FACILITATING INNOVATION ECOSYSTEM STRENGTHENING

Lessons from the Next i2i Program

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The NEXT i2i initiative is a program validating and accelerating early-stage African ventures addressing global development challenges. Inspired by the MIT D-Lab Scale-Ups Fellowship and funded by USAID, Ashesi University in Accra, Ghana launched a three-year initiative in 2018 to create an incubator for validating and accelerating early-stage ventures addressing global development challenges. Part of the initiative's goal was to catalyze connectivity across Ghana's entrepreneurial ecosystem, convening diverse stakeholders to spur new investment and encourage learning about how young entrepreneurs succeed.

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INTRODUCTION

About Innovation Ecosystem Strengthening

Innovation thrives in a local context when there are enabling conditions that support it, including local champions, appropriate infrastructure, and a favorable policy environment. The local system context that gives rise to innovation in any particular place is known as the local innovation system (IS) or, from a perspective informed by ecology, the local innovation ecosystem (Hoffecker, 2018a). Like a biological ecosystem, the local innovation ecosystem refers to the actors, other elements and resources (living and nonliving), and relationships between them that work together to enable or disable the production of innovation in a particular geography.

Local innovation ecosystems have been defined as "place-based communities of interacting actors engaged in producing innovation and supporting processes of innovation, along with the infrastructure, resources, and enabling environment that allow them to create, adopt, and spread more effective ways of doing things" (Hoffecker, 2019). Like other types of ecosystems, local innovation ecosystems can be strengthened and made more robust and resilient—or weakened and undermined—through deliberate strategies and actions, as well as the unintended consequences of human activity.

This guide shares lessons learned about the deliberate actions that local actors can take to launch and grow a local innovation ecosystem strengthening process. These lessons and recommendations are drawn from over a decade of research conducted by Elizabeth Hoffecker, lead researcher for the MIT D-Lab Local Innovation Group, as well as the experience that MIT D-Lab and Ashesi University gleaned from efforts to implement these research insights in the context of a specific ecosystem strengthening effort in Accra, Ghana, implemented as part of the USAID-funded Next i2i program. This implementation experience, which took place against the backdrop of the global Covid-19 pandemic, is shared in more detail in the second half of the guide.

The importance of innovation ecosystem strengthening

Research conducted by the MIT D-Lab Local Innovation Group has found that the process of strengthening local innovation ecosystems generates concrete development benefits for local communities (see box on the following page). These benefits contribute to increased production of local innovation; strengthened capacity to adapt, absorb, and put into use innovations originating elsewhere; and strengthened conditions for local economic activity and competitiveness more broadly (Hoffecker, 2014; Hoffecker, 2018a; Hoffecker and Douthwaite, 2022).

About this Guide

This document provides guidance on the **initial steps involved in organizing, convening, and facilitating a local innovation ecosystem strengthening process in a digital environment**. The content and recommendations are drawn from the research of the MIT D-Lab Local Innovation Group and from experience implementing a series of innovation ecosystem strengthening meetings in Ghana during the course of 2021, a year in which meetings and group work had to quickly move online due to Covid-19.

BENEFITS OF INNOVATION ECOSYSTEM STRENGTHENING

Benefit Category	Examples
New shared assets, including physical assets, financial assets, technological assets, and knowledge assets	Shared innovation spaces, such as maker spaces; new revolving loan funds for local innovators; new tools and technologies that can be used for innovation; new brands; enhanced stock of technical expertise and know-how
New resources and improved resource conditions, including knowledge and information, natural resources, financial resources, and human resources	A more highly-trained workforce with enhanced skills specific to a certain cluster or innovation niche, such as renewable energy or regenerative agriculture; new know-how related to specific innovation niches
New and/or strengthened infrastructure, including physical infrastructure, communication infrastructure, and relationship infrastructure	New professional networks; strengthened relationships and enhanced collaboration within existing networks; expanded information technology infrastructure
More favorable policy and institutional conditions for local innovation, including changes in norms, rules, and policies	Changed attitudes and norms more supportive of innovation; new government programs and policies that support innovation and innovation-driven entrepreneurship
New and strengthened capabilities within the ecosystem, such as the ability to achieve effective collective action and large-scale, multi-stakeholder objectives	A new, multi-actor supply chain within an innovation niche; successful multi-stakeholder policy advocacy to create tax incentives for local innovators
Improved functioning of the processes supported by the local innovation ecosystem	New and/or strengthened processes of knowledge sharing between actors in the ecosystem; new and/or strengthened processes of social learning, coalition-building, advocacy, and collective action

Sources:

Hoffecker, E. (2018b), “Why Cultivating Your Innovation Ecosystem Is Worth the Work.” *Stanford Social Innovation Review Online*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University.

Hoffeckaer, E. and Douthwaite, B., (2022), “Solving problems and strengthening systems: how local innovation of appropriate technology contributes to development,” in Régnier and Wild (Eds.) *Handbook of Innovation and Appropriate Technology for International Development*. Edward Elgar (forthcoming).

The guide shares what we have learned regarding how to approach convening a local innovation ecosystem strengthening process, what steps can be taken to kick-start this process, and how these can be adapted from an in-person to a digital work environment (see Sections 2 and 3). The guide also documents how the members of the NEXT i2i team, composed of staff from Ashesi University and MIT D-Lab, implemented a specific ecosystem strengthening process in the context of the NEXT i2i project (see Section 4). This includes how we adapted in-person activities to a digital environment and our recommendations for other groups interested in engaging remotely in ecosystem strengthening work.

Audience

This guide is designed to inform the work of "backbone organizations" or "backbone teams" (Crespin and Moser, 2018), groups that commit to moving the ecosystem strengthening process forward while providing consistent facilitation of the process, documentation, and engagement with other local stakeholders. Given that innovation ecosystem strengthening processes involve relationship building, trust building, and joint visioning, we recommend that the backbone teams leading these processes commit to a twelve-month time frame at a minimum. We also recommend that before proceeding with facilitating a sequence of events like those presented in this guide, readers become familiar with the content introduced in ***Understanding Innovation Ecosystems: A Framework for Joint Analysis and Action***, a companion publication to this guide.

This publication contains foundational concepts for the ecosystem strengthening process, including a local innovation ecosystem framework (Figure 1; reproduced on the next page), which describes the minimum set of relevant components for a local innovation ecosystem. These include actors in the ecosystem (by type and role); relevant resources and enabling conditions in the ecosystem; the quality and structure of relationships between these various components; and the ecosystem's purpose, which serves to orient and structure activity within the ecosystem (Hoffecker 2019).

How to use the guide

This guide provides an overview of the ecosystem strengthening process, as well as specific steps and facilitation tools that can be used to plan, convene, and host a multi-stakeholder working group focused on local innovation ecosystem strengthening. Section 4 offers more detail, providing a recommended meeting structure and agendas for seven initial working group meetings, incorporating lessons learned from implementing a similar sequence of meetings during the NEXT i2i program. We recommend that teams or groups interested in using this guide to plan for and facilitate ecosystem strengthening working groups approach the material in the following way:

1. To start, become familiar with the overall arc of the ecosystem strengthening process by reading *Understanding Innovation Ecosystems: A Framework for Joint Analysis and Action* and Section 2 of this guide.

2. If there is commitment to engaging in ecosystem strengthening work, identify the team who will be envisioning and planning it, and jointly read about the operational and logistical aspects of such convenings, presented as an overview in Section 3, and with more details in Section 4, which shares the specific experiences of the Accra Ecosystem Design Team.

3. Once a team has moved to the stage of planning for specific working group meetings, review the Working Group Agenda Overview Table (Table 3) and access the accompanying web-based Facilitator Toolkit (**Miro board**), which provides activity templates and detailed facilitation instructions for each of the activities described in this guide.

