LESSONS IN PARTNERSHIP: THE TRANSFORM STORY

IN 2015, A BOLD NEW INITIATIVE WAS CREATED TO SUPPORT IMPACT ENTERPRISES IN LOW-INCOME COUNTRIES. AS PHASE ONE NEARS ITS END, WE LOOK AT WHAT WE'VE LEARNED ABOUT PARTNERSHIP, PROCESSES – AND OURSELVES

TRANSFORM

WHAT'S IN THIS REPORT

This report looks at how the programme works, how different teams operate within it and the meaning of partnership in the development space. As we'll see, there are many different levels and kinds of partnership within TRANSFORM. To make life easier, we'll refer to Unilever, FCDO and EY as the core organisations.

Six years ago, Unilever and the UK's Department for International Development (DFID) – now the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) – combined forces to work together on TRANSFORM.

EY had worked with TRANSFORM for three years before agreeing to become the third core organisation in the venture in 2020.

Specific learnings we cover:

01

The need to define shared goals and commit to a longer-term timeframe than traditional business normally allows.

02

The benefits of growing small partnerships organically rather than jumping into huge multilateral, multi-year partnerships.

03

The importance of defining a shared purpose which is neither too broad nor too restrictive.

04

The need to understand and discuss each core organisation's ways of working and red lines so that decisions are made swiftly and jointly; and how to manage these on a portfolio level across multiple projects.

05

How we decide whether there's a good fit between us and the people who will run the project.

06

How and why we changed the legal and financial framework.

07

Why we hope the insights in this report will inspire others to undertake a similar journey.

INTRODUCTION: "TO MEET LOW-INCOME HOUSEHOLD NEEDS"

TRANSFORM is a unique joint initiative between Unilever, the UK's Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO) and EY. The goal is to create a partnership that can accelerate and support the work of impact enterprises trying to address the world's biggest development challenges.

Big words and noble concepts flood the world of development. We will undoubtedly be using several of them throughout **these reports**. But as we introduce our analysis of TRANSFORM's first six years, we want to begin where we all began: with this single, very simple goal.

This goal asked, and asks, a lot of us. It asks us to understand consumers in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia where not enough energy and resources have been spent to uncover the needs of these communities. It also asks the entrepreneurs we work with to turn this understanding into great products, market those products and build sales and distribution channels to sell them at affordable prices while making a profit.


Source: Sanivation


Source: Maya

It asks us to understand how changing digital technology helps us meet the needs of these people – and how it fails when too much faith is put in the tech and not enough in the real relationships between real people. TRANSFORM is in the business of behaviour change. How you make that change is rarely as straightforward as it seems on a business plan or around a boardroom table. The more you learn what really drives people, the more you need to challenge your own assumptions, pivot and adapt.

This report contains multiple examples of those 'pivots'. How the core organisations, Unilever, the FCDO and EY, found common ground to scope out their own roles within that clearly-stated mission. As TRANSFORM evolved, we were to discover which of those needs were most urgent and how best we could meet them. It has been a journey of discovery, learning and, above all, adaptation.

TRANSFORM: A BRIEF HISTORY

TRANSFORM came into being because the United Kingdom's Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (then Department for International Development) had already collaborated with the consumer goods company Unilever on a number of ad hoc projects.

Following the success of their partnership, they decided to formalise and extend the relationship in 2015 to create TRANSFORM. Blending £10 million of funding and bespoke business support to impact enterprises in low-income countries, helping them to tackle some of the most persistent development challenges.

A new Unilever and FCDO joint team was formed, dedicated to finding entrepreneurs with the ideas and products to solve problems which harm the prospects and shorten the lives of millions of people – among them access to clean water, good sanitation, healthcare, information and technology.

How fast those enterprises grow and how quickly their solutions are taken up will depend on the sector they are operating in. Still, we can broadly define what success means for a TRANSFORM project. Either: an enterprise that grows rapidly and succeeds in its own right as well as against our health and welfare goals. Or: an innovation that we can test, learn from and share with the world. Or, best of all – both.

