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# Accelerating Scale for Health Innovations: The Experience of Accelerator Models in East Africa and India

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 **CASE**  
CENTER FOR THE ADVANCEMENT  
OF SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP

 **INNOVATIONS IN  
HEALTHCARE**

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Success Factors from Accelerator  
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# INTRODUCTION

Both East Africa (a region that includes Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, and Ethiopia, among other countries) and India have seen enormous growth in innovation over the past decade, particularly in the health, energy, and agriculture sectors. As the number of innovators in East Africa and India rises, so does the demand for supporting infrastructure that facilitates their growth. Accelerators form part of this ecosystem, along with incubators, investors, governments, and other scaling partners.

Accelerator programs emerged in 2005 with the launch of Y Combinator in the U.S. In the years since, accelerators have proliferated—first in the U.S., then Europe, and now across the world. Accelerators were developed to support early-stage ventures through key challenges they face, including limited resources, nascent operational and managerial structures, and low credibility in the market. Accelerators typically run programs of a fixed duration (usually three to six months, though some programs are moving toward longer periods of a year or more) for competitively selected cohorts of innovators. The programs include a mix of curriculum-based training, mentoring/coaching, and sometimes investment, in an intense sprint designed to facilitate the growth (or fast failure) of start-ups.

The entrepreneurial ecosystems in East Africa and India have changed rapidly over the past decade. The first accelerators in India launched around 2008 and in East Africa around 2010, although incubators and innovation hubs have arguably played a stronger role in both markets, particularly for technology innovation. Incubators, also an important component of the innovation ecosystem, tend to target earliest-stage innovations with support such as physical co-working space that is often not time-bound. The line between incubators, innovation hubs, and accelerators is perhaps more blurred in emerging markets than in high-income countries.

There are no credible data available on the exact number of accelerators in either the East Africa region or India, but landscape studies indicate that the innovation ecosystem is growing and diverse in both geographies.<sup>1</sup> The Global Accelerator Learning Initiative (GALI) has [mapped more than 300 accelerators globally](#), including 48 in South Asia and 32 in sub-Saharan Africa, but notes that this is an undercount.<sup>2</sup>

Globally, about 12 percent of accelerators include a health-sector focus, the second largest sector for accelerators behind information and communication technology. This global trend is reflected in both East Africa and India as well, where healthcare is one of the most frequently identified priority sectors for accelerator programs (behind agriculture in East Africa and behind both energy and agriculture in India).<sup>4,5</sup>

Despite the rapid growth of the accelerator field in both East Africa and India, most studies of accelerator design and efficacy have focused on early-stage start-ups located in high-income economies, particularly the U.S. and Europe.<sup>6</sup>

In this context, the Social Entrepreneurship Accelerator at Duke (SEAD) was launched as a learning accelerator in 2012 by Duke University. Supported by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), SEAD was a five-year program (2012-2017) that provided programmatic support, resources, and partnerships to 25 innovation teams operating in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). The SEAD program targeted later-stage healthcare innovations based in East Africa and India. SEAD was an unusual accelerator program in several respects. First, the program cycle was three years, much longer than most accelerators. Second, it included two key geographic regions on different continents. Third, the accelerator program was based in a university and designed from the outset to generate data and evidence on health innovation ecosystems in East Africa and India, common challenges for late-stage enterprises, and factors that facilitate scale. For more information on SEAD and the lessons that resulted, please see the [SEAD Highlights Report](#),<sup>7</sup> [Decoding the ABCs of Effective Enterprise Acceleration](#),<sup>8</sup> [Healthcare Innovation in East Africa](#),<sup>9</sup> and more in the [SEAD Knowledge Center](#).

A [2017 study from GALI](#) of accelerators in emerging markets provides important data on the accelerator programs and ecosystems in these markets.<sup>10</sup> This study found that accelerators are successful in helping innovators in emerging markets grow in equity and debt (compared to innovators that applied for an accelerator program but were not accepted) but are less beneficial in terms of revenue growth or increasing the number of full-time employees. As compared to their peers in high-income markets (such as the U.S.), entrepreneurs in emerging markets were found to have more education and more entrepreneurial experience. Emerging market ventures were also more commercially established but considered less investment-ready at the time they applied for accelerator programs.

The study also found that there is less investment capital available in emerging markets than in high-income markets, and investment rounds are significantly smaller on average. Accelerator models in emerging markets reported more difficulty recruiting mentors and investors to their network, both key elements of accelerator models.

A [2021 study by GALI](#) reviewed five years of data on accelerator models around the world and found that acceleration does appear to work but that success varies significantly among programs.<sup>11</sup> The study identified tailored support (over classroom learning) and peer learning as important program components. However, there were no program components found to be consistently impactful; rather, effectiveness appears to be dependent on the way the components are delivered.

