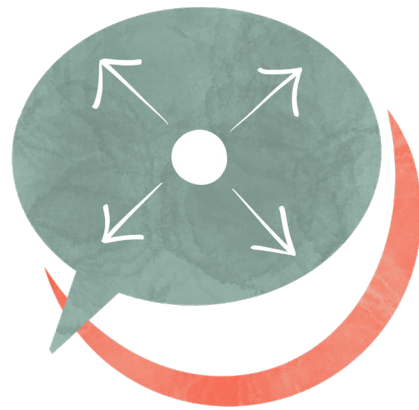


The Ember Take on Scale: Is Bigger Always Better?

Scaling has long been seen as the ultimate goal for mental health initiatives, with reaching big numbers often viewed as a gold standard for success. In this piece, we explore the factors behind the push for scale and the potential consequences of this approach for the global mental health landscape.

Drawing from our experience at Ember Mental Health, we call for an alternative approach to supporting mental health initiatives that aligns with the needs of those that are community-based and that safeguards the diversity of the ecosystem. We propose a forward-thinking approach to tackling the mental health crisis – moving away from scaling a few silver-bullet solutions to embracing complexity and diversity at scale.



What does scale even mean?

Scaling, in simple terms, means expanding or making something bigger. For example, in the context of global mental health, scaling might involve a youth-led peer-support group growing from one school to an entire district, or a local government implementing a postpartum depression programme across all its maternity centers.

While there are several, overlapping definitions of scaling in the scientific literature, most share a few core elements: an intervention or initiative that has been shown to work in a particular context; an effort to broaden its reach to an entire population or geographic area; and a goal of achieving greater, more widespread impact.

Achieving this often requires big-picture planning – building the infrastructure within organizations or health systems to make scaling possible. This might include creating new policies, training staff, establishing leadership teams, or setting up systems to track progress.



How Did Scaling Become the Holy Grail within Global Mental Health?

Over the past two decades, scaling mental health interventions has emerged as a central priority within global mental health.

This focus mirrors broader trends in public health and development agendas which, in an effort to address the world's most pressing health challenges, have urged expanding access to care and directing greater investments globally.

In 2007, the [Lancet Series on Global Mental Health](#) called for scaling 'basic, evidence-based packages of services' to address the magnitude of mental health challenges and the critical lack of accessible care, particularly in the world's most vulnerable communities. The message was clear: the problem was vast, resources were scarce and scaling effective mental health interventions was both a public health priority and a moral imperative.

"We call for the global health community, governments, donors, multilateral agencies, and other mental health stakeholders, such as professional bodies and consumer groups, to scale up the coverage of services for mental disorders in all countries, but especially in low-income and middle-income countries."

— *Lancet Series on GMH & Sustainable Development (2007)*

Since then, scaling has remained a central focus in global mental health policy, practice, and funding. Expanding 'best-buy' interventions continues to be a key objective in global health and sustainable development agendas. International organizations and development agencies prioritize scalable solutions that can reach large populations, work across different settings, and extend beyond local contexts. Terms like "scaling potential" and "scalability" frequently appear in funding proposals, and success is often measured by indicators such as reach and coverage. Increasingly, the value of mental health innovations is tied to how widely they can be implemented and the large numbers of people they can impact.

The Consequences of the Scale-Centric Approach

What are the consequences of this push for scale on the mental health ecosystem? And how do its ripple effects impact community-based initiatives?

Calls for scale have repeatedly raised the crucial question of what exactly should be scaled, and the answer has often been reduced to narrow lists of 'silver-bullet' solutions. What initially began as an effort to address the scale of the problem has seemed to evolve into a concerted global effort to scale only a handful of ideas and solutions.

The current focus on few, one-size-fits-all scalable solutions is at odds with the complex and varied nature of mental health needs. While a narrow menu of endorsed interventions dominates the conversation, the ways to support mental health are far more diverse, with countless examples of that found in communities around the world – ranging from [mental health clubs on campuses](#) to [community gardens](#) offering employment to people with schizophrenia, and beyond. However, the push for standardized

solutions stifles creativity and limits the diversity of the mental health ecosystem. It shifts attention away from addressing the mental health crisis holistically to overly prescriptive approaches that fail to account for the complexity and diversity of people's needs.

Community-based mental health initiatives (CBMHIs), which are deeply rooted in the communities they serve, often bear the greatest consequences of this scale-driven approach. These locally led initiatives are uniquely positioned to deliver comprehensive, culturally appropriate care and address social determinants of mental health. Yet, they are frequently overlooked because their impact, though deep, is often tailored carefully to their communities and not designed for broad, global reach.

Compounding this, CBMHIs struggle with funding criteria that often cater to large, professionalized organizations, along with a lack of access to much-needed mentorship and programmatic support in areas like governance, visibility, and networking.

Scaling Diversity: Ember's Blueprint for an Ecosystem of Care

What is clear more than ever is that a different approach is necessary—one that responds to the complexity of mental health needs and reflects the richness of the ecosystem of care. Through our work in finding, mentoring, and funding CBMHs in low-resource settings, we at Ember have witnessed first-hand the transformative power of support that is tailored to the unique needs, capacities, contexts and goal of these organisations. Our blueprint builds on this learning, offering a new approach to supporting and investing in mental health initiatives within global mental health.

From sidelining to Centering community-led solutions

Despite their importance, community-led initiatives have long been sidelined in the global mental health funding landscape. To address this gap, we prioritise and advocate for these initiatives for their unique ability to meet local needs in holistic, tailored ways, and to foster social inclusion and lasting mental health recovery.

From “silver-bullet” solution to Scaling diversity

We recognise the need to address the mental health crisis at scale – not through a few “silver-bullet” solutions, but by supporting and investing in many mental health initiatives of different shapes and sizes, that collectively build a diverse and resilient ecosystem of care. This is not diversity at the expense of scale, but diversity as the pathway to scale.

From one-size-fits-all to Rethinking scale itself

There are no shortcuts to genuine care. Even when scaling, we prioritise tailored, community-driven solutions over universal, one-size-fits-all interventions. It has become clear that traditional approaches of scaling universal, externally developed interventions have fallen short, largely because they lack of community engagement.

From scale-centric to Nurturing multiple pathways for impact

We support organisations to sustain, transform, or scale their work, allowing them to choose the pathway that makes most sense for their model, their context and their vision. We also center sustainability in all our support pathways, because no initiative can thrive and realize its impact without a strong foundation for operational and financial sustainability.

Conclusion

Putting this blueprint to action requires time and patience, trust, and a willingness to embrace complexity. It calls for prioritizing quality over quantity, exploring new ways to define and measure impact, and collaborating openly with others.

It is worth emphasizing that this is in no way a wholesale rejection of scale, but a call for a more nuanced, community-centered approach to supporting and investing in mental health initiatives, rooted in the understanding that what is most needed or most beneficial to communities is not necessarily what is most scalable; that **bigger is not always better**.

At Ember, this blueprint models the change we hope to see: the global mental health landscape

is transformed such that community-led mental health initiatives receive the support and resources they need within a diverse, inclusive ecosystem of care.

