



A Case Study on Scaling Early-Stage Edtech Ventures

How Amal Alliance Built its Evidence Base
& Influenced Stakeholders

About This Report

The Amal Alliance (Amal) is an NGO dedicated to empowering displaced and disenfranchised children through education and social development programs. This case study documents the scaling journey of Amal's flagship social and emotional learning program, Colors of Kindness, and provides a set of best practices and practical insights for other early-stage ventures seeking to build their evidence base and influence stakeholders.

This report was made possible by LEAP (Leveraging Evidence for Action to Promote change), a global initiative that brings together researchers, social entrepreneurs, and education ventures to advance evidence-based educational or mental health services to underserved children ages 2-12.



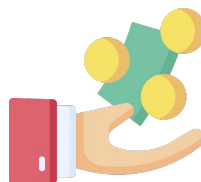
Who Should Read This Case Study

This case study has three audiences in mind:



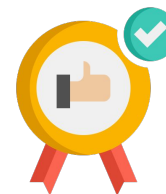
Founding Teams

Provides an honest account of how to build an evidence base and influence stakeholders during a venture's earliest stages.



Funders

Highlights what types of funding early-stage ventures need and the critical role donors can play in helping NGOs influence stakeholders to achieve scale.



Governments

Showcases how to be involved at each stage of venture development to promote sustainable scale of evidence-based programs.

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About Amal



Amal Alliance

Founded in 2017, Amal is an NGO dedicated to empowering children through education and social development programs. Across its three SEL programs – Colors of Kindness (a blended learning program), Superhero Academy (a home-based learning program), and Rainbow of Education (a teacher training program with accompanying curriculum), and Mini Rainbow (curriculum for 3-6 year olds) – Amal has reached over 276,000 children across 43 schools and other educational settings in 5 countries.

**Humanitarian
Education
Accelerator**

THE ROYAL ACADEMY OF BHUTAN

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**Crisis and Conflict Response
Top 3 Nominee**



Amal's programs have been recognized as innovative and scalable SEL solutions, and its content has been downloaded in over 175 countries.

Amal's Focus on Social Emotional Learning (SEL)

SEL is the process through which children acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that help them understand themselves, connect with others, and contribute to a more caring and just world. SEL is directly linked to a range of positive development outcomes, such as improved emotional well-being and mental health, prosocial behaviors and healthy relationships, as well as academic achievement (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2023). High-quality SEL programming has been shown to improve outcomes for all children, and may be particularly impactful for vulnerable children (Gedikoglu, 2021).

The growing number of children affected by humanitarian crises are among the most vulnerable. Today, one in four children (approximately 426 million) live in active conflict zones, and over 35 million children are forcibly displaced (Save the Children, 2023; UNICEF, 2022). These children are more likely to face physical harm, psychological trauma, weakened family and social networks, and interrupted access to health and education services (Better Care Network, 2022). Amal found that while the vast majority of humanitarian support focuses on providing basic needs (shelter, food assistance, water, sanitation), mental health and psychosocial support remain underfunded and difficult to implement at scale. This presented an opportunity for Amal to meet a significant need.

Amal's Flagship Program

This case study focuses on Amal's flagship program, Colors of Kindness. This multi-award-winning SEL program is designed to improve children's social and emotional skills and overall well-being.

The program has several unique features:



Colors of Kindness draws upon **best practices** in SEL and is aligned with evidence-based SEL frameworks from [LEGO](#) and the [Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning \(CASEL\)](#).



Delivered through a series of podcasts and a digital workbook, this **blended program** is easy to implement and requires minimal teacher training.



Easy to adapt to different educational settings, languages, and cultural contexts.



Accessible offline via simple, low-cost technology - Learning Equality's Kolibri Platform



Collects **real-time data**

These features make Colors of Kindness a cost-effective and highly-adaptable program that is scalable even in hard-to-reach contexts.