The 2021 study also found that entrepreneurs in emerging markets benefit more from accelerator participation in terms of revenue growth than their high-income market peers, but less in terms of investment. Expatriate accelerator participants (originally from high-income markets but operating in lower-income markets) were able to raise more grant funding than local participants, which is a critical source of funding for social enterprises in emerging markets. This may suggest that accelerators in lower-income markets benefit expatriate entrepreneurs more than local teams.

As accelerator models have spread to many parts of the world, more evidence is needed on their role and effectiveness in lower-income markets. Further, accelerator participants have diversified over the years and now include later-stage start-ups as well as social impact enterprises and nonprofits, which may bring different understandings of success and desired program outcomes.

Focusing on East Africa and India, the two priority regions for SEAD, we conducted a qualitative study to explore design choices for accelerator programs serving health sector innovators, identifying which components are most helpful, and how accelerators define and measure success. We hope that the findings of this study provide helpful insights for accelerator leaders to inform program design and for innovators to gain more value from accelerator participation. We also hope that the study will prompt additional research on how accelerators can be better designed to help healthcare innovation to scale effectively in emerging markets.

# DATA AND METHODS

This study uses a qualitative exploratory design to answer three key questions:

1. Which program design components are most and least helpful, based on the experience of accelerator leaders and participants?
2. How do accelerator programs define and measure success?
3. How can innovators maximize the value of accelerator participation?

We conducted 28 semi-structured interviews, by phone or video conference, with leaders from 20 accelerator programs. Of these, 10 accelerators focused on enterprises in India, nine focused on enterprises in East Africa, and one served enterprises in both markets. Most accelerator programs focused on health, healthcare, or health technology, either as a sole focus or one of several focus areas (see Table 1). Programs were identified through both professional contacts and internet research.

We also interviewed 15 innovators who had participated in at least one of the accelerator models included in our study sample. Eleven innovators were based in India and four were based in East Africa. We identified innovators for the study sample by asking accelerator leaders for connections to innovators who had participated in their accelerator programs. We also selected innovators who had participated in the SEAD program.

The interviews spanned a period of nearly two years (2018-2020). Interviews with India-based accelerator programs and innovators were conducted between November 2018 and February 2019. For three of the India-based programs, we conducted two interviews to speak with additional program leaders.

Interviews with East Africa-based accelerator programs and innovators were conducted from April to June 2019 and from April to July 2020. Of the five East Africa-based accelerator programs interviewed in 2019, we were able to conduct follow-up interviews with four of them in 2020. We added a set of questions about how the pandemic was affecting the programs for these and four other accelerator leaders that we interviewed between April and July 2020. Please see [“East African Health Accelerators and the Pandemic”](#) for our findings from that analysis.

For this paper, accelerator leaders were asked about essential elements of accelerator programs, what works well and what does not, pivots they had made in their program design, what design choices they would make if resources were not a constraint, how they measure the success of their program, and what advice they have for innovators to make the most of an accelerator program. Innovators were asked about their progress since graduation from the accelerator, how they measure success of their enterprise, how accelerator program success should be measured, which aspects of the accelerator were most helpful, which aspects could be improved, and advice for other innovators to make the most of accelerator participation.

All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded in NVivo to identify common themes. Accelerator leaders and innovators were de-identified prior to analysis. When referring to specific interviewees in this report, we refer to them by market (EA or India), type (accelerator or innovator), and number. The SEAD program, which operated in both East Africa and India, is labeled as an India accelerator for this report, as it would be easily identifiable otherwise.

**Table 1. Accelerator Sample**

Characteristics		East Africa (n=9)	India (n=10)	EA and India (n=1)	Total
Sector	Exclusive health focus	5	2	1	8
	Includes health sector focus	3	4	0	7
	General, no sector focus	1	4	0	5
Program duration	1-3 months	1	3	0	4
	3-6 months	5	6	0	11
	6-12 months	1	0	0	1
	1 year+	2	1	1	4
Growth stage	Early (ideation, R&D)	1	2	0	3
	Mid (proof of concept, transition to scale)	2	5	1	8
	Late (scaling)	2	3	0	5
	Varied	4	0	0	4

# FINDINGS

Through analysis of our interview data, we identified common lessons and best practices across accelerators serving health innovations in East Africa and India. Interestingly, most of the findings were similar for both markets. There were a few areas that appeared to differ by location, such as in-person activities (co-location), which came up more in interviews with Indian accelerators, or the limitations of classroom-style learning, which came up more in interviews with East African accelerators. But there was strikingly little variation between the regions in terms of program elements reported to be most successful.

Accelerator leaders in both markets noted that their programs and approaches differ from those in more-established ecosystems, such as the U.S. Several interviewees mentioned the nascent nature of the innovation culture and environment in their respective markets (East Africa or India) and how the lack of supports, such as investors and scaling partners, impacts both the role and potential of accelerators. These earlier-stage innovations need more early support, but there is less seed funding available to help push innovations along to later growth stages. Some accelerator leaders noted that they are pivoting to focus less on accelerator programs and more on building the ecosystem so that innovators have somewhere to go after accelerating.