Figure 1: Local innovation ecosystem model

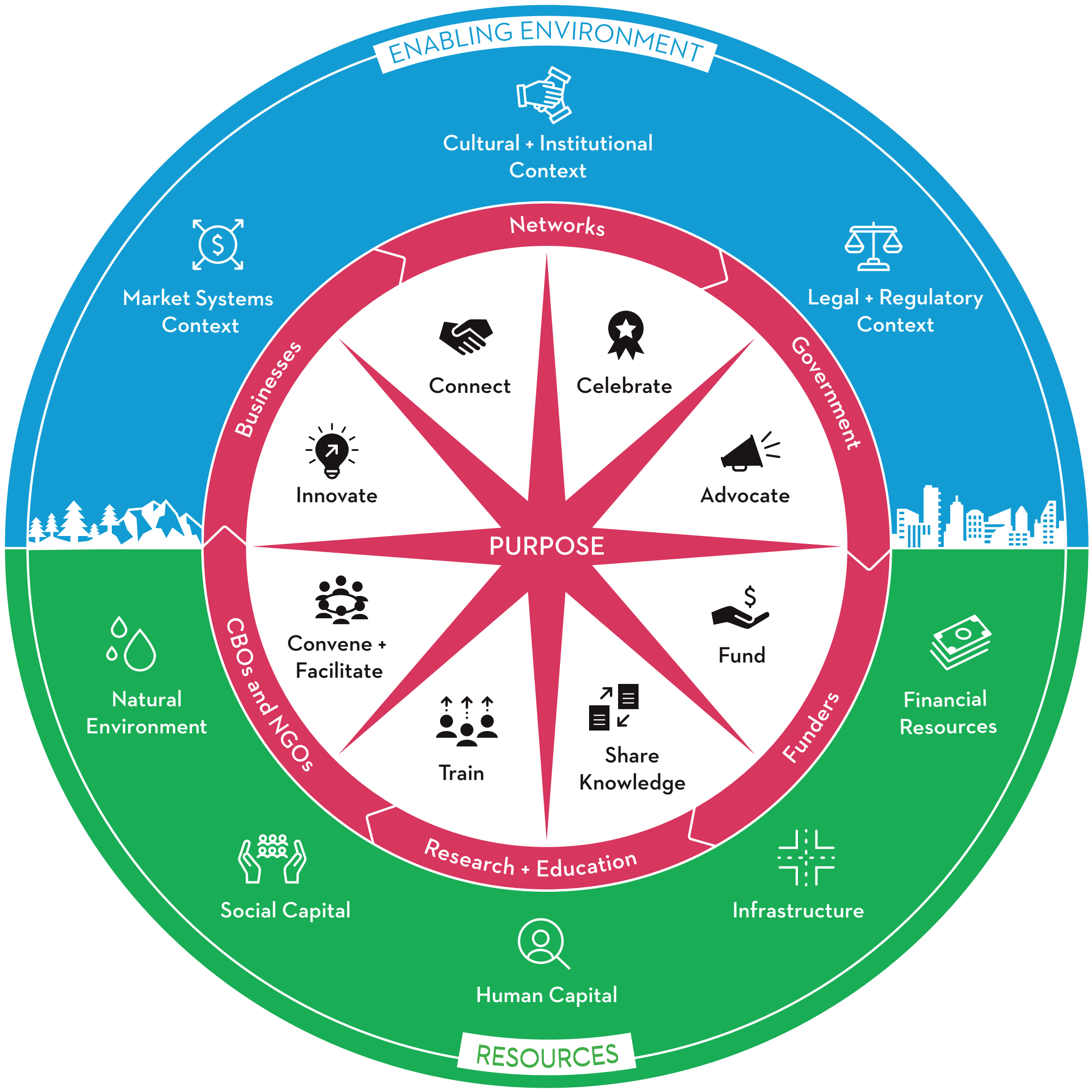


Image source: Reproduced with the author's permission from Hoffecker, Elizabeth (2019), Understanding Innovation Ecosystems: A Framework for Joint Analysis and Action. Cambridge: MIT D-Lab, p. 5, Figure 2.

THE ECOSYSTEM STRENGTHENING PROCESS: AN OVERVIEW

This section provides an overview of the initial phases of a multi-actor innovation ecosystem strengthening process, focusing on six initial phases in the process. These phases, and their descriptions, have been identified by the MIT D-Lab Local Innovation Group based on case study research of innovation ecosystem strengthening processes in the United States (Hoffecker, 2014), in Zambia and the Philippines (Douthwaite and Hoffecker, 2017), and through experience with the NEXT i2i program in Ghana.

Specific activities undertaken by the NEXT i2i program within these phases are described in more detail in Section 4. That section also provides a recommended sequence of working group meetings, with objectives, sample agendas, and recommended activities that have been used to facilitate progress towards meeting specific objectives within some of the phases described below.

Whether or not an ecosystem strengthening working group chooses to work through all six phases described below depends on its starting point, both as a multi-stakeholder group and as an ecosystem. If actors in an ecosystem are engaging in a deliberate ecosystem strengthening effort for the first time—or working with each other on this kind of effort for the first time—we recommend starting at Phase 1 and moving through all ten phases in sequence. If ecosystem strengthening efforts have taken place in the past or are already underway, then working groups might identify a later phase as the most appropriate starting point.

Phases in the Process

PHASE 1: Define the ecosystem of interest

The first phase in local innovation ecosystem strengthening involves a process whereby the individuals and organizations who are interested in engaging in such a process define the ecosystem they are interested in strengthening, and the boundaries of that ecosystem. Like all complex, adaptive systems, local innovation ecosystems can be defined at different scales, and in relation to other ecosystems of interest that typically contain many overlapping actors and elements. Local innovation ecosystems, for example, often contain components of the local start-up ecosystem and broader entrepreneurial ecosystem, but these ecosystems also have non-overlapping elements (see Hoffecker 2019, page 3, Figure 1).

Groups wanting to engage in local innovation ecosystem strengthening should start by asking:

- What is the ecosystem we want to strengthen?
- Is it the full local innovation ecosystem, or a subcomponent of it, such as the innovation ecosystem related to a particular industry cluster or sector (e.g., sustainable agriculture or circular economy)?
- Is it only the part of the innovation ecosystem that overlaps with the local entrepreneurial ecosystem? Or does it also contain elements of the innovation ecosystem that are outside the entrepreneurial ecosystem?

Asking and answering a set of questions related to the ecosystem of interest is a crucial first step, which enables the subsequent identification of relevant actors and components of that ecosystem, as described in Phase 2 below.

PHASE 2: Identify ecosystem actors and elements

Once the ecosystem of interest has been identified, the next step is to identify the relevant types of actors and elements in the ecosystem. Who are the current key actors and how do they connect? What are the factors—both positive and negative—that influence the system and each actor? This process can be done by the backbone organization using a model such as the Local Innovation Ecosystem framework (Hoffecker, 2019), a participatory process with existing contacts in the ecosystem, a process of desk research and key informant interviews, or a combination of these methods.

Once the categories and types of actors have been identified, the backbone team will be well-positioned to identify a subset of actors who should be invited to play a role in the ecosystem strengthening process. This is the smaller group of actors that the backbone team may want to invite to participate in an informal or formal innovation ecosystem strengthening working group.

PHASE 3: Convene an ecosystem working group

Once a smaller group of between five and fifteen key actors (individuals or organizations) have been identified, Phase 3 involves planning for the ecosystem working group and convening this group over a period of time to be defined by the backbone organization. Key considerations within this phase, such as how to prioritize which types of actors to invite to the working group, how much time is needed to plan for launching the working group, and other logistical considerations related to budgeting, facilitation, and implementation, are addressed in Section 3 of this guide.

PHASE 4: Facilitate regular ecosystem working group meetings

The next phase involves facilitating a series of regularly planned meetings with the members of the ecosystem strengthening working group over a period of time that may range from four to eight months or longer, depending on how frequently the working group meets, and how much time members want to devote to each of the steps and associated activities within this phase. Section 4 provides more details on the key objectives, recommended steps, and potential activities that can be undertaken during these meetings. At a minimum, these meetings should plan to accomplish the following five objectives:

1. **Identify the ecosystem's history and assets,** as these are strengths to build on.
2. **Identify the ecosystem's current purpose and results,** both intended and unintended, as this indicates the ecosystem's current function.
3. **Formulate a vision for the ecosystem's future** purpose and results in 10 to 25 years.
4. **Identify what the ecosystem needs** to move towards the future vision. What needs to be introduced or grown from within the system (actors, resources, enablers, etc.)? What needs to be strengthened? What needs to be removed or weakened?
5. **Prioritize the ecosystems's needs** as identified in step 4 to select an immediate starting point—a first pilot—for group action. This should be something that is a priority for all involved and will make a difference in achieving the vision, but is relatively straightforward to achieve in a short period of time, i.e. low-hanging fruit for multi-stakeholder work.

Selecting an impactful but "easy win" first initiative can help strengthen the ecosystem working group by building engagement with the work among existing members, who, in our experience, are typically motivated by achieving early results through working together. This selection also contributes to building momentum and encouraging other actors, who may not have been interested in joining initially, to link up with the group and its efforts moving forward.

PHASE 5: Launch first pilot: a joint activity or initiative for ecosystem strengthening

This phase involves planning and launching the working group's first multi-stakeholder ecosystem strengthening initiative. Depending on the type of needs identified and prioritized in Phase 4, this first initiative might involve creating a searchable directory of local innovation ecosystem actors and resources, organizing an ecosystem-level event, creating some other type of high-visibility ecosystem-level resource, or launching a pilot around better connecting actors within the ecosystem.

Whatever activity is chosen, we recommend that the ecosystem working group approach it as a deliberate pilot: a way to test assumptions about the ecosystem and its actors, elements, and needs that were identified in prior phases of work. As with all pilots, this pilot will benefit from identifying clear learning objectives, in terms of what the team hopes to accomplish and learn about the ecosystem and the strengthening process.

PHASE 6: Assess and reflect on the first pilot, and then plan subsequent work

The final phase in the ecosystem strengthening launch process is for the working group to assess and reflect on the first pilot, and to carry this learning forward into the planning of subsequent ecosystem strengthening activities. Through reflecting together, working group members may identify that aspects of their strategy and plans need to change, that their assumptions about the ecosystem and how it works need to be adjusted, or that new types of actors need to be actively engaged in the process to ensure success. These lessons should be documented and inform subsequent ecosystem strengthening activities the group pursues.

