



Foreign, Commonwealth
& Development Office

COAST Evidence Review 4

Scaling coastal adaptation for resilient and inclusive futures

This brief presents key findings on the trade-offs and opportunities for inclusive scaling in coastal adaptation contexts, drawing from an evidence review conducted by COAST's MEL Services team, a structured analysis of 63 academic and grey literature sources. Findings have been shared with the COAST programme to support the review and development of scaling strategies by implementing partners.

About the Climate and Ocean Adaptation and Sustainable Transition programme (COAST)

Funded through the UK's International Climate Finance, COAST is a multi-year programme designed and commissioned by the UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO), under the UK government Blue Planet Fund.

COAST aims to strengthen and sustain adaptive capacities, climate resilience and prosperity for vulnerable coastal communities through the equitable and sustainable management of coastal resources in selected low- and middle-income countries.



FINDING 1

Scaling choices create trade-offs that must be made explicit and deliberate

The evidence shows that scaling coastal adaptation is not a neutral or purely technical process. It is inherently systemic and shaped by institutional incentives, financing logics, social relations, and political power. Scaling in complex coastal systems inevitably produces winners and losers, creating risks for equity and inclusion if trade-offs are not actively managed.

Different scaling pathways—top-down versus bottom-up approaches, or market-based, blended, and grant-based financing—embed distinct assumptions about efficiency, speed, risk, and control. These assumptions directly shape who benefits, who bears costs, and whose priorities influence outcomes. Across common scaling models used in coastal adaptation (including CBA, LLA, institutional and policy, market-based, social innovation, and knowledge scaling), a consistent pattern emerges: financially and efficiency-oriented models scale faster, while relational and governance-led approaches are better suited to inclusive outcomes but face structural constraints.

What this means in practice: Scaling trade-offs need to be made explicit rather than allowing them to remain implicit in program design and planning. Practical steps include articulating a clear theory of scaling, assessing power and exclusion risks as initiatives expand, and embedding reflection points in monitoring and learning processes to adjust scaling pathways when inclusion is compromised.

FINDING 2

Financial incentives create structural access barriers that must be actively countered

Prevailing financial structures systematically prioritise bankability, risk reduction, and scale over vulnerability, equity, and locally defined needs. Private and blended finance tends to flow toward commercially strategic coastlines, large infrastructure, and monetisable nature-based solutions, while poorer coastal communities, informal settlements, and local enterprises struggle to access resources. Similar exclusionary dynamics appear in microfinance and insurance, where women, the poorest households, and those in high climate-risk areas can be excluded.

Importantly, inequitable access is not limited to private finance. Despite explicit equity mandates, public and philanthropic climate finance also struggles to reach the most vulnerable due to stringent fiduciary requirements, reliance on intermediaries, and increasing financialisation. These dynamics privilege certain partners, solutions, and scaling models, while leaving limited capital for the relational, institutional, and governance changes needed to address underlying vulnerability.

What this means for practice: Inclusive scaling requires deliberate intervention in how finance is designed and deployed. Practitioners can prioritise women-led organisations and highly exposed communities, protect the role of grants and concessional finance, expand direct access and devolved funding windows, and provide hands-on accompaniment where capacity constraints exist. Where blended or private finance is used, strong social safeguards and accountability mechanisms are essential.



FINDING 3

Pressure for speed and measurable outputs must be rebalanced

Dominant incentives within international climate finance and programming frequently prioritise efficiency, short-term results, and easily measurable outputs. These pressures conflict with the time-intensive processes required for inclusive scaling, including building trust, strengthening local capacity, shifting norms, and addressing power inequalities. Urgency narratives often favour “quick wins” and standardised solutions that appear effective in the short term but prove exclusionary or unsustainable over time. Even when participation is prioritised, efficiency pressures frequently reduce engagement to procedural exercises rather than meaningful influence over decisions.

What this means in practice: Trade-offs between speed, cost, and inclusion must be made explicit, whilst adopting phased, adaptive scaling approaches that balance early results with learning and institutional change. Embedding equity and sustainability criteria into performance and value-for-money frameworks can help shift incentives away from short-term efficiency toward durable, inclusive outcomes.

FINDING 4

Specialist capabilities and coordination must be strengthened as critical enablers

Inclusive scaling depends on the ability to manage complexity, coordinate across actors and scales, and address power dynamics. Yet institutional fragmentation, limited capacity, and weak coordination mechanisms often undermine governance-led and locally driven scaling models. By contrast, market-based and technology-led approaches can scale more easily through narrow delivery channels, often bypassing public institutions that could otherwise safeguard inclusion.

What this means in practice: Investment in the capabilities of local governments, community organisations, and customary authorities is required for meaningful engagement in planning, budgeting, and delivery. This includes skills in facilitation, systems thinking, and multi-actor coordination, and treating local and Indigenous knowledge as core evidence. Working through existing co-management platforms and supporting intermediaries can help connect local actors to national systems and shift decision-making authority closer to communities.



FINDING 5

Power asymmetries must be actively addressed to avoid maladaptation

When power dynamics are ignored, scaling can reinforce inequalities and produce maladaptation. Power shapes who controls resources, who defines problems and success, and which knowledge systems are recognised. Market-based models often concentrate power among actors controlling capital and technical expertise, while participatory approaches can also reproduce local hierarchies if power relations are left unexamined.

What this means in practice: Inclusive scaling through meaningful participation requires addressing power imbalances in decision-making. This can be facilitated through systematic political economy and power analyses throughout design, implementation, and scaling. And treating local and Indigenous knowledge as core evidence, strengthening accountability and grievance mechanisms, and managing adaptively to shift power dynamics.

Conclusion

The evidence review emphasises that inclusive scaling does not happen by default. No single scaling model is inherently inclusive or exclusive. Instead, inclusion depends on how trade-offs are recognised and managed across finance, governance, time horizons, institutional capacity, and power relations. Scaling strategies that prioritise speed, efficiency, and financial return without safeguards risk reproducing inequality, while strategies that centre participation and justice require sustained investment, coordination, and political commitment. Ultimately, inclusive scaling must be treated as a deliberate design choice and ongoing practice, not as an assumed by-product of successful adaptation.

The [full evidence review](#) is available for more detail on the evidence behind the brief.



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 mail@itad.com

Itad UK

International House
Queens Road
Brighton, BN1 3XE
United Kingdom

Tel: +44 (0)1273 765250

Itad US

c/o Open Gov Hub
1100 13th St NW, Suite 800
Washington, DC, 20005
United States

Itad Kenya

1870/610 The Westwood Building
Vale Close
Westlands, Nairobi
Kenya