TRANSFORM has scaled up as the initial funding commitment grew to £40 million. Now supporting 56 businesses and reaching over four million people, the fund will increase again to reach up to £90 million total by 2025. But it was never just about the money. We wanted to offer as much business support and expertise as we could, especially as the impact enterprises we work with are fighting their way through the critical early years as start-ups.

The professional services organisation EY began work on specific TRANSFORM projects in 2017. After a couple of years of exposure to our approach – and seeing the results – EY stepped up to become a core organisation alongside Unilever and the FCDO. From 2021, they will commit an additional £10 million to the programme.

The building blocks were in place: three core organisations from different worlds, with different skillsets, and varying agendas and hopes for the TRANSFORM project, all managed by a tight, multi-disciplinary team.

That team meets daily at most and weekly at least. If you work on TRANSFORM, you may see more of your counterparts in Unilever, the FCDO and EY than colleagues who have the same logo on their business cards.

But in order to learn and grow, TRANSFORM needed to engage with a diverse group of contributors: other corporates and donors, charities and NGOs – and with a new generation of entrepreneurs working where it matters: in communities directly serving those households' needs.

As of September 2021 TRANSFORM has:

- **Supported 61 impact enterprise and research projects in 13 countries**
- **Helped 22 business models transition towards scale**
- **Generated over £20m follow-on funding – approximately a 1:1 ratio of TRANSFORM's cash investment**
- **Impacted the lives of more than four million people in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia**

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY PARTNERSHIP?

We've found that TRANSFORM works best when we engage partners at different levels. We have a flexible approach allowing a variety of partner organisations to join our initiative based on their expertise. But let's look at the fundamentals of the relationships.

The words 'partner' and 'partnership' can often be used indiscriminately. As this is primarily a report about partnership, we've clarified what we mean to avoid any confusion.

Source: Kasha

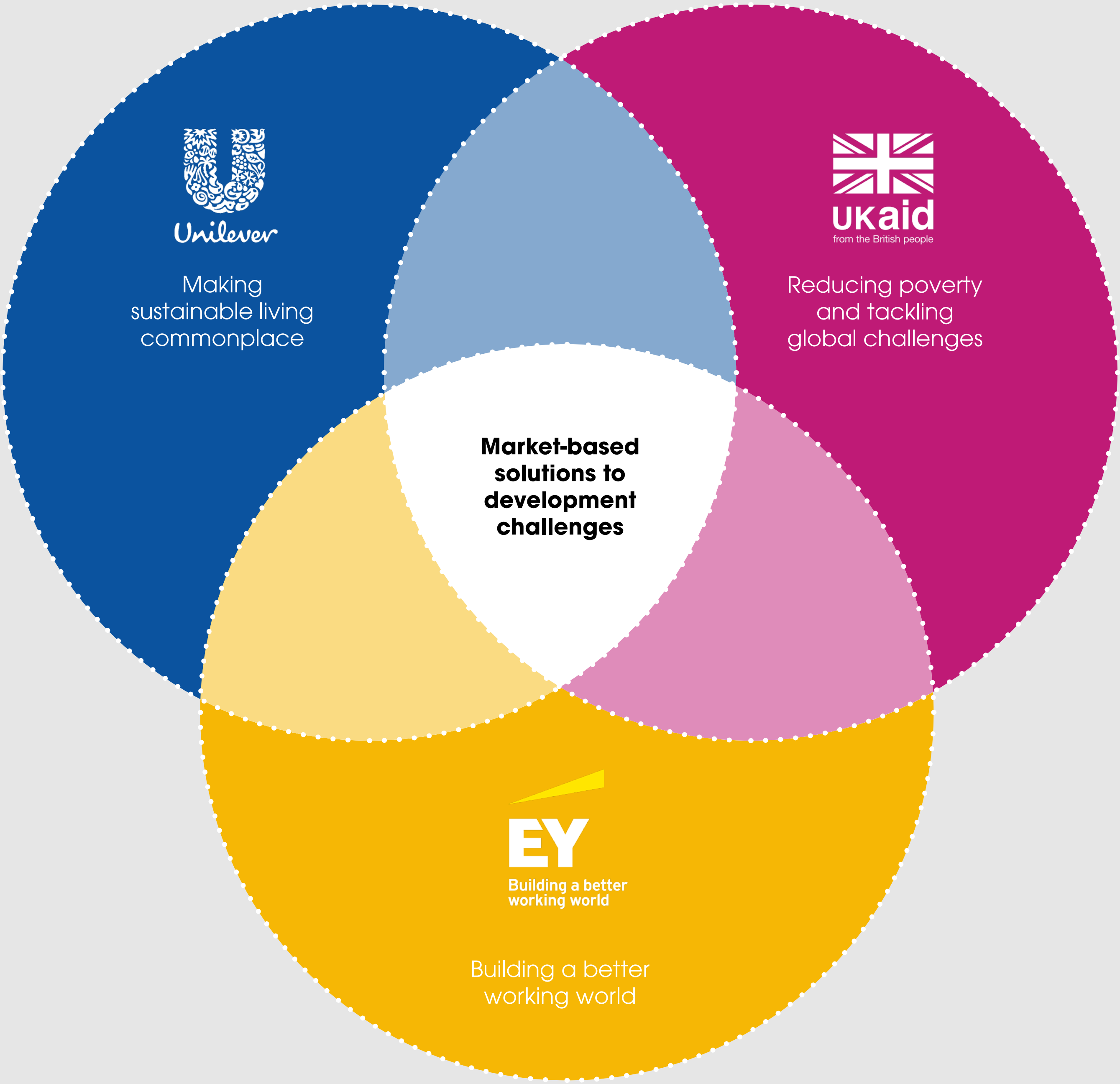
As mentioned before, we refer to Unilever, the FCDO, and EY as '**core organisations**'. Together, we are responsible for the overriding vision and direction of the partnership and the relationships with strategic suppliers and enterprises.