ORGANIZING AN ECOSYSTEM STRENGTHENING WORKING GROUP

This section of the guide provides more detail on Phase 3 of the ecosystem strengthening process. As introduced in the previous section, Phase 3 involves convening and facilitating a working group with a select group of ecosystem actors who are interested in playing an active role in leading a process of multi-stakeholder ecosystem strengthening. This section starts by describing the important role of backbone organizations—or backbone teams, if multiple organizations are working together to launch the ecosystem strengthening initiative—in facilitating this process, and discusses some of the key operational aspects of planning and implementing an ecosystem strengthening working group. It moves on to address some of the initial planning and logistical considerations for backbone organizations interested in launching and facilitating ecosystem strengthening initiatives.

Roles of Backbone Organizations

Backbone organizations are organizations that provide the core leadership and support required to plan, launch, facilitate, and grow multi-stakeholder, system-level, collective impact work, including innovation ecosystem strengthening efforts. The role played by a backbone organization—or backbone team, if several organizations are closely collaborating in a collective impact endeavor—is recognized as fundamental to the success of the multi-stakeholder work (Turner, et al., 2012). As documented by Turner et al. (2012), Hoffecker (2014 and 2019), and Crespin and Moser (2018), backbone organizations play the following essential roles in multi-stakeholder work:

1. **Clarity of purpose:** Backbone organizations provide clarity of purpose for the multi-stakeholder group. In the case of innovation ecosystem strengthening groups, the backbone organization clarifies the purpose of bringing together a working group to jointly engage in ecosystem strengthening activities.

2. **Vision and strategy:** Backbone organizations guide the development—and revision as needed over time—of the multi-stakeholder group's vision for its work and core strategies. Research by Turner et al. (2012) and Hoffecker (2014) has identified that successful backbone organizations maintain a laser focus on the group's vision, but adjust core strategies as needed over time, as the group's work progresses naturally from more foundational aspects of multi-stakeholder work to externally-facing initiatives aimed at building support for the group's work.

3. **Shared identity:** One of the most important roles of backbone organizations is to lead the process of creating a strong sense of shared identity within the multi-stakeholder working group, and maintaining this sense of shared identity over time. In the case of ecosystem strengthening working groups, this can include creating a name for the working group and for the broader initiative, as well as shared values and a shared language, including terms, names of approaches, slogans, and other ways of identifying the group's work, both internally and externally.

4. **Linking and connecting:** Backbone organizations are "relationship brokers," and in the context of local innovation ecosystem strengthening, they are what is termed "innovation brokers." A key role of an innovation broker is to identify other organizations doing related or potentially related work, create links to these organizations and groups, and connect them to the innovation ecosystem strengthening process as appropriate. Initially, this involves identifying core members of the ecosystem working group and facilitating connections between these organizations to build a cohesive working group. Over time, this role evolves to focus externally on connecting more actors, and more diverse types of actors, to the ecosystem strengthening initiative.

5. **Joint decision making:** Once an ecosystem working group has been convened, backbone organizations fill an immediate need by establishing processes for effective, efficient, and transparent decision making within the group, and then maintaining and adjusting these processes as needed over time, with input from group members. This process enables members of the working group to identify decision points, move through them with clarity and efficiency, and generate transparent group decisions that have the full buy-in of group members, contributing to retention and continued engagement of group members over time.

6. **Operational support:** Backbone organizations provide operational support, including staffing, budget for meeting expenses and materials, and other resources necessary for multi-stakeholder groups to meet, operate, and engage in activities aligned with their vision and strategy. In the case of innovation ecosystem strengthening groups, backbone organizations provide staffing, technology support, facilitation design, and logistical support for working group meetings in the initial stages of the working group's existence. Over time, effective backbone organizations build the commitment of working group members to provide some of these resources from their own organizational budgets, distributing the burden of running the group more broadly within the ecosystem.

7. **Capacity building:** When a backbone organization is supporting a multi-stakeholder process aimed at developing and/or strengthening a local innovation ecosystem, there is frequently a need to provide capacity-building support to one or more member organizations. In the case of facilitating virtual convenings, this may involve helping some working group members with technological barriers so they can effectively use the digital platforms where the group will be doing its work. In other cases, capacity building might be needed to help group members strengthen their skills in meeting facilitation, public speaking, or using shared measurement practices for tracking the group's results and impact over time.

8. **Metrics and learning:** Studies of effective backbone organizations have identified an important role for these organizations in supporting the development and implementation of shared measurement practices, which enable the initiative to track its results over time (Turner et al., 2012, Part 3). Tracking results—even for a short-term working group—is important so as to communicate these results with members and externally, which in turn helps to build momentum and the interest of additional stakeholders to engage with the initiative. Beyond establishing and tracking progress towards clear results, this role also encompasses facilitating opportunities for group members to learn from each other and from similar initiatives locally and regionally. Setting up and implementing peer learning opportunities, sometimes referred to as "Learning Journeys" or "Learning Exchanges," helps members of an innovation ecosystem strengthening initiative build on what is already working in their community, avoid duplicating existing efforts of other organizations and multi-stakeholder groups, and identify actions that are both ambitious and achievable.

9. **Building public will:** Once innovation ecosystem strengthening initiatives have an initial track record of success in their ability to identify and address ecosystem needs, many find that it becomes increasingly important to build awareness within the broader ecosystem regarding their activities

(Hoffecker, 2014). This involves efforts to raise the initiative's visibility so members of the ecosystem are aware of it, efforts to build public support for the initiative's work, and the creation of opportunities for members of the ecosystem and broader community to engage with and contribute in meaningful ways to the ecosystem strengthening work (Turner et al., 2012, Part 3).

10. **Mobilizing resources:** As the ecosystem strengthening initiative gains visibility and broadens support for its activities, it becomes important to identify opportunities to mobilize community resources in support of the ecosystem strengthening work. This can involve working with members of the initiative to formulate joint funding proposals, advocating for the development of new resources from public and private sources to support ecosystem strengthening work, and working with member organizations to help them identify sources of support for the initiative's joint work from within their own organizational budgets or spheres of professional influence (Hoffecker, 2014; Turner et al., 2012, Part 3).

11. **Advancing policy:** Finally, as a local innovation ecosystem initiative matures, it will likely need to advocate for policy changes that have been identified as creating a more supporting enabling environment for local innovation. These might be changes at the local level or at regional or national levels, depending on the policy environment and the types of changes to the enabling environment that the working group has identified.

These eleven key roles of backbone organizations are all equally important. However, some are more relevant at the start of a new multi-stakeholder initiative, while others gain relevance as the initiative establishes itself over time. In the case of a local innovation ecosystem strengthening process, the first eight roles are fundamental and should be exercised by the initiative's backbone organization (or team) from the start of the initiative. Once the initiative has begun to accomplish its early goals and demonstrate evidence of success in accomplishing "easy wins" that benefit the ecosystem, the backbone organization—as well as members of the working group—will be better positioned to play the latter three roles.

Overview of the Planning Process

This section addresses key considerations and lessons learned for planning and launching a new innovation ecosystem strengthening group. It is primarily intended for backbone organizations that have decided to convene and launch such an initiative. The section addresses the following four topics: 1) the resources required to plan such an initiative, including time, budget, tools, and materials; 2) logistical considerations of staffing and facilitating working group sessions, particularly remotely or hybrid in-person and online; 3) key competencies that are required to facilitate such meetings, as these should be developed by staff within the backbone organization or team prior to launching a working group; and 4) guidance on how to select working group participants from within the broader local innovation ecosystem.

VIRTUAL ACTION LAB STAFFING, RESOURCES, AND BUDGET

Preparing to launch an ecosystem strengthening process and multi-stakeholder working group can take as little as three months or as long as a year, depending on the amount of pre-work that has been conducted by the backbone organization. At a minimum, the planning process requires the following elements:

1. **Identifying the staffing** resources to support the process. We recommend that an ecosystem working group be supported by a minimum of two people from the backbone organization, each of whom should plan to devote at least two days per week to the initiative. One of these people should serve in the role of meeting organizer, lead facilitator, and point of contact for the group, and the second person should serve in the role of facilitation support and documentation. This involves preparing the digital workspace prior to each meeting, taking notes and recording thorough documentation of the meeting and its results, and following up with meeting participants as needed around scheduling and other meeting logistics. In addition, where possible, it is helpful to have one or more expert advisors with experience in innovation ecosystem strengthening. With this in mind, the staffing roles identified in the box below can be defined as distinct roles, whether they are filled by two people or more.

2. **Identifying technological and other resources** needed to support the process. To host a digital working group, the backbone organization will need access to a stable video-conferencing platform. Based on our experience using existing platforms, including Google Meet, Microsoft Teams, and Zoom, we strongly recommend Zoom as the most stable and user-friendly platform, particularly in areas of the world where internet bandwidth may be weak or unreliable. Having experimented with a number of digital visual collaboration tools, we recommend Miro as a user-friendly and intuitive tool for the types of collaborative activities recommended in this guide. We have therefore provided a number of activity guides in Miro (see Appendix) that can be used as facilitation and documentation tools. In addition to Zoom and Miro accounts, the backbone organization may want to create a WhatsApp group or other method to enable easy, real-time communication between working group members.

3. **Securing the budget** required to support the process. For a working group that is meeting purely online, the budget is likely to consist primarily of time for the staff people supporting the group; however, some budget may also be needed for software licenses (Zoom or Miro, for example); photography, videography, or publication costs (in case the group wishes to produce audio-visual or other outputs of its work); and data collection and research, if the group plans to conduct any diagnostic work of the current state of the ecosystem when this hasn't already been done.