*“[In emerging markets] you wouldn’t have that initial investment to get the start-ups going. You wouldn’t have that. Then you’re dealing with early-stage entrepreneurs who don’t have the experience of how to start a start-up. The 400 investors [that a U.S. accelerator could bring in], of course, you couldn’t get them from anywhere. They won’t be able to turn up. Market access in terms of B2B—who’s able to take up, check the solutions, you know—it’s not there in an emerging ecosystem. So you find that if you evaluate for the last 10 years accelerator programs that are running in the region, according to me, they have almost become glorified training programs where an entrepreneur goes through this, he’s told what to do, and then go hope that someone finds you and supports you.” – EA Accelerator 6*

Our findings are organized into five sections: key design trade-offs, most helpful program elements, common program design pivots, defining and measuring success, and how innovators can maximize benefit. We close the paper with recommendations driven by these findings.

## KEY DESIGN TRADE-OFFS

We found that accelerator programs make a set of design choices that involve trade-offs and that are sometimes mutually exclusive. Whether to take one path or the other depends on the target participant, partner, and desired outcomes. Leaders of accelerator programs find that when these targets are clearly articulated (through an impact framework or theory of change, for example), it is easier to identify the best design choice. We highlight a few of the common trade-offs that emerged in our interviews.



## Sector focus versus general focus

Some accelerators in our study worked exclusively in the health sector while others included health as one of several focus industries or had no sector focus. Our sample suggests there are more health-focused accelerator programs in East Africa than in India. Though we were targeting accelerators with either an exclusive health focus or a significant sector focus in health, we found only two accelerator programs in India exclusively focused on health innovations. While we did find several that included health as a sector focus, we also had to extend our sample to general accelerators without a sector focus. In East Africa, however, more than half (five of nine) of the accelerators in the sample were focused exclusively on health and another three included a significant sector focus on health, in addition to other sectors such as agriculture or education.

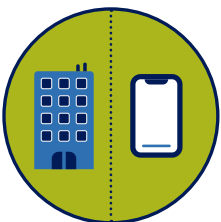
Our interview data indicate different advantages and disadvantages to sector-specific and sector-agnostic approaches. Overall, it seems that accelerators with a multisector focus are most valuable for business model development, while health-focused accelerators can be more helpful with industry-specific connections as well as the process of product validation and regulatory approval.

A health-sector-focused accelerator may be able to offer more synergies among innovators, increasing the benefits participants reap from taking part in the same program. This narrowed focus also allows health-focused accelerators to better coordinate resources both internally and externally, increasing program efficiency.

*“We have found that our expertise in the health sector has been a huge plus ... that has been able to give us an advantage when, for example, we are matchmaking with mentors or networks.” – EA Accelerator 1*

Accelerators that take a general approach see an opportunity to support capacity development on critical milestones such as business model and market testing without getting bogged down in the healthcare ecosystem and regulatory space. Our interview data indicate this may be most useful for very early-stage (ideation) and later-stage (scaling) innovators, but that health-focused accelerators are most helpful for innovators in the middle stages—working on regulatory approvals, proof of concept, and initial market traction—when industry-specific insights and connections are most important.

*“[India Accelerator 4] also really helped us create the right business model that can scale. ... They gave us a lot of frameworks and structures to help us understand how to take our product to market. Those are things that, although I had my MBA from a good school, they gave me a way to understand scalability, a formal structure.” – India Innovator 4*



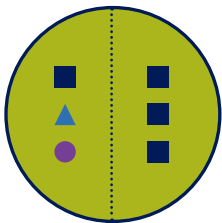
## Co-location versus remote program offering

The issue of co-location was mentioned more by accelerator models and innovators in India than in East Africa, though it did come up in both markets. The benefits of enforced co-location included the provision of physical space and enhanced peer learning opportunities. Innovators highlighted that being in the same space enabled them to learn daily from their peers and facilitated stronger relationships and networks within the cohort.

Younger companies, which were less likely to already have physical office space, seemed to benefit more from enforced co-location. Two innovators indicated that they would have improved their respective accelerator programs by making it mandatory for participants to operate out of the same office space.

*“Another thing is that it was not a purely residential program. Entrepreneurs benefit from ecosystem, and we would have benefited more if everyone were forced to work out of the same space. When you see everyone every day, you can learn about their struggles to avoid making the same mistakes that others made.” – India Innovator 3*

For later-stage innovators and for companies headquartered in different locations than their accelerator programs, co-location was not practical. Accelerator leaders reported that they struggled to find the right balance of in-person versus remote engagement. The COVID-19 pandemic forced accelerators to explore and test options for remote engagement, and many found solutions they expected to carry into post-pandemic programming. (For more on how the pandemic impacted accelerators, please see “East African Health Accelerators and the Pandemic.”<sup>12</sup>)



### **Balancing customization versus standardized curriculum**

Accelerator models need to balance between meeting the individual needs of each participant and providing standardized training and content across the cohort. Tailoring the program content and curriculum allows a better fit for each innovator but is resource-intensive and difficult to scale.