As we decide which challenges we want to focus on, we'll often enter into a **project partnership**. For example Microsoft, Mastercard or Acumen, are brought in specifically to help support an individual enterprise with cash or expertise on a challenge they're facing that sits outside of the core organisation skillset or expertise.

The structure and ambition is slightly different with, say, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, with whom we are testing a new approach focused on supporting utilities in Africa to launch sanitation business models serving low income people. It's an example of a **thematic partnership**, because it concentrates on several projects with a topic or expertise in common.

BUILDING PARTNERSHIPS: WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED SO FAR

TRANSFORM has a unique structure and a distinct approach to network building beyond its core organisations. What have we learned in our first six years?



01 START SMALL

Organisations often want to announce big, ground breaking, multi-agency ventures. In our experience, it is easier to start small, then build. Starting with a tight-knit group of people enables the core organisations to develop the relationship, test ways of working and build confidence before committing to a larger programme.


Source: BopInc

02 THINK HARD BEFORE ADDING NEW CORE ORGANISATIONS

Especially in the early stages, try to make your programme work with as few partners as possible. Bilateral beginnings are best. Even the leanest and most well-run organisations will inevitably bring with them different processes, rules and requirements on everything from legal to branding. Satisfying those requirements uses up resources and time. As the partnership inevitably grows, we've found that having three core organisations is the perfect balance.

03 FIND LIKE-MINDED ORGANISATIONS AND IDENTIFY YOUR SHARED PURPOSE

Every partnership needs a significant area where attitudes and values overlap. As partners, you share ways of doing business as well as a sense of purpose. You won't have 100% alignment, and nor do you want it – it's because the core organisations have different perspectives that they are interesting and useful to one another. With your shared purpose, you will try to create a hybridised culture using learnings from (in TRANSFORM's case) all three organisations.

TRANSFORM core organisations coalesce around the goal we set out at the beginning of this report: 'to meet low-income household needs'. You are aiming for a sweet spot where everyone is clear why they have joined; yet there is enough flexibility to explore different areas and respond to a major event such as COVID-19.

Let's interrogate this further. It is important that your goal be specific enough that all organisations know what it means – otherwise you'll spend a lot of time debating too wide a variety of projects and ideas. 'Low-income households' filters out a lot.

But don't be over-specific. We may devote some of our energies to work in water and sanitation. But before you answer the household need for better sanitation and cleaner water, you might identify a different need first like access to credit and finance.