Colors of Kindness' Scaling Journey

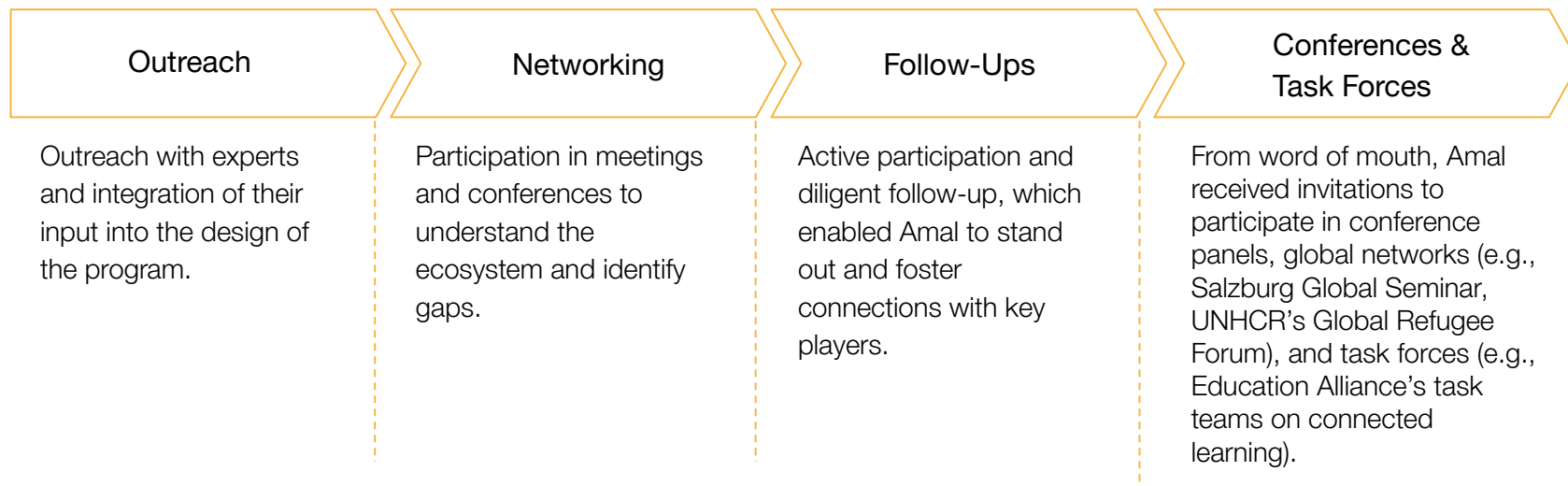
Colors of Kindness's Early Prototypes

The precursor to Colors of Kindness, the Rainbow of Education, was tested via small in-person programs, including refugee camps in Turkey and short programs in Greece and Lebanon. These programs were funded by small implementation grants from foundations, individual donors, and Amal's founder, and gave Amal the opportunity to improve its program based on feedback from teachers and students.

When the pandemic hit, Amal responded to the urgent need for digital content by adapting its in-person curriculum to easily shareable audio files. Amal disseminated its 'We Are in This Together' podcasts widely via Whatsapp in four languages and across a consortium of partners. By April 2020, over 260,000 users had benefited from the podcasts. Later, Amal partnered with Education Above All to create a workbook edition of Colors of Kindness, which was distributed on its internet-free resource bank. This workbook was downloaded in 175 countries and gained attention from large international organizations.

