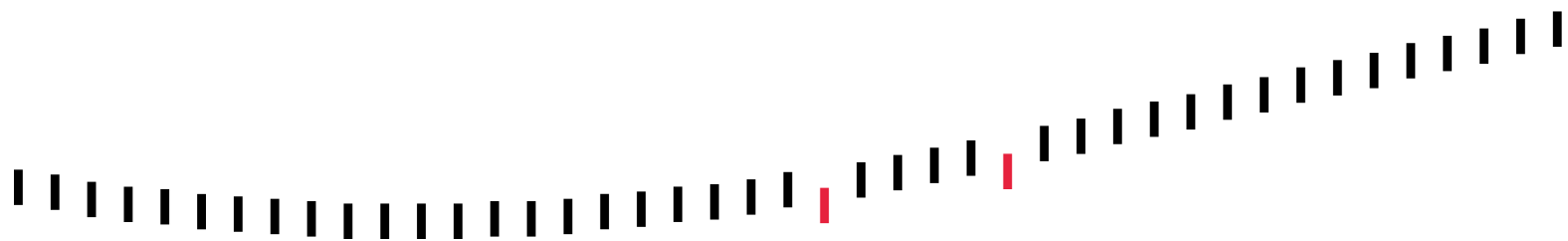**Report**

Evaluation of the TRANSFORM program

Basel ₁ 28.07.2025

▍Impressum

Joint external evaluation of SDC's TRANSFORM program based on the following four research for development projects: AgriPath, ComBaCaL, Hands4Health and IFE-2-LNOB
Report
28.07.2025

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Executive Summary

The evaluation assessed the four flagship projects of SDC's TRANSFORM program: AgriPath, ComBaCaL, Hands4Health (H4H), and IFE-2-LNOB. The program aims to generate transformative knowledge, foster the use of research-based innovations in development practice, and build scientific capacity for tackling complex global challenges. The evaluation's key findings include:

– Project level achievements:
  – All projects are on track toward achieving their intended results and have demonstrated strong potential to generate transformative knowledge.
  – The projects have demonstrated impact on national or international level policy, for example through integration into national guidelines or contributions to global policy dialogues.
  – Implementation partners played a decisive role in ensuring contextual relevance and policy engagement.
  – Capacity building occurred at multiple levels: from early-career researchers to local health workers, teachers, and farmers.
– Scaling:
  – Scaling was not initially a requirement for the projects. The fact that scaling is now a central topic is testament to the projects' success.
  – All projects have produced proofs of concept, but large-scale uptake remains limited.
– Program Design:
  – Mandatory inclusion of implementation partners and gender/social inclusion (GESI) requirements are key success factors.
  – The portfolio approach fosters peer learning and comparative insights but is constrained by the small number of projects.
  – A funding gap appears to exist between research and real-world application, highlighting the need for follow-up support for validation, stakeholder engagement, and institutional anchoring.
– Sustainability:
  – Strong networks built on previous funding cycles (e.g., r4d) contributed to success but risk dissolving without continued support.
  – Long-term impact depends on sustained funding and institutional anchoring within the Swiss research ecosystem.

Going forward, we recommend:

1. Continue funding transformative research to build on demonstrated impact and relevance.
2. Provide follow-up funding for scaling activities of the flagship projects.
3. In the future, require scaling strategies at the proposal stage.
4. Offer targeted support for scaling, including coaching, communication strategy development, and strategic partnerships.
5. Establish regular peer-learning formats to leverage the portfolio approach.
6. Strengthen SDC's role as both user and enabler of research uptake by embedding TRANSFORM in SDC's operational structures.
7. Explore co-funding with other national and international donors to secure critical mass and enhance sustainability of transformative research.

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1. Introduction

The TRANSFORM program funds transformative research and innovation projects and runs from 2020 to 2030. It aims to:

1. **Generate transformative knowledge and technology** that contribute to sustainable development in lower- and middle-income countries (LMICs);
2. **Foster the use of research-based knowledge, technologies and innovation** in development policies and interventions by involving implementation partners from the outset.
3. **Strengthen scientific skills and capacities** for conducting transformative and transdisciplinary research on complex development challenges.

The TRANSFORM program includes three programs (SOR4D, ETH4D and Tech4Dev) and five individual flagship projects, of which the DYNAMIC project is already completed. The evaluation focuses on the four flagship projects that are not yet completed. These are:

- **AgriPath**: Promoting sustainable agriculture through digitally supported advisory services;
- **ComBaCaL** (Community Based Chronic Care Lesotho): Strengthening community-based chronic care through village health workers in Lesotho;
- **H4H**: Improving hand hygiene, water quality and sanitation in primary health care facilities and schools not connected to functional water supply systems;
- **IFE-2-LNOB** (Innovative Financing for Education to Leave No One Behind): Creating an evidence base and changing the debate on innovative financing mechanisms for education.