Generally this trade-off goes hand in hand with cohort size: accelerators that lean toward customization tend to have much smaller cohorts, some as few as three participants, in order to provide one-to-one attention. Accelerators that use more standard and replicable content can have larger cohorts, ranging from 20 to as many as 50 participants.

*“We did hear from a couple of the entrepreneurs that this is by far the best accelerator process that they’ve ever been a part of. ... But it’s heavy lifting. It’s very tailored, it’s very hands-on. And we’re not here to have numbers, right? We’ve only touched—it will only be seven entrepreneurs over two years. So our model is going much deeper with a smaller number of projects.” – EA Accelerator 2*

*“If you assume that one size fits all ... you will probably then find that you have higher fallout from participants. ... So you just have a curriculum and you try and distribute it to everybody—the same assumption that all of them are needing this training. That’s quite detrimental.” – EA Accelerator 4*

*“Every company needs [a] customized solution—you cannot have a generic response to all. That is one of the reasons why we limit our cohort to a very small number. We need to spend a lot of time; especially when it comes to B2B, it is going to be a sales solution. The solutions need to be very tailored to each company—you cannot have a standardized one.” – India Accelerator 2*



## MOST HELPFUL PROGRAM ELEMENTS

The most helpful program elements were consistent across interviews with accelerators in both East Africa and India. There was very little variation between the two markets in terms of what worked well.

### Limited variation within cohorts

Some variation within a cohort is important, as it allows innovators to learn from each other. They can pull on knowledge from peers working in other markets or in later growth stages. Diversity may also reduce the competitiveness within a cohort—if innovators are going after the same market segments or funders, they may identify other cohort members as competitors and be less willing to share openly with each other.

But too much variation can make a cohort feel fragmented and water down the impact of the program content. Where the cohort comprises mixed growth stages or geographies, accelerators need to account for more disparate priorities and demands. Getting the balance right is tricky. Accelerator leaders have found that cohorts need to have two or more shared characteristics, including geography, sector, growth stage, or type of innovation.

However, early-stage innovators noted the value they found in working closely with later-stage innovators. While this may not be ideal for program delivery within a cohort, cross-stage, cross-sector, or cross-region relationships can be fostered in other ways, such as by leveraging an alumni network.

### Customization within standard framework

Accelerators must find a balance between support tailored to each participant's needs and standardized content that can be rolled out to the whole cohort, cycle after cycle. The program leaders we spoke with found that it worked best to provide as much customization as resources allow, embedded within a standard structure. This usually meant standard milestones, such as producing an investor-ready pitch deck, as well as a consistent program flow, for example moving from diagnostics to plan development to cohort workshop to one-to-one coaching to peer feedback.

*“We use a tool that we call a diagnostic panel. It is more like a solutioning panel where we bring in a team of key experts and the entrepreneur presents and we throw a few questions back to the panel and at the end of the day we come out with clear milestones for the next 100 days. That is standard across the program.” – EA Accelerator 5*

*“I think the important aspect is that the cohort comprises ... businesses and entrepreneurs who are at a similar stage in their growth path, or at least have similar objectives at the stage in that growth journey that there is a chance of the program being—without being too bespoke and too one-on-one, being able to deliver something that is of relevance to the entire cohort.” – EA Accelerator 9*

*“It was great to have start-ups at various stages; we could discuss some of the problems they would have at the growth stage with entrepreneurs that have been through the curve. It was great for folks who have products at research stage can learn from those that have products and have moved to the next level.” – India Innovator 11*

*“We have these workshops that are really very practical and targeted to the needs of the different teams. And that has been one of the things that the innovators really feel is very valuable and moves them forward. The ability to really address some of their technical gaps in a way that is tailor-made to their projects.” – EA Accelerator 8*

Using a consistent timeline and goal-setting process for the cohort proved important to channeling participants toward expected outcomes and keeping everyone on track.

Accelerator leaders recommend that programs invest time up front to understand each business, its team and its challenges, then look across the cohort and identify the common needs, such as retaining talent or marketing. Focus the standardized training on those collective needs and reshuffle the remaining curriculum, providing each team with a customized set of resources that match their specific needs. Mentors and coaches should be selected to reinforce support for individualized needs—those areas where teams could use the most one-to-one guidance.