04 TEST OUT YOUR PARTNERSHIP'S PURPOSE BY FINDING REAL PROJECTS

Before the partnership gets much further, build your pipeline. That means reviewing real projects you might potentially fund. It's a crucial test. Is your area of collaboration too wide or too narrow? Too wide, and it will be impossible to choose what to fund. Too narrow, and it is difficult to find projects that fit within the overlap or match your partners' skillset.

The selection process will also establish how compatible you really are. If you find the selection process too difficult, don't abandon your joint venture. Return to the mapping stage where you identify organisation overlaps and redefine the partnership's purpose.

05 USE THE PORTFOLIO TO BALANCE DIFFERENT PARTNERS' NEEDS

Once you have agreed a shared goal, you then need some ground rules which will decide how you work together. You'll have different requirements: now is the time to share them in full. For instance:

Will you run lots of small projects or focus on a few big projects?
Creating a large portfolio will allow you to impact a lot of businesses, but is potentially very resource-intensive. You may choose instead to fund a select few projects which receive larger sums of money and lots of targeted support.

Choose to work with early-stage or more mature enterprises?
Working with an enterprise early on makes a bigger difference to them and offers richer learning potential for the programme, but they are unlikely to scale to reach millions of people in, say, five years. Working with larger enterprises is more likely to reach more people but since more of the business has been worked out you will be likely to work on only a small aspect of their business rather than the whole thing.

Specialise or diversify?
Funding lots of similar projects allows for cross-project learning, but also can leave the portfolio vulnerable to external shocks. Funding diverse projects spreads the 'bets' but means there are fewer opportunities for learnings to be shared between projects.

Open tenders or trusted providers?
Governments try to ensure transparency and inclusion through open tenders; but partner businesses often build trusted relationships with suppliers and enterprises who they know they can deliver and provide value for money.

TRANSFORM's core organisations have a different answer to these questions based on the way their organisation works. But, we learnt early on that if you try to meet everyone's needs, every time, there will be very few projects you can all agree to work on together.

TRANSFORM's approach is to manage differing priorities and agendas across the whole portfolio, aiming for a portfolio where risk, rewards and impact are balanced. It's the role of a central, steering group, made up of representatives from each organisation, to find a course between them and decide how it is best to direct the programme's resources.

When we first started working together, these different priorities were not obvious; they only came to light when we started to make funding decisions as a team. In hindsight, we'd recommend spending time to understand how your partners work and what's important to them from the outset. You need to be aware of – and surface – each organisation's ambitions for the project and ways of working. You will find a balance – but only once you understand what each partner needs.

WELCOME ONBOARD: A CHECKLIST FOR CHOOSING NEW PARTNERS

As your partnership becomes established, you'll inevitably want to bring in new partners – usually to collaborate on individual projects, but sometimes on a number of initiatives which share a common theme. We've found that this checklist helps:

Four simple questions to ask early on in partnership discussions

'What do they give?'
what complementary skills, capabilities or funding will the potential partner bring?

'What do they get?'
What will the person or organisation want to receive in return for their contribution? If the answer is 'payment', then they are a supplier, not a partner. That's fine: but supplier relationships need to go through a different contractual process. This simple question at the beginning of every conversation helps to determine the correct and most efficient next steps.

'Do they answer the phone?'
Can they dedicate the time needed to sustain the partnership? If they aren't good at getting back to you in the beginning of the relationship, then it is unlikely to improve and will cause a strained relationship.

'Could we work together?'
You'll need to work together closely over the course of several years. It's important that your potential collaborators are people you want to work with. The cultures of the organisations and the people are both important.

Above all, make sure your own organisation passes these tests as you begin to work together: **always answer the phone and respond to partners in good time.**

Once you've established these four questions, find out more about the motivations of your new partner by putting yourself in their shoes. Ask them, what would be a big win for their organisation? What gets their boss excited? What are their red lines? The time and resource investment in potential partnerships can be enormous; so it is important to understand what success looks like for them and any constraints and limitations from the outset.