STAFF ROLES FOR ECOSYSTEM WORKING GROUPS

Facilitation: Someone from the ecosystem—ideally from the backbone organization—who is skilled in hosting and facilitating meetings. This person is responsible for setting the agenda for the working group meetings, planning the content of meetings (including activities), facilitating meetings, and preparing any materials and digital workspaces required to implement activities beforehand.

Relationship Management: This role involves checking in with working group participants on a regular basis, engaging with participants to schedule meetings, keeping them informed regarding upcoming meetings, and following up as needed to address any questions or feedback about the meeting process. This role can be filled by the meeting facilitator, or someone else within the group, but is also ideally a role of the backbone organization.

Documentation and Support: This person assists the facilitator with note-taking, meeting documentation, meeting follow-up, and related logistics. The role should be filled by someone who is a skillful note-taker and documenter of meeting content and results.

Content Expert: This role is optional, but strongly recommended. It refers to someone within the group or external to the group (such as a technical advisor) who has experience with innovation ecosystem strengthening and experience facilitating effective multi-stakeholder initiatives in the context of local economic development.

LOGISTICAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR STAFFING WORKING GROUPS

Beyond which video-conferencing platform and digital collaboration tools to use, there are additional logistical considerations to plan for when organizing a multi-stakeholder working group. These include:

1. **Frequency of meetings:** Given that preparing for and documenting working group meetings each take approximately one week of time, we recommend holding group meetings either every two weeks or once monthly.

2. **Scheduling meetings:** We recommend using a scheduling tool such as When2meet, Doodle, or similar prior to the first meeting to identify the ideal time and day of the week for your working group members to meet. Once that has been identified, we strongly recommend maintaining consistency in terms of date and time for the meeting, such as scheduling the second Tuesday afternoon or first Friday of the month, or some other predictable day and time. This avoids having to spend time scheduling each meeting thereafter, and saves communication with working group members for high-priority meeting prep and follow-up reminders.

3. **Getting work done:** For the working group to progress quickly enough in its first six months to retain the interest and engagement of group members, we recommend creating optional "pre-work" tasks that motivated members of the group can complete prior to each subsequent meeting. While some members may be too busy to do any work between meetings, creating the possibility for such work can help to move the agenda forward more quickly. It also provides a good indication of which group members are the most motivated to contribute to the initiative, which can be useful when thinking about how to transition group facilitation and leadership over time–both beyond the backbone organization and more equally among group members.

4. **Shared documentation:** In addition to providing documentation of the group's meetings, the backbone organization should establish a shared repository for meeting documentation, work, results, and metrics that all group members can access. This can be a shared Google Drive or Dropbox folder, or some other shared drive that provides a single place for meeting agendas, minutes, attendance lists, decisions, activity results, and other documentation to be stored.

COMPETENCIES FOR HOSTING AND FACILITATING WORKING GROUPS

Facilitating an innovation ecosystem working group means not only convening participants and guiding them through the processes described in this guide, but also creating and maintaining a welcoming environment for diverse stakeholders from the ecosystem to engage with each other productively and enjoyably. Research on effective group processes and multi-stakeholder ecosystem strengthening processes indicates that the optimal environment for such work exhibits the following characteristics:

1. It is perceived as a "neutral" space that belongs to all group participants, and is not co-opted by the backbone organization or any other group member (Douthwaite and Hoffecker, 2017);
2. It is a space that minimizes one-way communication (e.g., from facilitator to participants) and maximizes opportunities for meaningful connections and interactions to take place between members of the group; and
3. It provides "psychological safety" through shared group behavior norms, which enable group members to feel comfortable and safe bringing their whole selves to the working group, sharing their thoughts and feelings without needing to self-censor or fear reprisals, and providing and receiving feedback in ways that are respectful, constructive, and encourage honesty (Duhigg, 2016; Edmondson, 1999).

In order to create a working group environment with these attributes, we recommend that the innovation ecosystem working group be facilitated by someone who has demonstrated their competency in hosting and facilitating working groups or multi-stakeholder groups before. Capabilities and competencies that are particularly important for successful facilitation are highlighted below.

COMPETENCIES FOR WORKING GROUP FACILITATORS

1. **Comfort and skill in facilitating group processes,** including creating and facilitating agendas, keeping track of time and keeping activities on time, guiding group discussions, and setting up and resolving key decision points.
2. **Ability to establish and maintain group norms,** including the norms of mutual respect, interpersonal trust, "conversational turn-taking" (Dubigg, 2016), and providing and receiving constructive and respectful feedback.
3. **Demonstration of active and mindful listening,** including listening attentively without judgement, allowing divergent viewpoints to be expressed, and finding areas of common ground.
4. **Ability to prepare meetings in advance** and follow through on agreed action items and next steps.
5. **Demonstration of "collaborative competence,"** which consists of the skills and abilities needed to form and maintain interpersonal relationships with group members that can contribute to a sense of group membership and solidarity (Christens, 2012).

Selecting Working Group Members

Once a backbone organization has decided to convene an ecosystem strengthening working group and identified the staffing and other resources needed to plan and facilitate the group, the key question becomes: who should be invited to join the working group? Based on prior experience, we recommend an initial group that is not too large; fifteen members or fewer is preferable, and a group consisting of five to nine active members is ideal. Smaller groups are often able to stay focused and achieve "quick wins" together that can motivate the ongoing commitment of existing group members and attract additional members over time.

To determine what kind of organizational and individual actors to invite, we recommend using the local innovation ecosystem model to identify potential candidates from each of the six actor types in the model, and striving for actors that fulfill a varied mix of ecosystem roles. Once that broader group of potential actors has been identified, we recommend selecting invitees to join the group based on the following criteria:

1. **Motivation and interest to contribute to ecosystem-level work:** These organizations and/or individuals have demonstrated their interest in contributing to local innovation ecosystem strengthening by attending prior ecosystem events, engaging in prior ecosystem-strengthening activities, and/or directly expressing their interest in engaging in such work and demonstrating that interest through actions.

2. **Evidence of effective system-level work:** These organizations and/or individuals have already engaged or are currently engaging in efforts and initiatives aimed at strengthening the local innovation ecosystem and/or entrepreneurial ecosystem.

3. **Collaborative team players:** These organizations and/or individuals have a track record of "playing well with others" and collaborating to achieve results that share value and benefits not just with their organization and/or target beneficiaries, but with broader systems in which they are engaged. Organizations that fit in this category often stand out in terms of documenting and sharing their learning—both in terms of process and results—with their peers, including their perceived competitors as well as the broader ecosystem.

4. **Diversity of experiences within the ecosystem:** From among organizations that meet the three criteria above, we recommend inviting those who can bring perspectives from different vantage points within the system. This includes organizations that are centrally-positioned within the ecosystem, as well as those operating at the system's margins, serving less well-connected or well-resourced populations, or operating in geographically, socio-economically, culturally, or linguistically distinct niches within the system. This diversity of viewpoints and experiences enables group members to assess the systems' strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities from a variety of relevant vantage points.

5. **Capacity to meaningfully engage:** While motivation and interest to engage are the starting points, organizations must have the capacity to participate in the working group over the duration of the initial time commitment. This includes having a consistent representative who can attend working group meetings and engage with other members as needed between meetings.

LEARNING FROM THE ACCRA ECOSYSTEM DESIGN TEAM

Background on the Next i2i Ecosystem Initiative

In 2017, Ashesi University and MIT D-Lab launched the NEXT i2i program to accelerate early-stage African ventures addressing global development challenges. The program included the development of an incubator at Ashesi University for alumni enterprises and an initiative to strengthen the innovation-oriented entrepreneurial ecosystem available to support early-stage entrepreneurs in Ghana.

The initial ecosystem-strengthening activity involved an in-person, day-long event at Ashesi University in June 2019. This event brought student and alumni entrepreneurs at Ashesi together with actors in Ghana's entrepreneurial ecosystem, including representatives from USAID, financial institutions, universities, established businesses, nonprofits, the media, local entrepreneurship hubs, and local government. With facilitation from MIT D-Lab staff, participants in the event worked in teams to identify key gaps in the ecosystem and identified four main challenges, as well as potential solution areas that could address those challenges (see Figures 2 and 3).