Growing a Network & Building Credibility

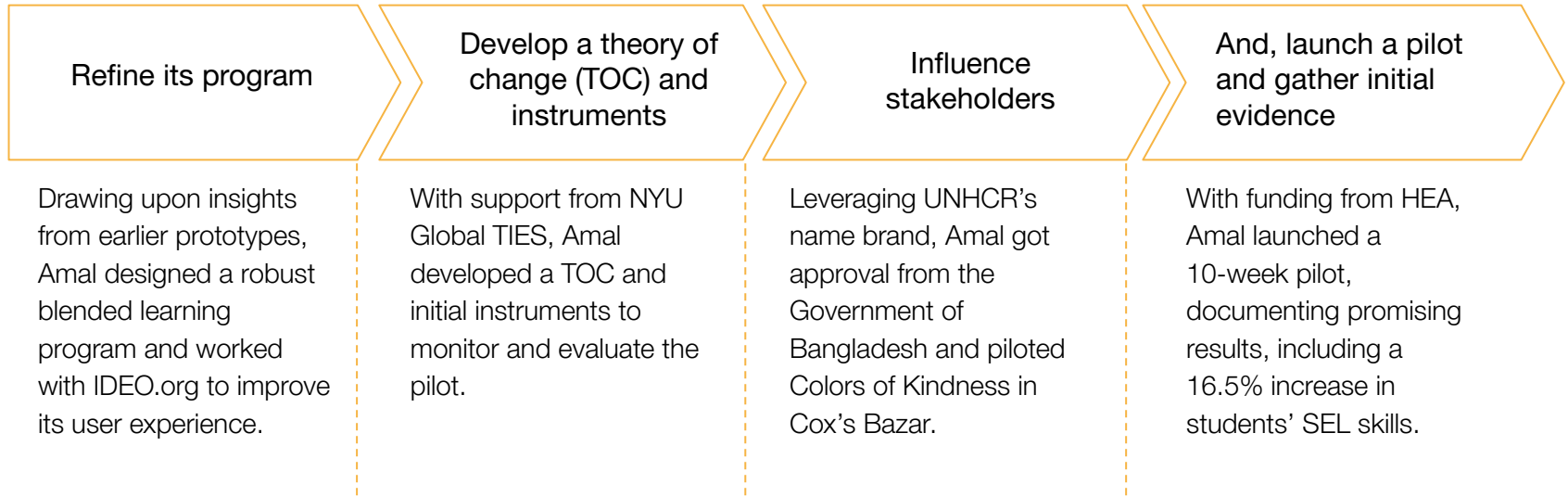
As a new organization, Amal had to invest in building a diverse network and advocating for stakeholder commitment to SEL interventions. It did this by:



Through active engagement, Amal built a strong network, established a brand, and developed both a conducive platform and an advocacy strategy to scale Colors of Kindness and other SEL interventions.

Codifying & Piloting Colors of Kindness

In late 2020, UNHCR invited Amal to apply to its Humanitarian Education Accelerator (HEA) COVID-19 Challenge. Through a rigorous selection process, Amal was one of three organizations selected. HEA provided funding, technical support, and a valuable network, which enabled Amal Alliance to establish four key building blocks for their evidence base: refine its program, develop a theory of change and related instruments for measuring progress, influence key stakeholders and launch a pilot that was part of Amal's evidence-gathering.



Through HEA, Amal Built a Strong Foundation

The pilot gave Amal an opportunity to test the program beyond its initial target audience and helped Amal build a foundation for its evidence base.



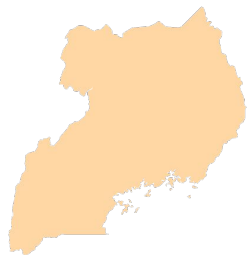
In Bangladesh, Amal proposed that programs for the Rohingya refugee community were also made available to the host community. This allowed Amal to trial the program with a broader audience and within formal education settings, which has become a signature feature of Amal's work in other countries.



Using the TOC and monitoring and evaluation instruments developed through HEA, Amal was able to demonstrate early signs of positive impact on both Rohingya and Bangladeshi children.

Scaling Set Backs & Opportunities

Although Colors of Kindness showed early signs of positive impact, the instruments used to evaluate the program had not been validated. Thus, Amal did not have sufficient evidence to qualify for HEA's second round of funding. As a result, Amal had to build a stronger evidence base while it refocused on outreach and fundraising. Amal leveraged its growing network to unlock opportunities for scale and research in new geographies.