Source: Zayohub

Identify the gaps you want to fill

Your core organisations will never be able to do it all. You need to have open and honest conversations about the expertise each core organisation brings to the table and collectively identify the skillsets you're missing.

Now it's time to bring in new project-level partners that can help fill the gaps, leveraging existing connections that you have a trusted relationship with, but also don't shy away from working with new organisations that can bring in fresh thinking.

It's important to remember that this is an evolutionary process and the needs and skillsets you require will change over time. This may be influenced by working with new enterprises or external shock factors like COVID-19. Either way, allow yourself the scope to review capabilities and gaps at any stage.

Use a funding gap as an incentive to continue to find new partners

Funding gaps are commitments to source additional funding and support once the partnership is operational. We have found funding gaps to be effective mechanisms to incentivise everyone to bring in new skills and knowledge as well as new money.

As for the potential partner, it is more compelling if you are joining a programme that is already underway and delivering results. There is less of a chance of stalling at the concept stage or stuttering as multiple organisations and legal teams get aligned.

During TRANSFORM's 2018 expansion, we left a £10m funding gap in the programme because the core organisations had confidence that we could secure new partnerships to that amount before the end of the programme. We've already exceeded this goal – securing £11.35m of additional funding from partners.

Meet potential partners as a team

The early discussions with new potential partners tend to be led by one organisation. However, once the conversations become more serious, we invite in someone from all three core organisations.

We find it most effective to work as a unified team to recruit new organisations to the partnership. It signals that the partnership is united and they're serious about the prospect.

On an emotional level, working together as a single team strengthens the dynamic of the partnership; winning a new partner – and it definitely is a 'win' – creates further rapport between the core organisations.

Build in expansion from the beginning

Designing a "closed-door" partnership that ringfences which core organisation can influence the direction of the partnership limits your ability to adapt. It's beneficial to be open-minded about the possibility to work with new partners from the beginning, so you have the flexibility to make easy decisions down the line.

The original TRANSFORM legal agreement between Unilever and the FCDO was not designed to be expanded. This led to complications when partners wanted to join.

TRANSFORM has since developed new contracts to make expansion simpler. It is far better to factor in expansion from the start to avoid the time and complication of retrofitting contracts.

THE LAW OF FLEXIBILITY

As TRANSFORM was established and sought to expand, we learned that our desire for flexibility and speed was hampered by our legal framework.

We have learnt a lot about contracts over the past five years. Unilever and the FCDO created an overarching Collaboration Agreement to enable that founding partnership. However, when it was time to onboard new partners, we could not change any clauses in this contract for a new partner without also changing the original Collaboration Agreement, with the FCDO and Unilever. In practice, at least some limited changes were always required and so it was impossible for partners to join the Collaboration Agreement.

We relied on interim bilateral legal arrangements instead, where Unilever contracted on behalf of TRANSFORM with new partners. However, that put a heavy administrative burden on all parties and left Unilever with higher legal risk.

We have now designed a new type of contract: an Additional Partner Joining Agreement (APJA). The APJA enables the core organisations, Unilever, the FCDO and now EY, to contract with new third parties. The APJA follows the commitments made in the Collaboration Agreement, but also allows the third party to customise the contract. The result is a flexible and adaptable document that allows partners to sign up to different areas of the programme; but which also holds parties to account.

Finally, we always consider what level of agreements are required. While contracts are signs of commitment, they are not always needed. TRANSFORM has worked with project-level partners without formalised contracts; a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) may serve just as well.

HOW TRANSFORM OPERATES

CORE ORGANISATIONS BRING DIFFERENT SKILLS TO THE TABLE. IT HELPS IF ONE TAKES THE OPERATIONAL LEAD.

Partnerships exist between people, not organisations. This is not always an easy lesson to remember when you are building them at a senior and highly strategic level. As we'll see in the following section, partners have different agendas: that's inevitable and healthy. But that's all the more reason why your core team has to have a strong culture, separate – not independent – from the members' parent companies. Let's interrogate the TRANSFORM governance model in more detail.

Source: U Join

01 We have created a core, dedicated and consistent team

Why: Tightly integrated partnerships don't work if the core organisations only meet one afternoon a month. They need to be dedicated to your project, share responsibility and maintain focus and purpose.