*“The program had very clear timelines. ... It’s very important to have structure that enforces iteration. ... We wanted to enforce timelines to report progress to mentors and make decisions.” – India Accelerator 11*

*“The answer is, as much as possible, try and customize. And figure out then what are you able to offer corporately that is able to feed everybody at the same time.” – EA Accelerator 4*

*“We work with each start-up on an individualized format and over the period there are common interactions where all start-ups are brought together. We bring start-ups together for an orientation week at the start, bring them all together in the middle of the program to discuss individual problems, and bring [them] together at the end of the program for follow-on funding.” – India Accelerator 7*

*“A lot of diagnostic needs to be done so that you understand where they are; even if they are ‘growth stage’ there are different levels of progress. And then you quickly need to customize intervention based off the diagnostic. What can you do for each entrepreneur in the program that will help them focus on the gaps that they have? You know that really helps you to escape that one-size-fits-all approach.” – EA Accelerator 6*

## Mentors that can contextualize and show, not tell

Mentorship and coaching were critical components of all of the accelerator models included in this study but the engagement (and success) of mentors differed significantly. The most successful programs had three common elements: understanding of the context, frequent engagement, and a push toward critical problem-solving.

When chosen well, mentors can fill critical gaps in the entrepreneurs’ knowledge and skill set. But this study showed that more important than specific expertise were a mentor’s deep understanding of start-up trajectories as well as the ecosystem in which the innovators were operating. Some innovators and accelerator programs noted that if mentors were disconnected from the innovators’ environment, their advice was often unhelpful. On the other hand, when mentors understood the context and challenges, they were able to help innovators save time and effort.

Programs and innovators that reported high satisfaction with the mentoring component pointed to frequent engagement (at least several times a month) that meant mentors understood the teams’ day-to-day challenges and workflow. Frequent contact also tended to lead to high-trust relationships, in which innovators were more open about their challenges and felt comfortable reaching out for strategic advice.

*“They told us to make investment in sensors first and we must be prepared to have x-y-z all lined up, even though we were hesitant to spend at first. But it turned out to be a great decision we would not have made. They know that if we do x-y-z right, the logical next step is a-b-c. ... They really understand the growth trajectory of start-ups.” – India Innovator 6*

*“I mean, [the mentors] are on at least several calls a month with these projects, they could articulate exactly what the challenges were, exactly what their pilot consisted of, exactly what the results were. So moving from [a] kind of client–service provider approach to really a collaborative and co-creative approach I think was part of what the entrepreneurs really enjoyed, and being able to really share pain points and get strategic support from their mentors.” – EA Accelerator 2*

In addition to frequent contact, the best mentors pushed innovators to think through their challenges from different angles and guided them through the problem-solving process. Rather than just telling them what to do, these mentors helped innovators develop new ways of approaching problems.

*“The thinking is what we were asking for. How do you think under those circumstances, and how do you make the quick pivot?” – India Innovator 4*

## Peer learning

Accelerator programs and innovators in both East Africa and India noted that peer learning was a significant source of support for the participants. Innovators were able to relate to one another’s on-the-ground experiences and apply practical knowledge to similar challenges. Several accelerator programs had been surprised by how important this program component was to participants and made it a larger part of the experience in response to participant feedback.

Program leaders noted that building strong peer engagement requires work to foster a supportive, rather than competitive, environment. Some leaders recommended building in interactions that involve vulnerability, such as providing pitch feedback. Maximizing the in-person component was seen as important to forging initial relationships, though many found that, once established, peer learning continued remotely.

*“There’s a lot of peer review. Because entrepreneurs listen to entrepreneurs more. So ... even if I know what they’re struggling with, we refer them to an entrepreneur who has been through the exact same process. And when they explain what they faced, what they went through, it made it—it relates more to them than when I try to explain it to them, because they look at you and think, ‘What do you know?’” – EA Accelerator 6*

*“It’s been four years after graduation but I’m still in a WhatsApp group with all of my cohort. They are my first port of call for recruitment, support, and advice. It was just this phenomenal support system that grew.” – India Innovator 7*

## Post-graduation support and connections

Alumni programs take many shapes. Some accelerators maintain very active roles with their graduates, continuing to reach out with opportunities and connections. Some programs run light-touch programming to include their alumni, such as discussions on relevant topics that bring in experts and may spur follow-up collaborations. In some accelerators, graduates become mentors to the newer cohorts.

One accelerator model included in our study runs a six-month accelerator program but then continues with hands-on, bespoke support for two more years. Not every innovator takes advantage of it and some will fall off the radar for a year and then come back and reengage. The accelerator leaders have found that the post-program period is when many entrepreneurs need guidance most, as they are trying to apply the lessons from the accelerator.

*“So if you had [an entrepreneur] that participated six years ago, it makes a lot of sense, if they’re still in existence, to bring them on board to try and help the new cohorts understand what they’re going through and what they benefited from.” – EA Accelerator 7*

*“Soon after the program was over, there was no active connect. ... We didn’t hear from them. But our actual work started after the program and that is when we needed a lot of help with connections to VCs, other professionals. ... [Accelerators should] continue maintaining strong connections with the companies in their cohorts even after they have graduated to understand what they require. Because that is what they really need to stay the course.” – India Innovator 9*

*“Yes, I’ve kept in contact with [India Accelerator 7]. I never felt like I graduated. While there is a formal exit, I never felt like I’ve left. I always keep in contact with them and they are always very active and helpful.” – India Innovator 5*

## **Strong connections to funding and ecosystem**

Connections with relevant networks, scaling partners, and funders were seen as critical components for accelerator success. Accelerator leaders noted the importance of using their networks and credibility to help participants “unlock” follow-on funding after graduation.

