extending far beyond any single solution. Training-of-trainers models exemplify this multiplier effect: Viktoria Solutions' 38 trainers went on to train over 400 participants across universities in Kenya and Ethiopia, expanding the reach of the original programme and ensuring broader uptake of key skills and knowledge required to scale research and innovations.



Building social capital:

Traditional Challenge Funds create competition and erode trust. Ecosystem approaches build collaboration and spread benefits equitably. RISA increased representation of marginalized groups through targeted interventions – the University of Gondar's "Women in Science" conference engaged 100 female researchers in training and capacity building, with 10 selected for additional support to scale up their concepts. Meanwhile, Impact Investing Ghana's Deal Source Africa collaborated with SHEBA, an accelerator focused on female-led businesses, connecting 5 selected businesses with 7 impact funds to explore investment opportunities, with 4 moving to further discussions. As one disabled farmer benefiting from Gondar's agricultural training noted: "As a disabled person, living in poverty, I was not able to access such technologies and agricultural inputs. Thanks to the University of Gondar, I'm able to get improved rice, fertilizer, and training and able to use my land and get better rice yield."



Evidence-based deployment:

Comprehensive approaches capture intangible factors like trust levels and power dynamics that determine success. RISA's evidence-driven approach enabled the program to identify where impact was strongest, then concentrate final-year resources accordingly. Rather than continuing to spread efforts across all

activities, RISA focused on five thematic areas showing clearest results: networking and collaboration, gender equality and social inclusion, pathways to scale, policy and enabling environment, and research quality.



Cross-border learning:

Every intervention becomes a vehicle for cross-border learning. RISA facilitated this through initiatives like the Africa Research and Innovation Commercialization Summit convened by partner Heritors Labs in Ghana, bringing together ecosystem actors from research, technology and innovation sectors across Africa. The programme also supported the Internet of Production Alliance's 'Innovative Manufacturing in Africa' project, building research and innovation capabilities of makerspaces across Kenya, Ghana and South Africa that have become educational hubs for training the next generation of engineers and craftspeople.

PATHWAYS TO SCALE



RISA helps innovators and researchers build the capacity, networks, and funding needed to scale. This includes skills development, R&D support, patenting guidance, physical and virtual innovation spaces, and access to finance.

73

innovations transitioned to scale – that's 20% of all supported innovations.



370

innovations supported across six countries.



GHANA: Munkaila Mohammad, Dolca Fresh

With support from the University of Ghana Business School and the RISA programme, Munkaila developed essential production and business skills. He is now scaling up Dolca Fresh to meet growing demand and explore export opportunities.

Defining an Ecosystem Strengthening Approach

Adopting an ecosystem approach means fundamentally changing how innovation interventions are designed, implemented and evaluated. It requires contextualising decisions around multiple actors' needs, targeting support into ecosystem weaknesses that benefit current and future participants.

Approaches to consider:

Entrepreneurial approaches create supportive environments for entrepreneurship in nascent ecosystems. RISA used this in Ethiopia, supporting Jimma University to establish an innovation incubation centre for mentoring and collaboration, particularly benefiting disadvantaged students.

Innovation-oriented approaches work with ecosystems having human capital but needing stronger scaling processes. RISA applied this in Kenya, supporting the University of Nairobi to develop big data algorithms while training policymakers in evidence-based decision-making.

Mission-driven approaches mobilise mature ecosystem actors around specific challenges. RISA's Deal Source Africa platform exemplifies this, creating focused intervention around access to finance that facilitated 5 deals totalling \$1.4 million with another \$1 million in pipeline.

coverage provided insights into ecosystem interconnections. Key principles include balancing geographic scope with engagement depth, ensuring early government involvement given their steward role, and actively engaging other funders to amplify collective impact.

- 3. Design for Local Ownership and Ecosystem Leadership.** For RISA, success has come from affording partners significant autonomy and flexibility, with embedded local team members providing strategic advice with deep contextual knowledge. This enabled some partners to evolve into ecosystem leaders. Effective strategies include investing in ecosystem convening capacity, supporting local leadership emergence, and designing programs that strengthen rather than replace existing networks.
- 4. Develop Context-Appropriate Monitoring and Evaluation.** RISA learned that ecosystem approaches require context-specific measurement systems than conventional programming. The programme balanced comprehensive theories of change with flexibility to capture emerging impacts. Adaptive monitoring, evaluation, and learning focuses on system-level changes rather than project outputs, uses multiple data sources, and builds in regular strategy adjustment.