In 2021, Rotary Clubs in the U.S. raised funds for a pilot in Uganda and helped Amal build partnerships with a Rotary Club in the Nakivale Settlement. Simultaneously, Amal raised separate funds for another pilot in Palabek Settlement. Leveraging partnerships via the INEE network, Amal received approval from the Office of the Prime Minister for both programs.



In 2021, Porticus Foundation, which had learned about Amal's work through HEA and the Salzburg Global Seminar in 2019, funded a third pilot in Greece. Porticus played a critical role in helping Amal retain local consulting firms to conduct stakeholder mapping and develop outreach strategies. Leveraging the Boston University Alumni network & GDP Center Advisory Board Role, their Founder established a relationship with the government, Amal was able to attain approval for pilots in refugee camps (Nea Kavala, Schisto, Serres, Lagadikia, Veria) as well as in formal education settings via the Ministry of Education within a short period.

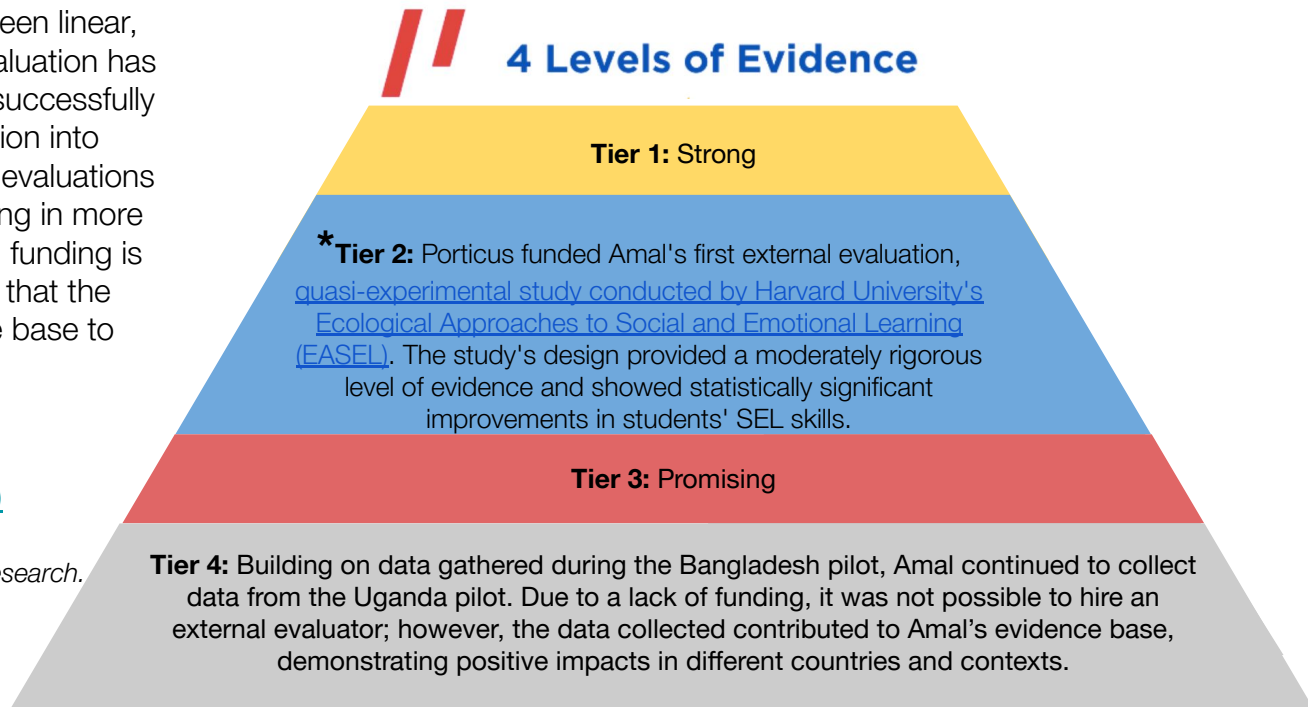
Amal Continues to Build Its Evidence Base

To improve the Colors of Kindness delivery, Amal monitored and evaluated its activities to drive higher impact. Amal understands that building its evidence base is critical for influencing stakeholders, building partnerships with government and other partners, and securing funding.