Figure 2: Ecosystem challenges identified by design teams

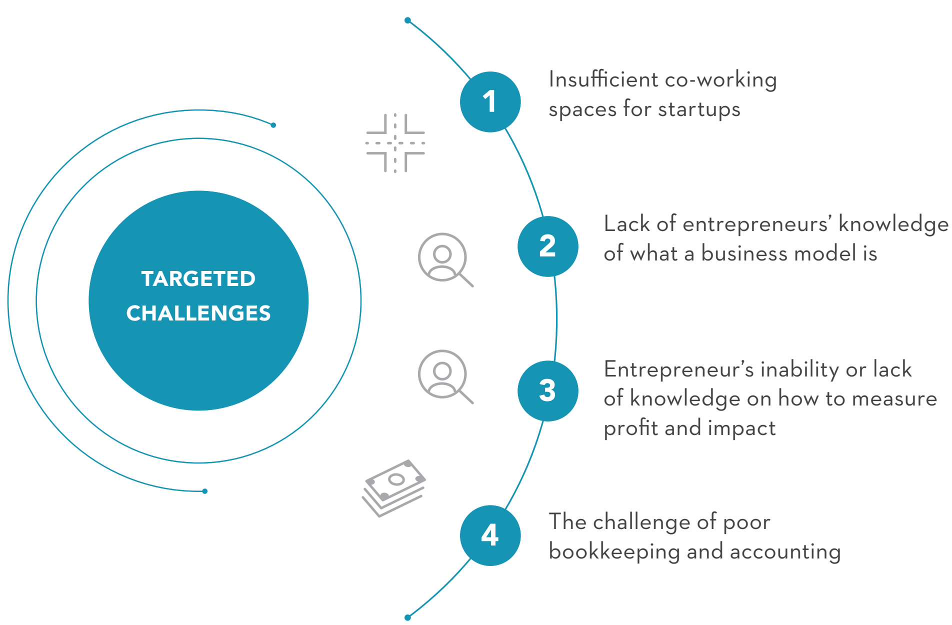


Figure 3: Solution areas identified by design teams

The NEXT i2i team identified two insights as it worked to determine next steps for strengthening the ecosystem. First, many fellows coming out of the incubator were not going to be ready for acceleration because their businesses did not achieve the level of performance needed to qualify for most accelerator programs. There was, therefore, a void between university-based incubation and acceleration that needed to be filled. Second, there was little traction for holding a problem-focused convening because it did not provide a clear sense of direction for action. Rather, the team identified the need to explore a more asset-based approach to ecosystem strengthening in order to quickly capitalize on existing capacities for supporting entrepreneurs, where possible. For these reasons, the team decided to convene an ecosystem strengthening process focused on the opportunities available to create a more well-connected ecosystem that could bridge the gap between incubation and acceleration.

To plan the ecosystem strengthening process, the Ashesi and MIT D-Lab team convened a small steering committee in early 2020 to participate in a series of strategy and planning meetings intended to co-develop a larger, in-person event planned for June 2020. Unfortunately, after one in-person steering committee meeting, the remainder had to be quickly shifted online with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, and the in-person event planned for June of that year was cancelled.

With three major cities across Ghana in lockdown, movement restricted, and businesses closed, the Ashesi and D-Lab team needed to quickly adapt the initial plans. What had been envisioned as a day-long, in-person convening in June was converted into a series of monthly online calls that ran from March to November 2020. Instead of serving to plan and organize an in-person convening, these calls became the convening, and the participants became the Accra Ecosystem Design Team—the participants of the ecosystem strengthening process. This guide documents and draws lessons from the process of ecosystem strengthening we engaged in together over the next nine months.

In the following section, we describe that process, starting with the logistics of how we selected and invited members to participate, the tools we used to facilitate remote meetings—and those we recommend based on this experience—and the sequence of meetings we facilitated with group members. For those interested in facilitating a similar sequence of virtual meetings, we provide a more detailed description of each meeting's objectives, agenda, key activities, and results, as well as links in the Appendix to a Miro board with detailed facilitation instructions and templates for each of the key activities. We conclude by describing the early results that this process is producing and reflecting on what we have learned about the ecosystem strengthening process through this experience.

Organizing the Working Group

The working group was initially envisioned as an in-person series of meetings over breakfast, designed to create ample opportunity for participants to get to know each other better, collaborate, and identify shared interests and potential areas of joint work. With that in mind, we had initially chosen to convene a small group of participants in the range of ten to fifteen members.

PARTICIPANT SELECTION

When identifying participants to invite to the working group, we prioritized participants who met the following key criteria listed below:

- **Could speak to the gap at hand:** In this case, the gap was the incubation-to-acceleration gap for young student entrepreneurs. We identified these gaps at previous convenings.
- **Have a collaborative mindset:** Those who are interested in working together to accomplish the same goal will be key to making the collaborative work a success.
- **Have demonstrated motivation and interest** to work on these challenges by their actions (for example, who have had a presence at prior key discussions and events, and are working on projects related to these challenges). We recommend identifying preliminary events to enable self-selection as an indicator of who is really motivated and interested to engage in this type of work.
- **Serve as leaders and influencers** in the system from a variety of perspectives. One of the motivators in the cultural context of Accra was that participants would be able to work with other high-level players.
- **May be "unusual suspects" in an action lab:** We suggest looking beyond the obvious candidates for leaders and influencers by going through the categories in the Local Innovation Ecosystem Framework (see Figure 1) to identify actors with perspectives that might be missing if only the "usual suspects" are invited.

Inviting Participants

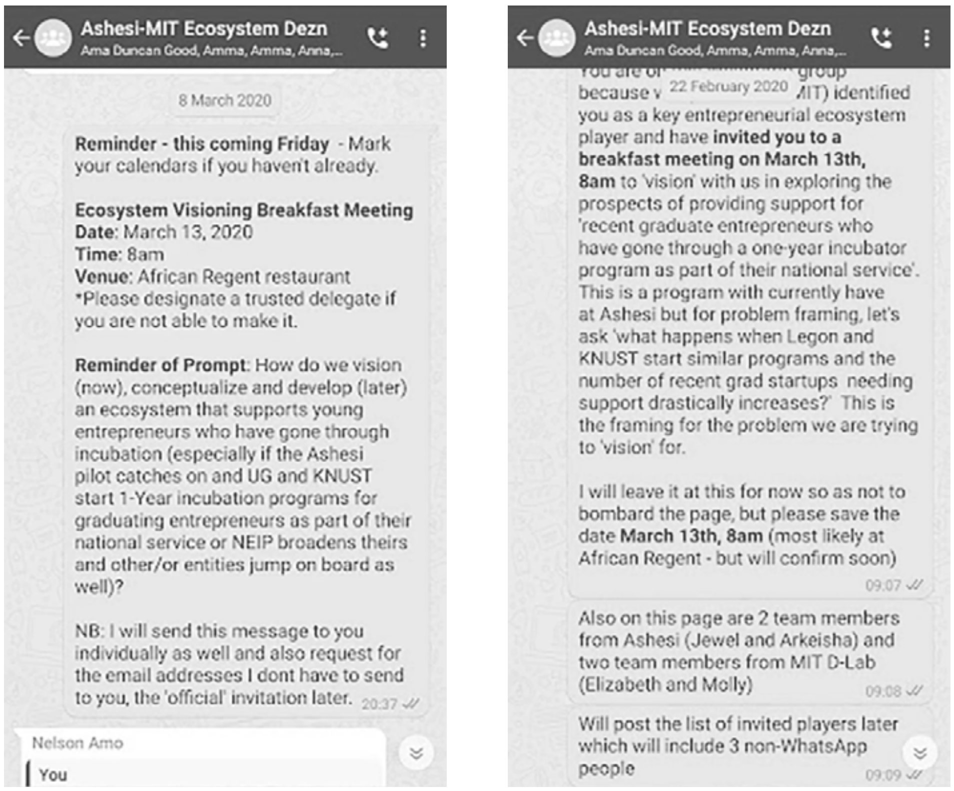
With these criteria in mind, we invited 14 people from a variety of key roles in the ecosystem to the Accra Ecosystem Design Team's kick-off event. These included individuals playing roles as investors, incubator managers, consultants, and entrepreneurship supporters (see Table 1 for a list of working group members). While no one from the local government was able to consistently attend the meetings, we think that it is valuable to include at least one person from local government if possible, as they bring insights on key processes and policies.

After identifying invitees, we crafted personalized and formal emails from Ashesi University that included:

- A summary of the purpose of the events and what we would like to do together;
- What the invitees' role would be and why it was important for them to participate;
- The shared challenge we would like to address together; and
- The expectations for participation—being clear from the beginning that this was a pilot initiative and would be experimental in many ways.

The invitees were a mixture of personal contacts and contacts with whom we did not have preexisting relationships (cold contacts). When reaching out to cold contacts, we found it helpful to state the organizations we were working with; for example, we noted that this was a group convened jointly by Ashesi University and MIT D-Lab. We followed the initial invitation emails with a WhatsApp invitation, as well as a reminder message seven days before the first meeting (see Figure 4).

FIGURE 4: Examples of WhatsApp invitations sent to potential working group members



Members of the Ecosystem Design Team

Out of fourteen participants initially invited to join the working group, ten came to the initial in-person breakfast meeting. Once meetings pivoted online, participation in the working group—which was named the Accra Ecosystem Design Team—ranged from five to eight members per call.