Four Strategic Lessons from RISA's Implementation

- 1. Embrace Experimental Mindset and Adaptive Management.** RISA adopted a "learning by doing" approach, creating space for regular strategy discussion and adaptation. This enabled response to emerging opportunities and informed innovative monitoring approaches reflecting ecosystem complexity. Successes included avoiding rigid assumptions, building in review cycles, and creating adjustment mechanisms based on evidence. This works best with clear stakeholder communication about experimental approaches and realistic expectations.
- 2. Strategic Portfolio Design Drives Impact.** RISA's experience across six countries and all ecosystem goals generated valuable learning about portfolio construction. Working in multiple countries enabled cross-country learning and relationship-building, while comprehensive goal

► CASE STUDY:

KENYA: Mawazo Institute. Women Researchers Tackling Food Security

Support from the Mawazo Fellowship provided PhD student Stellah Oirere with resources to afford research assistance and materials, as well as valuable mentorship from other accomplished women.



Implementing Ecosystem Approaches: Key Considerations

Engaging Local Stewards

Established, trusted relationships with local actors are essential. Work with clearly defined actor subsets who can collectively address functional gaps. Early engagement with local actors having ecosystem mandates builds sustainability. Government actors merit priority attention given their unique position to sustain changes.



Determining Priority Areas

The International Development Innovation Alliance framework identifies nine Ecosystem Strengthening Goals for priority-setting through participatory research. RISA adapted this by adding research-focused goals around “Research Incentives” and “Research Quality.” RISA’s evidence-driven approach enabled final-year concentration on five areas showing strongest impact: networking, gender equality, pathways to scale, policy, and research quality. Ecosystems evolve constantly, requiring regular intelligence rather than initial analyses alone.

Building Partnerships for Local Ownership

Fund to facilitate, not implement – strengthen local actor connectivity rather than creating parallel structures. RISA provided partner autonomy with embedded local team members for strategic advice.

Build convening capacity – support local actors to sustain collaborative relationships. Engaging multiple funders from both the public and private sectors amplifies impact and reduces fragmentation.

GENDER EQUITY & SOCIAL INCLUSION (GESI)

GESI has always been a core priority for RISA - we ensure that women and under-represented groups are not only included, but enabled as leaders, innovators, and researchers.



71%



of grantees (20 out of 28) made real progress in advancing gender equity and social inclusion.

What This Means for Ecosystem Actors

RISA provides concrete evidence that ecosystem approaches generate transformative results impossible through traditional programming, while revealing practical challenges requiring different ways of working.

For governments: As ecosystem stewards, government actors create enabling environments through policy frameworks, research funding, and institutional support. Early and continuous engagement is crucial given the public sector's unique position to sustain changes beyond individual programs.

For researchers and innovators: Success depends on building relationships across ecosystems, not just technical excellence. RISA's most impactful interventions succeeded by connecting diverse actors around shared challenges.

For private sector actors: Companies are both contributors to and beneficiaries of strong innovation ecosystems. RISA's Deal Source Africa demonstrates how engagement in investment facilitation can transform finance access. View ecosystem participation as long-term innovation investment rather than short-term business development.

For civil society: These actors serve as crucial ecosystem connectors and convenors. RISA shows the value of bringing together actors who rarely interact, facilitating collaboration across traditional boundaries.

For funders: Ecosystem approaches require experimental mindsets while managing accountability pressures, conscious navigation of breadth versus depth trade-offs, and intentional local ownership design. They need different M&E approaches capturing complexity while planning realistic exit strategies. Start with strong local relationships, embrace adaptive management, and plan for longer timeframes with continuous learning.

Ecosystem strengthening fundamentally enables all actors to work together more effectively, generating and scaling innovations no single actor could achieve alone. This requires thinking beyond individual mandates to consider roles in strengthening the whole system. The question is how different actors can learn from pioneers like RISA to collaborate more effectively. This requires rethinking traditional ways of working, but the payoff is innovation systems that systematically generate solutions.

NETWORKING

RISA creates networking opportunities to catalyse collaboration, connect different partners, and spark joint action across sectors.



163
joint initiatives
launched



333
collaborative relationships
established
between research &
innovation actors.



143
innovation-focused
research projects
supported in total,
advancing evidence-
informed policymaking



About RISA

The Research & Innovation Systems for Africa (RISA) Fund represents the UK government's first systematic effort at strengthening innovation ecosystems, working across Ethiopia, Rwanda, Kenya, South Africa, Nigeria and Ghana from 2020–2025. The programme is managed by Chemonics UK in partnership with the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO), in consortium with SOAS University of London and Results for Development (R4D), and is guided by the IDIA framework.

This learning brief combines foundational guidance on ecosystem approaches with insights from RISA's comprehensive implementation experience across six African countries. This learning brief was co-developed by Chemonics UK and Results for Development (R4D).

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