Amal's evidence journey has not been linear, and funding for monitoring and evaluation has been scarce. However, Amal has successfully embedded monitoring and evaluation into every project, carrying out internal evaluations when funding is limited and investing in more rigorous external evaluations when funding is available. The LEAP team believes that the latter has brought Amal's evidence base to Tier 2.

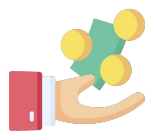
*[*The Every Student Succeeds Act \(ESSA\)](#) provides guidance to help education stakeholders evaluate the quality of the research.*

*[*Figure courtesy of Meghan Ecker-Lyster.](#)*



Colors of Kindness' Next Phase of Growth

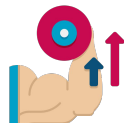
In less than 3 years, Amal has been able to influence stakeholders and build an increasingly robust evidence base, which has led to successful pilots in 3 diverse geographical locations. In its next phase of growth, Amal can build upon this foundation by:



Securing Funding: While Amal has gained growing recognition, funding remains a constant challenge. For Amal to improve program delivery, grow its partnerships, and strengthen its evidence base, it needs to secure flexible funding that covers its core administrative costs, including more robust monitoring and evaluation and a core team.



Broadening its Sphere of Influence: By increasing awareness and outreach with governments, donors, international and civil society organizations, and academia, Amal can continue to scale its programs and research, contributing to both advocacy efforts and the global evidence base.



Strengthening its Evidence Base: Amal can strengthen its evidence base in a number of ways, including broadening the outcomes it measures (e.g., academic performance, mental health), refining its instruments (e.g., balance self-reported data with other types of measurement), conducting replication and/or experimental studies to determine causality, cost-effectiveness, and efficacy across diverse settings and groups (cf. Nesta, 2013).



Best Practices & Lessons Learned

Key Lessons for How to Influence Stakeholders

Amal's experience aligns closely with research from [Cooley et al. \(2021\)](#), which outlines the following criteria as important in helping ventures influence stakeholders.

Criteria

Amal's Experience

Support from influential individuals and institutions



Amal's participation in HEA gave Colors of Kindness credibility. Support from influential institutions like UNHCR and NYU Global Ties was critical in obtaining approval for pilots and forging initial partnerships with donors and researchers.

The intervention addresses an important and urgent problem



Colors of Kindness addressed a persistent problem - the need for high-quality SEL programming - which became even more salient due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The intervention has a strong evidence base with clear, attributable impacts



Colors of Kindness draws upon decades of research linking high-quality SEL programming to positive outcomes. It also shows early signs of positive impacts across multiple geographies, including increasingly robust studies carried out by external evaluators.

The intervention is cost-effective



Colors of Kindness is cost-effective, leveraging low-cost and widely accessible technology and requiring minimal teacher training.

There is limited opposition



The most opposition to SEL programming comes from parents, who do not always understand its value. With awareness campaigns embedded into delivery methods, this opposition is minimized.

Practical Tips on How to Influence Stakeholders

Amal's experience offers additional insights into how early ventures can influence stakeholders.

Rigorous Outreach & Networking

Amal connected with key networks through direct email both globally and in the country. Amal also conducted research to identify influential teachers, parent associations, teacher unions, regional offices, and individuals to guide through the process.

Stakeholder Mapping

While Amal's strategy for reaching stakeholders is the same across countries, local staff, partners, and, on occasion, consultancy companies helped Amal identify the right stakeholders and the most effective communication channels.

Understanding Local Context: Rules, Regulations, Needs

Through a consultative process with local stakeholders (teachers, parents, NGOs, governments, working groups, consortiums), Amal learned how to adapt its content and delivery to align with local requirements and needs.