*“Once you do the coaching and capacity building, the thing that will take it over the edge is capital-investments partnerships.” – EA Accelerator 1*

*“People join accelerators that show that they have connections to acquirers and investors. Their main goal is to expand their network. The accelerators that do a good job are constantly connecting them. Putting them on a strict process to say here’s what you have to do.” – India Accelerator 4*

Several accelerator leaders mentioned the importance of shaping the ecosystem for health innovation, particularly in emerging markets where it still may be underdeveloped.

*“We do lots of business matchmaking and demo days with industry. And the reason we do this is more for the industry than for the entrepreneur because industry in emerging ecosystems is trying to figure out what this innovation thing is about. So we kind of create, you know, a platform for them to come in to engage with the innovators around what they are trying to work on.” – EA Accelerator 6*

## **COMMON PROGRAM DESIGN PIVOTS**

To better understand which program elements do and do not work, we asked accelerator leaders what pivots they had made to their programs over the years and the reasons underlying those iterations. Several common lessons emerged across accelerator models in both East Africa and India.

### **Travel requirements are a burden**

Many accelerator programs reported that they pivoted away from requiring frequent travel in order to hold in-person training. They found that it was difficult to maintain connection and momentum during “off weeks” in between in-person events. Innovators needed a chance to put what they were learning into practice and needed ongoing guidance outside of the intensive workshops.

*“So where I think we kind of failed was in the off months. ... Once they left the [accelerator location] they felt a little like, ‘Now what then do we do? Yes, we learned some great tips and pointers during the workshop, but we’d like to be able to touch base from time to time and be able to put what we learned in practice.’ But we don’t have that extra, additional help offline.” – EA Accelerator 1*

Accelerators also found that the burden on founders and CEOs to travel regularly or to take up temporary residence for the program was untenable. To spread the travel burden, as well as the learning opportunity, cofounders would sometimes split the travel, with one joining for the first training and then another joining for the second training. But this led to disjointed cohorts and interrupted learning.

To address these issues, accelerators reported minimizing required travel and adding more e-learning courses, site visits, and virtual contact with mentors and coaches.

*“One of the key components that we had to refine was the engagement period. When we started, we were looking at a four-month residential program. We asked the start-ups to relocate and operate from our offices. What we found was that there was a disconnect then between the founders and their teams, who continued to work in their home offices. We refined by asking the founders to come for two weeks at a time, but the logistics and cost of travel [were] too much for these start-ups.” – India Accelerator 6*

*“So if we’re going to have entrepreneurs outside the area where we work, we need to basically level up or bring up our capacity in virtual training, so to speak ... whether it’s adding e-learning courses or making more of an effort with our mentors and coaches to have more virtual contact with the entrepreneurs. And again, this is something that we hope to tweak in the next version of our accelerator program.” – EA Accelerator 1*

## **Classroom learning is inferior to hands-on training**

Accelerators have found that, while training and curriculum can help ensure that everyone is working with the same tools, hands-on expert help can be more beneficial. Overreliance on classroom-style learning, without an opportunity to apply the lessons, leads to disengagement. This was mentioned more frequently by accelerators in East Africa than those in India.

*“I would generally go towards removing the curriculum, the business model canvas, these sort of formal trainings. Because at the end, the trainings don’t help a lot from what I’ve noticed. ... Sit down with someone who understands the dynamics. ... I would go more into practical people, knowledgeable about contract negotiation, legal, IP because these are things that start-ups never think about.” – EA Accelerator 3*

*“The one particular thing that we’ve found that works best has been practicality, ... engagement in a practical way and avoiding the theoretical bits of the program mainly. And having facilitators that are in the same scope and have actually done, or gone through, the same things that the participants are actually doing.” – EA Accelerator 7*

## Soft skills are overlooked

While accelerator models often focus on identifying and filling gaps in hard skills, innovators also need to further develop soft skills such as critical thinking. Some accelerator leaders noted that this need is more pronounced for founders from lower-income markets versus their expatriate peers, who come from high-income countries. Accelerators have worked to shift their curriculum and mentoring goals to emphasize soft-skill development.

*“We realized that it’s not necessarily the hard skills that entrepreneurs are lacking. Well, they are lacking them, but having them or not having them doesn’t seem to make a huge difference in terms of whether or not they become successful. What seems to have a bigger implication are some of the softer skills: your ability to analyze your current situation, your ability to prioritize these problems and their solutions, define in a sharp critical way what solutions are the most effective to address these problems, and then having the discipline and the leadership to implement these. Those soft aspects of entrepreneurship seem to be much more an indicator of whether or not the entrepreneurs will go on to be successful.” – EA Accelerator 9*

## Program design does not align with expected outcomes

Some accelerator programs found that their theory of change (or logic model) was underdeveloped and lacked clear connections between program activities and expected outcomes. (See [Decoding the ABCs of Effective Enterprise Acceleration](#) for our insights on developing a theory of change for the SEAD program.)