Benefits: The core TRANSFORM team has seen few changes in personnel over the past five years. The programme benefits from that consistency of leadership and operational knowledge.

A team which is intimately familiar with the purpose, partners and operations will always be able to move faster. And when new people do join the team, they of course bring new ideas and direction: but it is the role of the core team to stay true to the founding purpose.

How: When the internal stakeholders sign off the financial resources for the programme to go ahead, they then request ringfenced personnel who will run it.

02 We delegate decision-making to the core team

Why: Speed, once again, and clarity. We want those higher up in the organisational hierarchy to concentrate on the purpose, rather than being stuck in the detail.

Benefits: The TRANSFORM management team is empowered to implement the programme unhindered. We use executive committee meetings to get senior leadership buy-in.

How: Ask each core organisation to nominate one - two people to make decisions on behalf of their organisation, someone who has the capacity to stay abreast of all programme developments. These team members must join a team meeting on a monthly basis to align on the big decisions but work in an integrated manner behind the scenes between these meetings.

03 Partners have equal rights and an equal say

Why: Each core organisation will have projects they are excited about. They may also feel strongly that other projects aren't right for TRANSFORM.

Benefits: Not all projects will tick the box for every core organisation's skill or interest, and nor should they. It's the responsibility of the core team to have open discussions, make sure the voices are heard, but overall, they have to ensure that a balanced portfolio is maintained to spread the risk.

How: In return for sharing the funding, each core organisation has a veto on the projects, and overall the portfolio must meet the needs of each organisation. To do this, compromise is required, and not each project has to have equal partner weighting. For TRANSFORM, this means that if one organisation loves an idea and the others are less enthusiastic (but still broadly positive), it normally goes ahead.

04 The core team sees a lot of each other

Why: We need to build a robust subculture that complements rather than rivals each organisation's own ways of working.

Benefits: The people who work on TRANSFORM become one team despite working for organisations in very different sectors. The subculture they create leads to an openness within the team. There is tension – that's inevitable – but it's a positive tension.

How: We meet at least monthly and talk remotely several times a week. We build relationships through onboarding events, get-togethers and regular check-ins.

Source: Kasha

05 Share a common language

Why: Clear communication is important at all times – but especially when you are building something ambitious and new. We all work in English, but that doesn't mean that misunderstandings don't occur, with the inevitable consequences for time and resource. So, we agree at the outset the words we will use for the different ventures we engage in – and the people and organisations involved.

Benefits: Avoids confusion and streamlines communications.

How: Be as clear as you can about the terms you are going to use. If you're unsure about a technical term or a piece of jargon, ask.

Even a simple word like 'scale' can mean different things to different people. The more empirical and the less woolly you can be the better. Does 'scale' mean 'achieve revenues of $100m'? Or simply 'try to grow your revenues every year'?

06 Create Standard Operating Procedures

Why: The lack of rotation within the team does create some risk. Knowledge of the partnership history and processes becomes deep-rooted. If members of the core team do leave, there is a risk the partnership will struggle with continuity. So we document Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs).

Benefits: Ensure process and purpose remain consistent despite any team changes.

How: SOPs are maintained by the core team and detail the daily programme operations and procedures. At their core, the SOPs are a manual to run the programme, designed for anyone to pick them up and for the programme to function.

Source: ZayoHub


Source: ZayoHub

TRANSFORM'S STRUCTURE: GLOBALLY LED, REGIONALLY SUPPORTED

The **Executive Committee** is comprised of senior leaders from each core organisation. The Committee has the highest level of oversight. It meets twice a year to advise on the strategic direction of the programme and ensure the business case targets are being delivered.

The **Management Team** is the operational heart of the programme. Up to three representatives from each organisation meet every two to four weeks to oversee decision making and the implementation of the programme. The Management Team reports to the Executive Committee.

The **Programme Team** comprises of Unilever team members. The team meets at least once a week and is responsible for programme delivery: planning, budgeting and reporting, monitoring and evaluation (M&E), risk management, service delivery, partner management, communications and engagement.