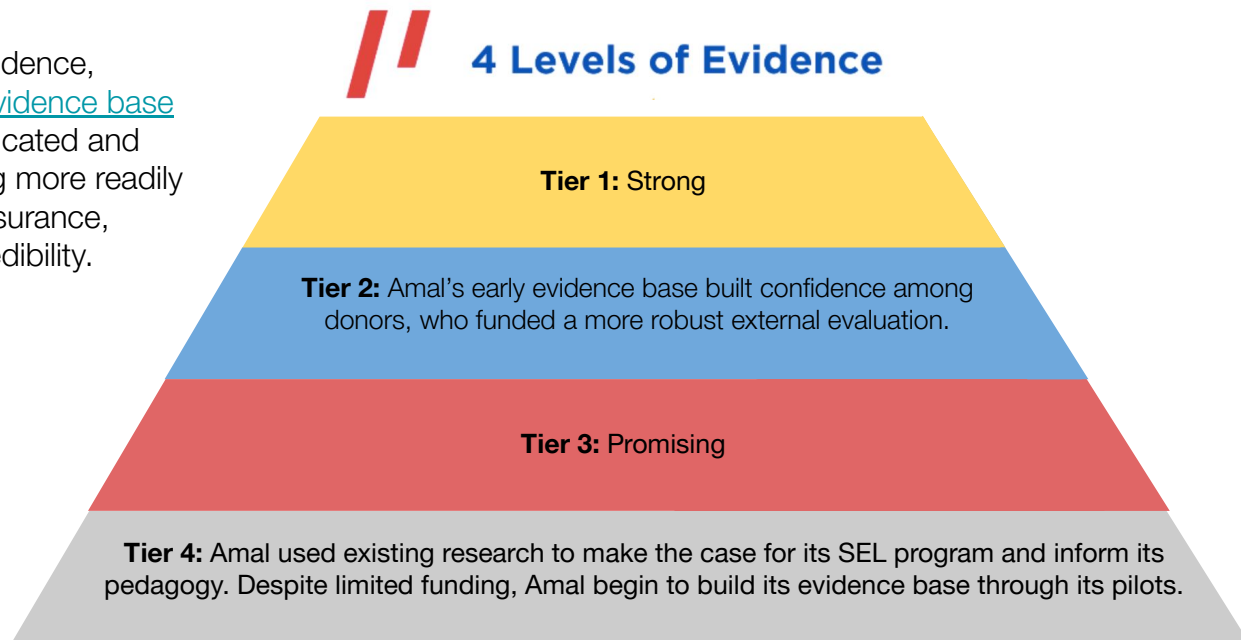
Tailoring Your Venture's Value Proposition

Based on its understanding of the local context, Amal was able to adjust its value proposition to respond to on-the-ground priorities (e.g., in Uganda, Colors of Kindness was seen as a way to support school retention while in Greece, it was part of a broader pivot to skills-based learning and academic reform).

Key Lessons for How to Build an Evidence Base

Ventures need evidence to show that their program is effective in producing intended results and that they [use strategies with evidence of impact](#). Although the gold standard for evidence of efficacy is randomized control trial (RCT), RCT studies are expensive, difficult to carry out, and can be controversial (e.g. ethical issues related to denying a group an intervention and the datafication of learning, see Goldacre, 2013; Brooks et al., 2014;).

Aligned with ESSA's four tiers of evidence, ventures often need to [build their evidence base](#) gradually, investing in more sophisticated and robust studies over time while using more readily available data to support quality assurance, inform improvements, and build credibility.



*[*Figure courtesy of Meghan Ecker-Lyster.](#)*

Practical Tips on How to Build an Evidence Base

Amal's experience shows the importance of drawing upon existing research and best practice as well as documenting and evaluating its process, and building data-driven cultures. For example, Amal was able to document positive impacts on families and teachers, as well as streamline and improve its program (e.g., animating visuals, shortening audios, including a self-care module for teachers).

