Scaling Frontier Innovation

BuildBackBetter
Final Report
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The global pandemic has had a significant impact on local communities and the economy in South & Southeast Asia - slowing down overall activities in incubation and acceleration activities among Entrepreneur Support Organisations (ESOs) as resources are diverted into emergency response and many are forced to downsize their team and operations. A detailed report by ANDE and Dalberg in May 2020 estimated¹ that 42% of the Small and Growing Businesses (SGBs) that ANDE supports are at high risk of failing within six months, and Executive Director, Randall Kemper, shares in Business Fights Poverty that their latest member survey indicated “nearly a third of capacity development organisations are themselves at risk of bankruptcy in the next six months”.

¹ ANDE: https://cdn.ymaws.com/ande.site-ym.com/resource/resmgr/publications/covid_and_sgbs_issues_brief-.pdf
Recognising the important role that ESOs play in supporting the growth of SGBs in local economies and the ongoing effects that the global pandemic has had on local communities in South & Southeast Asia, the #BuildBackBetter program was conceived. It aimed to address the question we were left with: “How might we meaningfully support ESOs, and thus the entrepreneurs they support, during COVID-19?” ESOs had reported impacts ranging from loss of revenue and existing contracts (resulting in financial precarity); closing of business streams within their business (e.g: coworking, events); inability to run planned in-person programming; and limited capabilities and capacity to pivot their programs to a fully virtual delivery. There has been very minimal support provided to help ESOs respond to the COVID-19 crisis and its impacts on intermediary organisations. At the time of applying, none of the participants reported receiving any support (financial or non-financial) to respond to COVID-19, which further emphasised the gap in support for impact intermediary organisations.

After a closed call for applications, 20 ESOs across South & Southeast Asia were selected for the 16-week #BuildBackBetter program, which included weekly masterclasses with topics spanning Ecosystem Mapping, Business Model Resilience, Identifying Future Growth Pathways and Virtual Convening with a view to enable them to meaningfully pivot their own organisations and incubator/accelerator programs during the post-COVID transition towards sustainability. The masterclasses were also complemented by structured peer support circles set at a regular cadence to provide dedicated time for ESO leaders to synthesize learnings together as a group, and to offer peer support to one another on related topics and common challenges. As a cohort, there was immense diversity with representation across nine countries, and 55% of the cohort comprised of women.
OUR PROGRAM:
At a Glance

**Duration**
16 weeks (Jul - Oct 2020)

**Format**
- Weekly masterclasses with trainers from Spring & Conveners.org
- Dedicated 1:1 Office Hours
- Additional “Peer Circles” support

**Content**
Topics included:
- Ecosystem Mapping
- Business Model Resilience
- Identifying Future Growth Pathways
- Virtual Convening Strategy
- Online Facilitation Techniques
- Resilient Leadership
- Financial Sustainability

**Platforms**

![Thinkific](https://via.placeholder.com/150)
![Miro](https://via.placeholder.com/150)
![Zoom](https://via.placeholder.com/150)
This unique program was supported by The Australian Government’s Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and The Incubation Network, a program of SecondMuse and The Circulate Initiative. The program content was designed and co-facilitated by Spring Activators and Conveners.org as trainers for the cohort, allowing all partners to leverage their unique set of skills and knowledge to open up to the cohort in an engaging, timely and teachable format. As organisations with a commitment to ecosystem building, we saw an opportunity to collectively bridge support for Entrepreneur Support Organisations to adapt and pivot their business models, develop new capabilities in virtual facilitation and program delivery, and build a resilient mindset during the pandemic.

“Being part of a supportive group of people who are all going through the same, very unique, situation was the most valuable part of the program for me.”
COHORT:

Key Statistics

Strength of Cohort

20 participating ESOs

- 21 Total of 21 ESOs registered
- 15 from the Frontier Incubators community
- 6 from The Incubation Network
- 1 Of the 15 participating ESOs from Frontier Incubators, one ESO did not complete the program.

Average participation rate per session

90%

Diversity

9 Countries represented

- Bangladesh
- Cambodia
- India
- Indonesia
- Myanmar
- Pakistan
- Philippines
- Thailand
- Vietnam

Roles:

- 70% were senior professionals/ESO leaders.

Gender:

- 55% were women.
Participating ESOs

Effectiveness of program

90% responded with “I feel more confident”

80% responded with “We are in a better position than we started”

70% responded with “I feel completely transformed for the better”

when asked: “How would you rate your organisation’s virtual convening, facilitation skills and strategy?”

when asked: “How would you rate your organisation’s current financial resilience/sustainability?”

when asked: “How would you rate your personal or organisational leadership resilience?”
Pre-Program Survey Insights

How would you rate your organisation’s current financial resilience/sustainability?

- 75% Managing/financially sustainable
- 25% At risk of closing operations (limited cash flow and runway)
- 0% Profitable

How would you rate your personal or organisational leadership resilience?