One accelerator leader in East Africa spoke about how they expected their program to result in “strategic partnerships” between their participants and business mentors but, after a few years, realized that wasn’t happening.

*“Because we didn’t have very clear KPIs set up from beginning to end, we were going in with no real agenda. So we got to the end and we weren’t able to solidify any partnerships and we had no unique value proposition for the entrepreneurs necessarily to even want that... [Now], by the time we get to the end, we’ve done the capacity building, we’ve done the business plan, we’ve gotten buy-in. We’ve done everything that makes a partnership easier.” – EA Accelerator 1.*

## Attaching capital is complicated

Among our sample of accelerator programs, most (but not all) provide funding as a key part of the program. This is seen as critical in order to help innovations move forward, particularly in the early stages. Accelerator leaders also noted that it can give innovators breathing room to focus on the work of the accelerator program.

*“When we started, we did not offer funding. We are now committing \$50,000 to start with to help entrepreneurs achieve certain milestones and targets so that the company doesn’t have to go to other investors to get money. They need to spend a lot of time outside to raise money otherwise.” – India Accelerator 2*

However, some programs have found that offering funding attracts applicants who do not bother to check whether they will really get value from the program but are just chasing the money. Several accelerators have de-emphasized funding in their value proposition or decided to drop it altogether in order to attract entrepreneurs who are more focused on partnerships and learning. Others have made funding dependent on meeting certain milestones either during or at the conclusion of the program.

*“Unfortunately, accelerators in general are looked to as sources of capital. We found that participants appreciated the content but primarily wanted money to keep their lights on. We didn’t put a heavy emphasis on the capital side and tried to downplay this aspect of the accelerator.” – India Accelerator 5*

*“We don’t provide funding for the initial program. We pay for everything basically so that it’s at no cost to them but there’s no funding. But four teams will make it through to the final stage and those teams get between 30,000 to 50,000 Euros as funding for a proof of concept.” – EA Accelerator 3*

## DEFINING AND MEASURING SUCCESS

Most accelerator leaders in our study reported that they struggle to both define and measure the success of their programs. While many could point to general areas they expect to impact, such as follow-on funding, growth of innovations, and people reached, few had clear metrics. Many leaders identified this as their primary gap but were unsure how to address it. A few programs had hired consulting or evaluation partners to help develop an impact and measurement framework but still felt they had a lot of work to do in this area.

*“Some of these things are things that we would love to find [a] solution on in terms of data collection, but we haven’t seen any proper solutions, at least not for the type of businesses that we deal with. And I think that’s part of the problem. A lot of these smaller businesses that are in the early growth stages are already strained in terms of resources, don’t necessarily have proper structures to capture even operational data that is important in their decision-making, leave alone kind of the peripheral impact-related data that we or our partners might need. So it’s definitely something we’re struggling with.” – EA Accelerator 9*

*“Fundraising is the most tangible support that you can provide. It is harder to measure that we helped them to be more efficient. So we started focusing more on fundraising.” – India Accelerator 4*

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It is important to define success both for the accelerator program (is it accomplishing what it set out to do?) and also for the participants (did they get what they expected by participating?). In our study, accelerator models tried to answer these questions in some common ways, including these frequently mentioned accelerator program metrics:

- New models integrated into corporate strategies
- Number of joint ventures or partnerships resulting from the accelerator
- Better understanding among corporate employees (for accelerators rooted in corporates) of innovation and healthcare challenges, which is seen as a form of professional development
- Percent of enterprises receiving follow-on funding (post-graduation)
- Percent of enterprises that succeed and grow post-graduation

For one corporate accelerator, the impact on the company demonstrated the value of the accelerator program.

*“[Surveys from employees who interact with the social entrepreneurs through the accelerator program] come back saying that they’ve learned really what does agility mean, what does it mean to work with a low number of resources, what does entrepreneurship mean, and also a lot of business insights into wow, what’s really happening on the ground in areas where there’s just a different interpretation of access to healthcare.” – EA Accelerator 2*

To measure success for participants, most accelerators rely on post-program surveys and use anecdotal feedback to inform program pivots. Common metrics used for innovators include the following:

- Company sustainability
- Company scale (revenue growth, customer retention)
- Impact (lives reached, improvement in health outcomes, jobs created)
- Well-being of the leaders
- Follow-on funding
- Movement to the next scaling stage

One accelerator leader described how their program ends without any clear success markers and noted how difficult that makes it to evaluate the benefit.