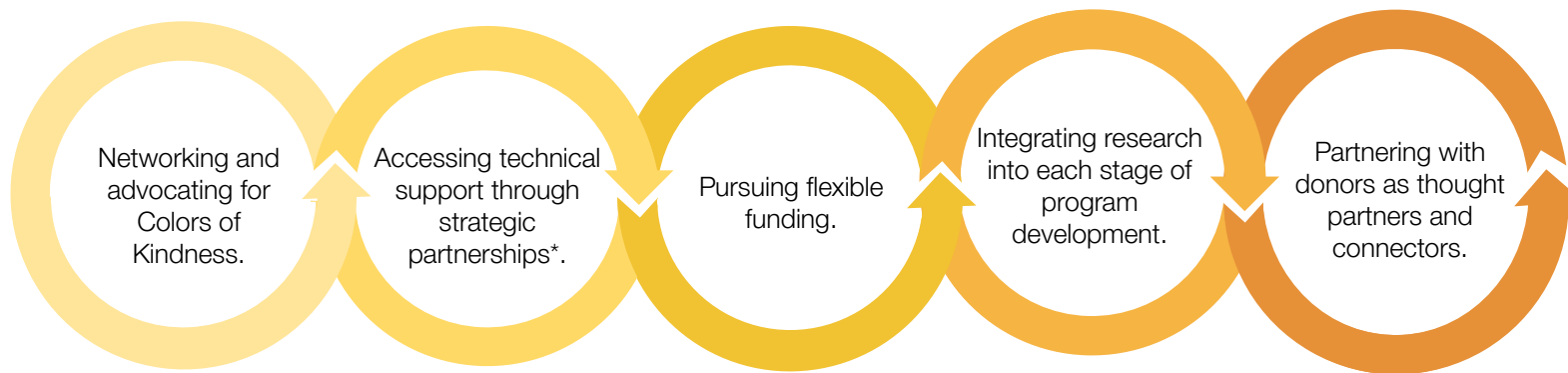
Although this data was collected internally, it was critical for helping Amal to build credibility and confidence among partners and donors, who ultimately support more expensive externally conducted studies.



Conclusions

Like most early-stage ventures, Amal's success has not been linear. There have been hundreds of nos for every hard-earned yes, and its growth has been spurred by relationships on the ground and unexpected opportunities rather than a preset 5-year plan.

Amal has been able to seize opportunities and evolve agilely by:



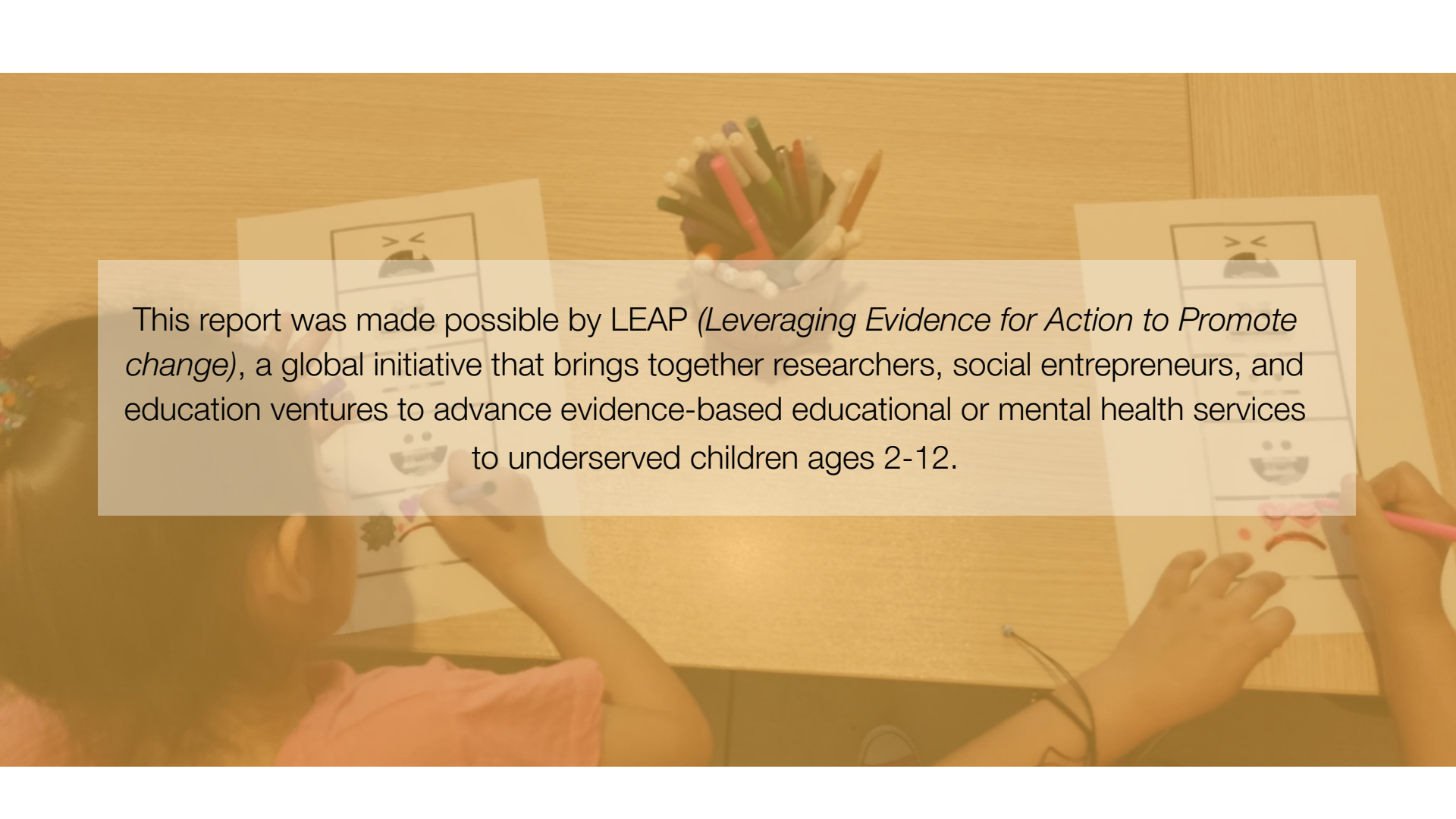
*E.g. leveraging local and government partnerships



**Key Takeaways
for Founding Teams,
Governments,
& Funders**

Key Takeaways for Ventures, Governments & Funders

1. Early-stage ventures need to dedicate time and resources to outreach and marketing in order to build a network and a name brand. This includes frequent emails, in-person and virtual meetings, as well as participation in conferences, events, and thematic task forces. Opportunities can be unlocked by using all possible networks.
2. Accelerators like HEA provide ventures with critical funding, technical support, and networks, which are especially important during the venture's earliest stages. Access to technical support can be more valuable than funding.
3. Early-stage ventures need flexible funding to cover core operations, respond to on-the-ground implementation needs, and build their evidence base.
4. At every stage, research should be woven in and aligned to the venture's theory of change. During the early stages, organizations should collect and analyze data internally to test assumptions, ensure quality assurance, and improve program delivery. Evidence should be built gradually, with organizations investing in more robust external evaluations when funding allows.
5. Donors can be valuable thinking partners and connectors, unlocking new opportunities and helping ventures navigate bureaucracies more effectively and efficiently.
6. Government partners need to be involved at every stage from design to implementation to scale, and their support is invaluable during the scaling phase to ensure information about the program can reach audiences faster.

A photograph of children sitting at a wooden table, coloring cards. In the center of the table is a white cup filled with various colored markers and pencils. Two children are visible, each holding a card with a grid of three emotion faces. The child on the left is coloring a purple smiley face, while the child on the right is coloring a pink smiley face. The background is a plain wooden wall.

This report was made possible by LEAP (*Leveraging Evidence for Action to Promote change*), a global initiative that brings together researchers, social entrepreneurs, and education ventures to advance evidence-based educational or mental health services to underserved children ages 2-12.

Acknowledgments

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Thank you

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