- 65% ‘I feel OK’
- 20% ‘I am confident’
- 15% ‘I do not feel confident’

Post-Program Survey Insights

How would you rate your organisation’s current financial resilience/sustainability?

- 80% responded with “We are in a better position than we started”

How would you rate your personal or organisational leadership resilience?

- 70% responded with “I feel completely transformed for the better”

How would you rate your virtual facilitation skills and convening strategy?

- 90% responded with “I feel more confident”
A baseline survey at the beginning of the program and an end-point survey in the final week of the program was conducted with all 20 qualifying participants. At the end of each Masterclass, a NPR (net promoter score) survey was also shared to get rapid feedback from the cohort on the effectiveness of the materials throughout the program.

The following lessons learned build from the cohort’s survey answers and testimonials, and also informed by an “after action review” with the consortium (SecondMuse, Spring & Conveners.org).
What worked well

- **Cadence, regular structure and masterclass schedule**
  - Clear calendar of topics and curriculum so that participants could see the learning journey and prepare for classes.
  - Consistent, weekly momentum for live classes that were pre-booked as calendar invitations in advance.

  "You are being pushed to set time (weekly call) to think beyond your daily activities, but to think ahead! This is really meaningful, often we are caught in a present loop and don't have time to prepare for next year."

- **“Peer Circles” to complement the curriculum as an informal setting for participants to get to know each other, build relationships and their network.**

  "I felt more connected to challenges as founders of ESOs...for me being able to hear and express vulnerability is something fresh and super helpful - as founders of companies we are always expected to be a rock and stay solid no matter what."

- **Rhythm of flowing between different trainers, formats and content (ensured it wasn’t all too monotonous)**
  - Variety of engagement formats throughout the 16 weeks - learning sessions, peer circles, guest speakers. This was necessary to sustain participation and enthusiasm over 4 months.
  - Open space for participants to share their pivoting plans with one another, collect feedback and “test” concepts or ideas with one another.

  "Being able to take time to reflect and revise current strategy, and positioning with other ESOs, and validating our approach with other ESOs. Also leveraging feedback and networks of Spring and SecondMuse”

  "I learned a LOT from others, how they are navigating crisis, the different opportunities they see coming from this year, and how they are coping. Also made some really valuable connections which I’m sure will carry on into the future."

- **Flexibility on delivery formats of prescribed assignments/activities**
  - Cohort were given flexibility to submit their deliverables during the course in the form of documents, slide decks or video recording (eg: Loom) to cater for diversity in presentation styles.
Providing stipends for participation (based participation in 80% or more of the live Masterclasses and satisfactory completion of program activities / assignments)

- Enabled the cohort to value the program and participate fully in sessions (at a time where there were many competing demands) and have a sense of accountability in completing activities and assignments.
- Encouraged ESOs to “pay it forward” and explore training and programs for their own community in the content they received.
- Average participation rate was very high at 90%.

Consortium of experienced facilitators and partners

- SecondMuse, Spring and Conveners.org having had previous experience working together on Frontier Incubators, there was a high level of familiarity, trust, and capability which made the communication and delivery of the program smooth, even when pivots were required to respond to cohort needs.

“...The program helped me understand as a founder it’s okay to acknowledge vulnerability in me as well as others. As founders of companies acknowledging our weakness allows us to come back stronger and better.”
What could work better in the future

- Most people needed more customised content for their local context and situations (this led to high demand for 1:1 office hours with trainers)
  - We recommend ensuring that future curriculum allows for more built-in 1:1 interaction with program facilitators to contextualise content.

- Content was better suited towards founders/executive directors of ESOs, and there were a number of program managers (30% of cohort) that could have benefited from different level of content.
  - For example, long horizon strategic planning topics were more suited to founders and more senior participants in decision-making roles of their organisation.
  - We recommend exploring a dual-track approach next time (separate tracks for founders and program managers) to benefit from a shared cohort experience, but to tailor content, activities and peer support based on the levels/roles of the cohort members.

- Accessibility and technology:
  We still experienced challenges in connectivity due to low bandwidths in some SEA countries, some cohort members logging in via mobile and not having laptop access (low mobile-friendliness of the content and assets)
  - We recommend more simple, “tech-lite” formats for documentation and asynchronous feedback (ie: Google Docs/Slides rather than harder to use applications and software)

Pace of instruction and conversation for non-native speakers
  - We could consider language-specific breakout activities in future iterations.

Questions, curiosities and recommendations:

- Is it a repeatable program? The COVID context is unique and urgent.

- How might we create a more persistent learning environment (beyond one-off programs) for ESOs to build their capacities in resilience, leadership and business model strategy?

- The program highlights the value of training and capacity building for program managers, whose organisations often do not have local resources and capacity to deliver training to their teams.
“BuildBackBetter really helped us transition through a tough period and now, as some of the COVID-induced stresses have subsided, we are in a stronger position than ever before.”