Table 1. Members of the Ecosystem Design Team

Name	Organizational Affiliation(s)	Ecosystem role(s)*
Abigail Swad Laryea	Deputy CEO, National Entrepreneurship and Innovation Plan-NEIP	An **advocate** that provides support through policy and funding
Ama Duncan	Founder, The Fabulous Woman Network (The FWN)	A **trainer** that connects female entrepreneurs
Ama Gyampo	Business Coach, Management Consultant, Funding Matchmaker	A **connector** that shares business knowledge and connections
Amma Lartey	Africa Regional Director, Reach For Change	A **trainer** that also provides small amounts of funding
Anna Samake	Executive Director, MBC Africa; Chairman, West African ANDE Steering Committee; Founding Member, Impact Investing Ghana	A **funder** that convenes ecosystem leaders and advocates for entrepreneurs
Ashwin Ravichandran	Managing Director, MEST Africa	A **training program** for software development, business, and communications
Fatima Tambajang	Program Manager, Enpact	A **training program** that provides business support to entrepreneurs
Hamdiya Ismaila	General Manager, The Venture Capital Trust Fund (VCTF)	A **funder** that provides support to local private businesses
Josiah Kwesi Eyison	Chairman, The Ghana Tech and Business Hubs Network; Founder, Ispace Foundation	A **facilitator** that provides access to training, funding, and network members
Leticia Browne	Director, Intelligent Capital; Project Manager, CEO Advisory Group on SDGs to the President of Ghana; former Investment Relations Officer, Ghana Angel Investor Network	A **funder** who provides investment and advocacy
Nelson Amo	CEO, Innohub; Exec Director, Ghana Tech Lab; Founder, Accra Angels Network	A **funder** that provides support to local private businesses
Richard Yeboah	Project Director, Ghana Innovation Hub	A **convener and facilitator** for small and growing businesses
Ruka Sanusi	Executive Director, Ghana Climate Innovation Centre	A **convener and facilitator** for climate-themed small businesses
Sam Yeboah	Impact Investor and Development Consultant	A **funder** who provides investment and coaching

* Note: in the case of individuals representing organizations in the working group, the ecosystem roles refer to the role that the organization or group is playing in the system, not necessarily the role of that specific individual within their organization.

PLANNING MEETING LOGISTICS

Initially, when the ecosystem working group was envisioned as an in-person series of breakfast meetings, we had planned and budgeted for the following: a) renting a venue for the meetings; b) pre-ordering and paying for food; c) purchasing and obtaining materials useful for the meetings, such as flipchart paper, markets, name-tags, and worksheets; and d) costs associated with staffing the event, including the time of a facilitator, at least one note-taker, and someone to provide visual documentation, including photography and visual note-taking.

When we pivoted to virtual meetings after our first and only in-person breakfast, we no longer needed to plan for the logistics and costs associated with having a venue, meals, media, photographers, or in-person note-taking or materials. However, we found that we needed to increase the amount of staff time dedicated to supporting the working group, given the time required to adapt print materials to a digital format and re-design sessions to work through video-conferencing. Given that it was our first time convening a virtual working group, two roles that ended up taking significant amounts of time were the following:

1. **Checking in regularly with participants,** so as to be adaptable with the timing of meetings and rescheduling as needed to accommodate moving schedules, which was necessary in the context of Covid-19. In the Ghanaian context, people are more comfortable with WhatsApp than phone calls for these types of check-ins, so we assembled a WhatsApp group to be more efficient and build the community.

2. **Preparing digital workspaces** for each session. Since we had not implemented any of the activities planned for the group in a virtual environment before, significant time was spent deciding which platforms would be best to use (e.g., Google Slides, Mural, Miro) and preparing the materials and flow for those digital workshop spaces.

Based on our experience over the course of the six subsequent calls, we recommend the following logistical considerations when planning remote or hybrid (remote/in-person) sessions:

- **Video-conferencing platform:** Identify and use a reliable video-conferencing platform. We used Zoom for its ability to host breakout rooms, use a chat feature and screen-sharing, and for its reliability even with reduced internet bandwidth.

- **Shared Digital Workspace:** Identify a single digital workspace for group work in breakout rooms and between calls. We experimented with several collaborative online workspace applications, including Google Slides, Google Docs, Miro, and Mural. Based on this experimentation, we recommend Miro for facilitating the activities included in this guide. The Appendix includes a link to Miro boards with pre-built templates and facilitation instructions for running the activities described in the following sections.

Table 2. Lessons Learned and Recommendations

Lesson Learned	Recommendation
In-person sessions lend themselves to more efficient work than remote sessions. An activity that might take 15 minutes to run in person can take double or triple the time when facilitated remotely. Therefore, it is important to set realistic agendas that do not attempt to accomplish too much in the allotted time.	Plan for meetings to be approximately 90 minutes long, and budget generous amounts of time for agenda items. This helps the group feel like progress is being made and contributes to an effective group working culture.
When teams are remote, time needs to be built in up front for members to reconnect after time away from meetings. A brief round of introductions and/or check-ins at the start of the meeting is helpful for returning and new members.	Budget at least 15 minutes for meeting kick-offs, including introductions. A rule of thumb is to allow a minimum of 1.5 - 2 minutes per group member for initial check-ins.
It is necessary to engage in significant amounts of follow-up (over WhatsApp) between meetings to maintain group engagement.	We recommend periodically reaching out to group members personally to conduct one-on-one phone conversations (or WhatsApp chats) to check in, hear their feedback and experience with participating in the group, and gauge their interest in continuing to stay involved in the process.
To progress steadily from one meeting to the next, it is important to thoroughly document results from previous meetings in a timely manner, in a place and format that is easily accessible to all group members. Documentation enables these results to be used as inputs to future sessions, and facilitates subsequent documentation of the group's results.	We recommend Miro as the primary mechanism to capture the results of the activities suggested in this guide. In conjunction, we highly recommend assigning a staff or volunteer note-taker to document conversations that occur in the context of completing activities using Google Docs (or another shared word processing app). We do not recommend relying on Zoom recordings or transcripts as a primary means of meeting documentation, as it is rarely practical for group members to review them between meetings. Rather, they can be used by the note-taker to fill in any key information that might be missing from their notes.

Implementing the Working Group Meetings

The remainder of this guide shares the plan we designed and implemented for Phase 4 of the ecosystem strengthening process, namely, "facilitate regular ecosystem strengthening meetings,' in the context of the Ashesi Next i2i program. We start by providing an overview in Table 3 of the seven meetings we facilitated during this phase. These meetings started with the initial launch of the working group (Meeting 1) and ended with the identification of the working group's first joint initiative, the Entrepreneurial Value Chain Initiative (meeting 7).

The meeting agenda overview provided in Table 3 is followed by page-long descriptions of each of the seven meetings we facilitated. Each meeting page provides the basic content necessary to facilitate a similar meeting, complete with meeting objectives, a proposed agenda with suggested topics, activities, and times, as well as examples of the types of outputs these activities generated in the Next i2i program. Further detailed guidance on how to facilitate the recommended activities, as well as activity worksheet templates, are provided in a Miro board which is referenced on each meeting page as relevant and linked directly through a QR code in Appendix A.

Table 3. Overview of Meeting Agendas

	Objectives	Prep Before Meeting	Meeting Agenda	Meeting Output
1	Launch the ecosystem leadership group (Accra Ecosystem Design Team); identify assets and strengths in Accra's ecosystem	• Select meeting host/facilitator • Clarify the reason for bringing this group together • Prep meeting facilitation guide • Prep digital workspace for **Ecosystem Assets Worksheet**	• Facilitate introductions • Facilitate **Ecosystem Assets Activity** • Identify who else should be involved	1. Completed Ecosystem Assets worksheets/Miro 2. List of other people to invite
2	Explore the ecosystem's purpose	• Invite any new members identified during meeting 1 • Select meeting host/facilitator • Process answers to Ecosystem Assets worksheet to report back on these at meeting • Prep digital workspace for **Ecosystem Purpose Worksheet**	• Welcome new members and recap last meeting • Share/present principles of effective ecosystem strengthening • Facilitate **Ecosystem Purpose and Vision Activity**	1. Completed Ecosystem Purpose worksheets/Miro 2. Identification of relevant ecosystem assets
3	Develop concrete visions for the future of Accra's entrepreneurial ecosystem	• Send documentation of individual responses to the **Ecosystem Purpose Activity** • Prep digital workspace for **Ecosystem Visioning Activity**	• Welcome and introduce activity • Facilitate **Ecosystem Visioning activity** • Identify common elements across visions	1. Three or four ecosystem 10-year visions (one per breakout room) 2. Identification of common elements across visions
4	Identify ecosystem gaps/needs and actions needed to move towards the visions articulated in meeting 3	• Send documentation of visions; edit for clarity if needed • Prep digital workspace for **Ecosystem Needs activity**	• Welcome • Review visions from previous meeting • Facilitate **Ecosystem Needs Activity** • Discuss ideas emerging from activity; identify ideas that address multiple visions	1. List of elements needed for the ecosystem to exist as envisioned in 10 years 2. Longlist of actions/ initiatives/strategies that could address those ecosystem needs
5	Prioritize actions that can strengthen the ecosystem, focusing on significant "low-hanging fruit" actions	• Send out longlist of actions/ strategies and ask members to add any additional ones (on Miro before the next meeting) • Prep digital workspace for **Impact/Difficulty Ranking Activity**	• Welcome • Review longlist of ideas • Facilitate **Impact/Difficulty Ranking Activity** • Discuss quadrant 1 ideas/ initiatives	1. Categorization of actions by their level of difficulty and impact 2. Small group of prioritized actions (quadrant 1) that are high impact and low difficulty
6	Explore the high-priority ideas (quadrant 1) identified in meeting 4; identify where there is traction within the group to move ideas forward	• Identify any concepts/actions that cut across Quadrant 1 proposals • Invite members to present on any current work related to Quadrant 1 proposals • Prep discussion guide	• Welcome • Review Quadrant 1 ideas and any that the planning team has added • **Member presentations** on current work/ideas related to Quadrant 1 initiatives • **Discussion** • Closing: prep for decision-making at next meeting	1. List and details on existing initiatives connected to Quadrant 1 ideas 2. Discussion notes
7	Select an initial joint area of work to advance as a group; plan approach for moving this forward	• Prepare criteria and process for group decision-making	• Welcome • Facilitate **decision-making process** to select an initial area of joint work	1. Decision on the ecosystem strengthening initiative that the group will pursue as a first joint project

Meeting 1

The purpose of the first meeting of the Accra Ecosystem Design Team was to set the tone for subsequent meetings and provide members with an opportunity to get to know each other. Some members of the working group had prior experience collaborating with each other, while others did not, so we wanted to provide ample opportunity for casual introductions. In the first meeting, it is also important to understand what each member brings with regard to their prior experience with ecosystem strengthening work or other forms of multi-stakeholder work, and their aspirations for the working group: why are they excited to engage in ecosystem strengthening work, and what are they hoping to accomplish? This understanding can be accomplished through a structured round of introductions, where each member replies to a prompt, or as a closing activity where participants reflect on the meeting and next steps.