*“[The participants are] like, ‘[W]hat were we supposed to get out of it? Did I get what I was supposed to? Was this a waste of time coming and taking time out of my business?’” – EA Accelerator 1*

A factor compounding the difficulty of measuring success in accelerators is that innovations rarely scale in a linear fashion. While many investors, accelerators, and other ecosystem partners use scaling stage frameworks (such as the International Development Innovation Alliance’s [IDIA] [Scaling Stages](#)), in reality, innovations tend to move in both directions as they mature, sometimes revisiting previous stages. Success metrics for scaling support need to account for this looping “backward,” as it can actually indicate progress.

A few interviewees mentioned the need to fail fast and suggested that accelerators help support that process, allowing innovators to pivot quickly and move on. Notably, however, none mentioned metrics for measuring this outcome and, in fact, many noted that they measure sustained growth and “continued existence” of participants after program completion. This suggests that accelerator programs are not prepared to see fast failure as a positive outcome, though it may actually be a desired result of their program.



# HOW INNOVATORS CAN MAXIMIZE BENEFIT

Participants play a key role in the success of accelerator programs. The accelerator leaders and innovators we interviewed offered insights based on their experiences of what innovators can do during both the selection and participation process to maximize the value gained by being part of an accelerator program.

## DO THE HOMEWORK

**Innovators should clarify what they want from an accelerator program and make a list of their top priorities.**

They need to understand the value proposition and track record of the accelerator programs they are considering and conduct due diligence to make sure a program will provide what they need. Innovators should also ensure that the program structure aligns with their work routine and capacity, including required travel, co-location, and expected weekly time commitment.

*“The biggest advice I would give is to make sure that the accelerator has some pedigree. It could come from other successful companies that have come through that accelerator. But even more important is to know who are the people who would be mentoring you. What track records do they have? These are very important things to keep an eye on. Accelerators could be a dime a dozen, it doesn’t mean you are going to be successful just because you are participating in an accelerator. Just as much as they interview you, you should also be interviewing them once you have been selected.”—India Innovator 4*

## BE VOCAL

**Accelerator leaders recommend that innovators assert themselves throughout the program to make sure that it is meeting their needs.**

Several interviewees noted that they found out after the program finished that participants did not find the content useful, but if they had known in the moment, they could have tweaked the program.

## USE THE OPPORTUNITY TO LEARN

**A key message coming through the interviews with accelerator leaders was that they look for innovators who are “coachable” because this goes hand in hand with getting value from the program.**

Innovators who are open to new ways of seeing things and are willing to listen when experts spot gaps in their plans or teams are most likely to benefit. Some accelerators look for seasoned entrepreneurs because they have found that experience brings a willingness to learn, whereas younger entrepreneurs may be less aware of their blind spots.

*“So that self-awareness of idea versus business idea is quite important, and the awareness of the journey ... and the amount of work it’s going to take for them to build this. ... [T]hat has been very, very important for us because you know, it’s already difficult to be doing this but if someone is not self-aware then they won’t value the time spent in the program and then you know, it wasted time for everyone.”—EA Accelerator 6*

# RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings from this exploratory study point to several best practices and recommendations for accelerator programs.

1.

## **Define success and how it will be measured**

Develop a theory of change or impact framework with clear markers of success that connect to the program design. Set metrics to measure success (and to identify areas that need improvement). How will you know if the accelerator is successful? How will innovators know if their participation was successful?

2.

## **Tailor content to innovators within a standardized program framework**

Identify which parts of the program can be standardized, such as time frame, milestones, and pitch opportunities. Customize support within this framework as much as resources allow. This does not all need to be hands-on, intensive support; it could include a pick-and-mix curriculum that allows accelerator staff to pull from existing resources to build a learning plan tailored to each enterprise.

3.

## **Promote a strong peer network**

Select cohorts with a set of common characteristics, to promote peer learning. Build in face-to-face interactions early, when possible, to establish relationships within cohorts. These relationships can be sustained remotely through peer feedback activities (particularly for pitch practice) and text groups. If the cohorts are small, consider facilitating interaction between recent graduates and current participants (see recommendation 4) and/or connecting with similar cohorts in the ecosystem.

4.

## **Extend support and connections beyond graduation**

Develop an alumni program that actively engages graduates, who can then contribute to the program as peer mentors and benefit from ongoing connections and troubleshooting. Invite alumni to pitch days, networking events, and topical webinars or working groups. Consider a staged post-graduation plan in which alumni are eligible for higher levels of support in the first year, gradually tapering off to lighter-touch engagements.

The findings from this study illuminate best practices and design pivots made by accelerator models in the dynamic innovation ecosystems of East Africa and India. While our study design is specific to acceleration of health innovations, the findings are in line with earlier research from GALL on accelerators across sectors and point toward significant differences in the operating environment for accelerators and innovators in emerging markets relative to those in high-income economies such as the U.S. and Europe.

More evidence is needed about when and how accelerator models in East Africa and India, as well as other emerging economies, work best, particularly in the health and social impact sectors. Innovation can play a critical role in meeting development goals over the next decade, and a strong evidence base on how to source and scale impactful innovations will help maximize benefit from limited resources.

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