Project Leads are responsible for managing individual projects. Project leads typically meet with the enterprises once a fortnight depending on the support required. Project Leads report to the Programme Team and Management Team, providing portfolio updates monthly.

Like the organisations we support, we try and adapt our processes and approaches to be as efficient as possible. Two new ways of working we have recently launched are:

The **Regional Forum** includes representatives from each core organisation. TRANSFORM has two regional forums based in our core geographies: Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. The forum meets quarterly to support the programme within their markets, which facilitates greater collaboration between our organisations both inside and beyond TRANSFORM. It allows us to showcase the programme within our organisations, find champions to spearhead regional efforts and embed the work within the local organisations. The regional forum is hosted quarterly, helping to source new projects, find new partners and contribute insights which help us decide which projects to support.

Sub-teams are subsets of the Management Team which form to undertake specific tasks and sprints. Sub-teams help TRANSFORM move quickly. Once a workstream is complete, the sub-team return to the Management Team for sign-off. For example, the **Selection Panel** is accountable for project selection decisions. Members of the Management Team are joined by independent representation from subject matter experts and scale partners.

TRANSFORM PROVIDING A BLUEPRINT

FOR FURTHER COLLABORATION

In 2020, the TRANSFORM model allowed Unilever and FCDO to rapidly respond to the COVID-19 crisis. In just two months we launched the £100 million Hygiene & Behaviour Change Coalition (HBCC), which provided funding, technical assistance and hygiene products to over 20 NGOs. Combined, these organisations delivered hygiene interventions that reached over 1.2 billion people in 37 countries around the world. It also helped to consolidate Unilever-FCDO relationships at senior levels.

TRANSFORM very much acted as the blueprint for this partnership: it would not have been possible without the relationships, trust and contractual templates that TRANSFORM had put in place.

Source: Kasha

TRANSFORM FOR ALL

AN OPEN INVITATION TO LIKE-MINDED VENTURES

TRANSFORM is not a one-off project. We don't hide our learnings or insights; it is designed to be flexible and replicable. It is, if you like, an open-source project. By sharing what we've learned and the processes we've trialled, we hope to enable future projects of this scale to get up and running more smoothly and quickly.

Phase One of TRANSFORM is coming to an end, where both our partner ventures and the principles we started with have been severely tested by the COVID-19 crisis. But as Phase Two begins, we believe the model is a robust one.

We can only continue to grow with the help and engagement of likeminded others from all backgrounds. That is why our core organisations are from different walks of life, and our project and thematic partners are global and local experts.

So, where next? We want to do more; and we hope that by sharing these lessons honestly that others can apply them in their own work. The world needs more partnerships to help bring about a clean, sustainable, equitable future.

To find out more about our projects check out the **interactive map** on our website, where you can also see all of our existing partners and the impact enterprises we support. We would also love for you to be part of our community - you can do this by signing up to our **newsletter** and following our social channels (**Twitter**, **LinkedIn**) for regular news and insight updates. And if you'd like to work with TRANSFORM as a project or thematic partner, please get in touch with us.

TRANSFORM is a joint initiative between Unilever, the FCDO and EY. Established in 2015, it works to accelerate impact enterprises, blending funding and support to deliver market-based solutions to the world's biggest development challenges. TRANSFORM uses its capabilities and expertise in marketing, distribution, digital, and business resilience to deliver transformative market-based solutions to low-income households in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia that last. For more information on TRANSFORM, visit our **website**, and follow us on **Twitter** and **LinkedIn**.

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Our vision is to be the global leader in sustainable business and to demonstrate how our purpose-led, future-fit business model drives superior performance. The Unilever Compass, our sustainable business strategy, is set out to help us deliver superior performance and drive sustainable and responsible growth, while: improving the health of the planet; improving people's health, confidence and wellbeing; and contributing to a fairer and more socially inclusive world.

While there is still more to do, we are proud to have been recognised in 2020 as a sector leader in the Dow Jones Sustainability Index and - for the tenth-consecutive year - as the top ranked company in the 2020 GlobeScan/SustainAbility Sustainability Leaders survey. For more information about Unilever and our brands, please visit **www.unilever.com**.

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