OBJECTIVES

1. Launch the ecosystem leadership group
2. Build and strengthen relationships within the group
3. Identify aspirations for the working group and areas of strength from which to build
4. Identify any groups or organizations that are missing from the effort who should be invited to subsequent meetings

AGENDA AND ACTIVITIES

- At least thirty minutes of casual, unstructured time for participants to mix and get to know each other (only if held in person; if online, this step can be deleted)
- A structured, interactive approach to introductions (at least 2 minutes per participant). In this case we asked the following: ***Please share your name, organizational affiliation, and response to this prompt: "When you think about a vibrant entrepreneurship ecosystem supporting university graduates, what comes to mind?"***
- An introduction to *why we are here* and the purpose of bringing these actors together. This involved a brief presentation by the NEXT i2i backbone team (10 min)
- **Innovation Ecosystem Asset Mapping Activity** (see Appendix): (15-20 minutes)
- Time to discuss aspirations and shared hopes for the working group, as well as concrete next steps, including identifying any members of the local ecosystem who should participate in subsequent meetings (10-15 min)

Run time: Approx. 2 hours, depending on number of participants and whether this is held in person (2 hours) or remotely (1.5 hours, eliminating the first 30 minutes of causal socializing)

FOLLOW-UP

- Send out any foundational reading or orientation materials to group members, such as *Understanding Innovation Ecosystems: A Framework for Joint Analysis and Action*
- Invite any new members to the group who were identified by participants in the first meeting
- Select meeting host/facilitator
- Process answers to **Ecosystem Assets Worksheet**, to report back on these at the next meeting
- Prep digital workspace (Miro) for **Ecosystem Purpose Worksheet** (adjusting for the number of expected meeting participants and breakout rooms)

Meeting 2

This meeting was designed to introduce working group members to the ecosystem strengthening process and focused on the first step of the process, which involves identifying a shared vision for the ecosystem. After welcoming participants back, we started with a 15-minute presentation on successful processes of local innovation ecosystem strengthening, delivered by the lead researcher of MIT D-Lab's Local Innovation Group.

We then transitioned to an activity designed to encourage each working group member to reflect on the current function/purpose that the ecosystem was serving, and the purpose they would like to see it serve in the future. We closed by reflecting on which of the strengths and assets we identified in the previous meeting might be particularly valuable in helping move towards our visions. We did not yet work on coming to consensus around visions, but rather created space for them to co-exist at this stage in the process.

OBJECTIVES

1. Build a shared understanding of what ecosystem strengthening work involves (effective principles and practices)
2. Start a conversation about the current and desired purpose of the ecosystem of interest
3. Learn about different views among members of the group regarding their visions for the future of the ecosystem; identify any areas of synergy or convergence in aspirations

AGENDA AND ACTIVITIES

- Welcome back and recap of last meeting; welcome any new members (10 min)
- Brief presentation on the role of purpose/vision in ecosystem strengthening, with examples of successful ecosystem strengthening initiatives drawn from case studies (15 min)
- **Ecosystem Purpose Activity** (see Appendix) (35-60 minutes, depending on length of discussion)
- Identification of assets and strengths that relate to visions (15 minutes)
- Wrap-up and next steps (10-15 minutes)

Run time: 90-120 minutes

FOLLOW-UP

- Send out notes documenting individual responses to the Ecosystem Purpose Activity
- Prep digital workspace (Miro) for **Ecosystem Visioning Activity**, adjusting for the number of expected meeting participants and breakout rooms

Meeting 3

This meeting provided an opportunity to deepen the conversation on visions for the future of Accra's entrepreneurial ecosystem. The meeting's design was based off of an activity that the MIT D-Lab team had implemented during in-person workshops, which we redesigned as an activity in breakout rooms on Zoom.

OBJECTIVES

1. Identify concrete visions for what Accra's innovation-driven entrepreneurial ecosystem could look like in a decade
2. Begin to generate alignment around 2-3 primary visions
3. Identify areas of similarity/commonality among these different visions

AGENDA AND ACTIVITIES

- Welcome participants to the meeting, provide an overview of the agenda (10 min)
- Introduce the **Ecosystem Visioning Activity** and provide instructions (See Appendix) (5 min)
- Run Ecosystem Visioning Activity in breakout rooms (15-20 minutes)
- Breakout rooms share their discussion with full group (15-20 minutes, depending on number of rooms)
- Group discussion to identify common elements across visions (20 minutes)
- Wrap-up and next steps (10 minutes)

Run time: 90 minutes

FOLLOW-UP

- Send out links to documentation of the Ecosystem Visioning Activity, including the finalized vision statements that teams developed, edited for clarity if needed
- **OPTIONAL:** Send out links to resources on ecosystem strengthening, including examples of ecosystem mapping initiatives implemented around the world by organizations such as MIT D-Lab, ANDE, and SwissContact
- Prep digital workspace for **Ecosystem Needs Activity**

RESULTS OF THE ECOSYSTEM VISIONING ACTIVITY

Breakout Room 1: In seven to ten years, the entrepreneurial ecosystem of Ghana will be recognized globally for **health innovations**, and the production and export of dried or processed, nutritional foods, and local medicinal products mostly sourced from smallholder farmers by conscious entrepreneurs who want to increase livelihoods of these farmers.

Breakout Room 2: In seven to ten years the entrepreneurial ecosystem of Ghana will be recognized globally for **Agricultural Technology** and Value Addition Innovation to a:improve upon farming productivity and distribution of products and b: attract the youth into farming; and agricultural innovation.

Breakout Room 3: In seven to ten years the entrepreneurial ecosystem of Ghana will be recognized globally as a **regional hub for educatio**n and human capital development that focuses on skills training (including vocational) for young Africans to succeed in the 4th industrial revolution.

Meeting 4

This meeting provided a space to go deeper in building out each of the three vision concepts identified in Meeting 3. The vision statements were provided as inputs to the meeting, and the primary focus of the meeting was to identify what would be required to get from "here" (where the ecosystem current is) to "there" for the desired vision in seven to ten years' time. Participants were asked: Taking into account the current ecosystem assets identified in meeting 1, what needs to be strengthened, developed, put in place, or otherwise cultivated in order for each of the articulated visions to be possible? What enabling conditions need to be present? What barriers might need to be addressed?

OBJECTIVES

1. Identify specific initiatives, actions, or steps needed to move towards each of the three visions identified in Meeting 3
2. Group any common ideas/gaps/needs across the three visions

AGENDA AND ACTIVITIES

- Welcome and recap from last meeting (10 minutes)
- **Identifying Ecosystem Needs Activity** (see Appendix) (30-45 minutes)
- Wrap-up, general discussion, and next steps (15 minutes)

Run time: 60-90 minutes, depending on how much time is desired for discussion

FOLLOW-UP

- Send out longlist of actions/strategies and ask members to add any additional items to the Miro board prior to the next meeting
- Group/cluster common initiatives/ideas emerging from the **Ecosystem Needs Activity** into a longlist of proposals; send out to the group for review prior to the next meeting
- Prep digital workspace for **Impact/Difficulty Ranking Activity** (see Appendix)

RESULTS

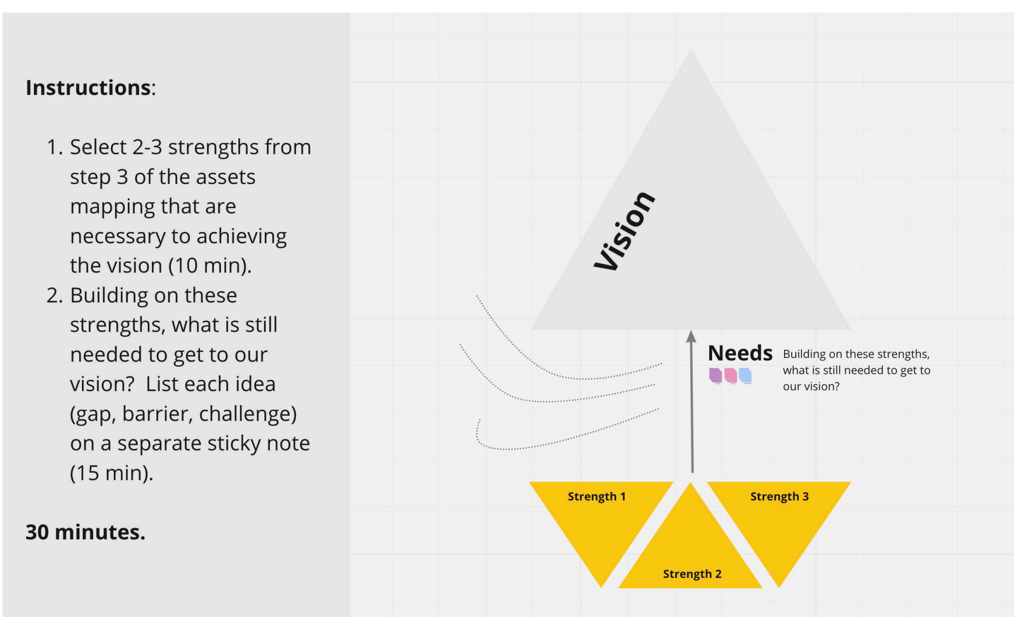
Vision 1: Health Innovation	Vision 2: AgriTech	Vision 3: Education
In seven to ten years, the entrepreneurial ecosystem of Ghana will be recognized globally for health innovations and the production and export of dried or processed, nutritional foods, and local medicinal products mostly sourced from small holder farmers by conscious entrepreneurs who want to increase livelihoods of these farmers.	In seven to ten years the entrepreneurial ecosystem of Ghana will be recognized globally for Agricultural Technology and Value Addition Innovation to a:improve upon farming productivity and distribution of products and b: attract the youth into farming; and agricultural innovation.	In seven to ten years the entrepreneurial ecosystem of Ghana will be recognized globally as a regional hub for education and human capital development that focuses on skills training (including vocational) for young Africans to succeed in the 4th industrial revolution.

(continued on next page)

RESULTS (continued)

Vision 1: Health Innovation	Vision 2: AgriTech	Vision 3: Education
ECOSYSTEM NEEDS 1. **Policy revision** to support the growth of the sector, including incentives for the emergence of food and health goods manufacturers in Ghana 2. Develop stronger **market-side buying relationships**. 3. **Develop stronger standards**/ quality skills training and certification processes for R&D, labs, testing, speed, fee payments, policy support to strengthen such institutions. 4. Develop stronger processing equipment supply chains to promote the growth of processing/ light manufacturing hubs and centers to industrialize the country and support entrepreneurship in the sector.	ECOSYSTEM NEEDS 1. **Some "backbone" enterprises** offering key services that drive the whole ecosystem forward such as agriculture marketplaces 2. **Effective adoption** of proven technologies and business models from more mature markets 3. **Stronger IP protections** for invention 4. **Marketing campaigns** to attract the youth to organized Agrihubs/Agriparks to provide apprenticeships. This will help build up more successful ventures based on an ecosystem that better provides for the required infrastructure, market model, and nurturing of collaborative working relationships.	ECOSYSTEM NEEDS 1. Opportunities for young people and aspiring entrepreneurs to acquire **emotional intelligence skills** 2. **Improved branding** of our educational institutions and countrywide policies 3. Provisions for **access to better energy, internet connectivity, and education funding** as well as regulations that might constrain the scaling of innovations in the education sector and other utilities to support stronger and more relevant skills-based education 4. Soft skills, capacity building, work-based training, etc.

FIGURE 5: Ecosystem Needs Activity template on Miro



Meeting 5

This meeting was focused on prioritizing the various initiatives, ideas, and strategies identified in the previous meeting, to identify which of these would be the most strategic starting points for the group to advance through initial projects. The prioritization process was structured using a framework that considers a proposed initiative from the perspective of a) how high-impact it is likely to be in terms of helping move the ecosystem towards its future vision; and b) how straightforward or difficult it is to implement. We refer to this framework as the "Impact and Difficulty Ranking Matrix," the objective of which is to identify initial projects or initiatives with the highest impact and relatively low implementation difficulty from the set of projects. This activity sets the team up to take on initial projects that can meaningfully move the ecosystem towards its vision, while accomplishing some "quick wins" to build further interest and engagement in the ecosystem strengthening activities.

OBJECTIVES

1. Sort the main initiatives and needs identified in the previous meeting using criteria
2. Use the sorting activity to begin prioritizing areas of potential joint work

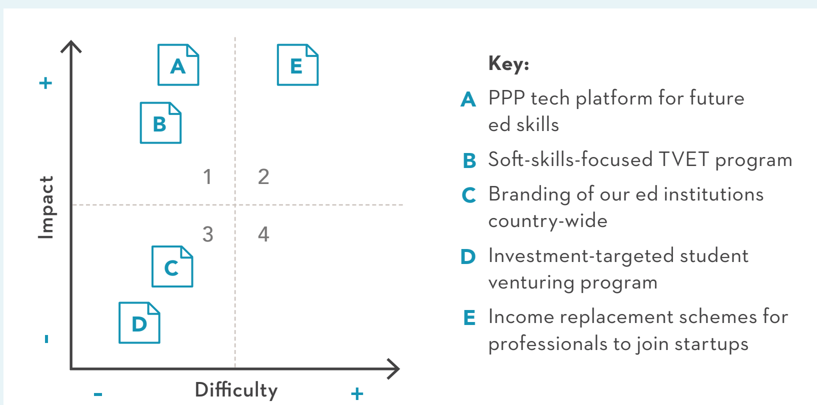
AGENDA AND ACTIVITIES

- Welcome and recap from last meeting (10-15 minutes)
- **Impact and Difficulty Ranking Matrix** (see Appendix): (30 minutes)
- Discuss quadrant 1 ideas/initiatives (15 minutes)
- Wrap-up, general discussion, and next steps (15 minutes)

Run time: 75-90 minutes, depending on how much time is desired for discussion

RESULTS

1. A categorization of actions by their level of difficulty and impact
2. A small group of prioritized actions (Quadrant 1) that are high impact and low difficulty (see box at right)



FOLLOW-UP

- Identify any concepts/actions that cut across Quadrant 1 proposals
- Invite members to present at the next meeting on any past or current work they're engaged in or knowledgeable about that relate to Quadrant 1 proposals
- Prep discussion guide for meeting 7

Meeting 6

This meeting provided an opportunity for group members to offer brief presentations highlighting initiatives in Accra that were connected to or similar to the highest-priority ideas that emerged from the previous meeting. The objective of the presentations was to identify any existing progress in these areas and opportunities for synergy, which served as factors in deciding which initiative to start with as a group.

OBJECTIVES

1. Explore the high-priority ideas (quadrant 1) identified in meeting 5 and identify who in the ecosystem may already be working on these initiatives or closely related ones
2. Begin to identify where traction and interest lies within the group to move ideas forward

AGENDA AND ACTIVITIES

1. Welcome (15 min)
2. Review Quadrant 1 ideas from Meeting 5 (10 min)
3. Member presentations on current work/ideas related to Quadrant 1 initiatives (30 min)
4. Discussion focused on identifying areas of synergy with existing initiatives (15-20 min)
5. Wrap-up and prep for decision-making at next meeting (10 min)

Run time: 90 minutes

RESULTS

1. A list with details on existing initiatives connected to Quadrant 1 ideas
2. Discussion notes identifying areas where ecosystem group members are most interested to engage and focus their joint efforts moving forward

FOLLOW-UP

- Send the list of existing initiatives, as well as the discussion notes, to members for consideration at the subsequent meeting
- Identify any shared concepts underlying the various Quadrant 1 ideas
- Prepare the criteria and process for group decision-making for the next meeting, to be able to successfully select an initial area of joint work moving forward

Meeting 7

This final meeting in the initial series was dedicated to choosing a first initiative to work on jointly moving forward.

OBJECTIVES

1. Select an initial joint area of work to advance as a group
2. Identify a strategy and approach for moving this area forward, including immediate next steps

AGENDA AND ACTIVITIES

- Welcome and purpose of the meeting (15 min)
- Facilitate decision-making process (voting, discussion until consensus, etc.) to select an initial area of joint work (30-45 min)
- Create a plan for next steps to take action on the group's decision (25 min)
- Closing (5 min)

Run time: 90 minutes

RESULTS

1. A decision from the group regarding the first project or initiative they would like to jointly pursue

Results: Launch of the Entrepreneurial Value Chain (EVC) initiative

In meeting 7, the Accra Ecosystem Design Team decided to pursue an initial project that involved identifying and strengthening the "entrepreneurial value chain" for young entrepreneurs in Accra, Ghana. They termed this the Entrepreneurial Value Chain (EVC) Approach, and decided to take advantage of an upcoming high-level conference, Accelerate 2030, to launch the approach. The group organized a panel session at the conference, which was convened by the SDG Advisory Unit within the office of the President of Ghana, to describe the approach and invite other stakeholders in Accra's entrepreneurial ecosystem to get involved.

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APPENDIX: Activities and Worksheets

Here we provide a list of the specific activities and accompanying worksheets mentioned throughout this guide. Detailed facilitator activity guides and printable and digital versions of worksheets can be accessed online in our Innovation Ecosystem Strengthening Facilitators' Toolbox, available at this link: **Miro Here** (or scan the QR code at left).

Activities and associated worksheets in order of mention:

1. Ecosystem Assets Activity and Worksheet
2. Ecosystem Purpose Activity and Worksheet
3. Ecosystem Visioning Activity
4. Identifying Ecosystem Needs Activity
5. Impact and Difficulty Ranking Matrix
6. Selecting the First Initative