The evaluation assesses whether the four projects are on track to achieving their intended outcomes and contribute to the overarching goals of the TRANSFORM program. Building on the findings, the evaluation makes recommendations toward the strategic development of the program (See Annex A.1 for the evaluation questions).

The evaluation is designed as a **participatory evaluation** and is mainly based on a series of workshops, which are displayed in the figure below. The workshops were complemented by 7 interviews with project participants and a review of the available documentation. Annex B provides more detail on this approach.

2. Project level

2.1 Achievement of the TRANSFORM objectives

We begin by evaluating to what extent the projects have achieved the overall objectives of the program (see Section 1.1). The first objective is generating transformative knowledge and technology.

2.1.1 Generate transformative knowledge and technology

The success of the TRANSFORM program is based on the transformation potential of the knowledge generated in the funded projects. To transform systems, the knowledge created must itself have the potential to drive such change. This goes beyond producing sound academic evidence. It requires generating insights that challenge dominant paradigms and established practices. This aspect is most directly reflected in the objectives of IFE-2-LNOB:

– **IFE-2-LNOB** aims to re-frame the dominant paradigm on innovative finance in education. While it has come to be almost universally accepted, that innovative financing is the solution to all funding problems in education, the project challenges the dominant paradigm by pointing out the knowledge gap: There is little evidence on the effectiveness of innovative financing in education. By creating, collecting and disseminating evidence, the project seeks to change the discourse on innovative education financing.

However, also the other projects advance transformative approaches:

– **H4H**: The project conceptualized and assessed a multi-dimensional and holistic approach to WASH in fragile settings, by combining different modules – infrastructure, behavior change and maintenance and management – in a way that sustainability is fostered from the very beginning. This approach contradicts the general nature of WASH interventions that are timebound and focused on single measures.
– **AgriPath**: Even though digital advisory services (DAS) and the use of agricultural extension agents are well established in many countries and contexts little research has focused on how implementation of these tools can be most effective and how they can operate together. By providing new evidence on the most effective implementation, it has the potential to transform the use of digital advisory services and extension agents in multiple countries and contexts.
– The **ComBaCaL** project provided proof of concept that, when supported by a clinical decision-support system, community health workers can diagnose and treat relatively complex conditions such as diabetes and hypertension. The approach piloted by the project is now applied to additional medical conditions (potentially cervical cancer).

In summary, all projects pursue ambitious objectives. However, none of the four projects represent moonshot-type (e.g. achieving universal access to safe drinking water within 10 years) projects with a high risk of failure. In their core, they are all still research projects – and that is also what was initially asked from them. Expectations to innovate and to scale were added later, as we will elaborate below.

2.1.2 Foster utilization of research-based knowledge, technologies and innovation

While the projects may not have achieved all of their objectives (yet), all four have succeeded in bringing research-based knowledge, technologies and innovation to use:

– **ComBaCaL**: The project's results were incorporated into Lesotho's clinical guidelines for non-communicable diseases. The project results were transferred to additional districts, which adopted individual ComBaCaL components. At the same time, an ILO-certified micro-enterprise training addressed the economic sustainability of village health workers; by the end of 2024, 44 health workers-run small businesses were operational, reinforcing local ownership.

– **AgriPath** successfully implemented its approach in five countries. The project adapted the Farmbetter app to local needs and translated it in 4 languages. The design process has led to a 3-in-1 solution, with a dashboard, an app for extension agents and one for farmers, improving farmbetter's main product and establishing the app as a tool. More importantly, the project has generated research that can inform the practical implementation of agricultural advisory services through both digital means and extension agents in the future. The 3-in-1 solution Farmbetter developed as part of the project is being marketed towards potential customers in Kenya, with potential expansions to Nepal and India.

– **H4H:** For each project country, there is evidence that partners and stakeholders adopted or institutionalized elements of the solutions developed and that capacities could be strengthened, especially at local level. This is remarkable because all project countries experienced humanitarian emergencies (e.g. war and conflict, natural catastrophes).

– **IFE-2-LNOB**: The project has only reached its halfway mark but continuously shares evidence on innovative finance mechanisms at several global dialogue platforms, thus contributing toward a reframing of the dominant paradigm on innovative financing solutions. To generate evidence, the project implements formative and summative evaluations on partner programs in different countries. These evaluative activities have the potential to strengthen organizational decision-making and the design of finance mechanisms, leading to improved educational outcomes on the ground.

2.1.3 Enhance scientific skills and know-how

Capacity building was a central objective in all four funded TRANSFORM projects and was successfully implemented on multiple levels.

1. **Participating researchers**: Our findings suggest that they have strengthened their ability to design and carry transformative and transdisciplinary research on complex development challenges. The principles of transformative research – particularly user-centeredness, interdisciplinarity, policy engagement, gender and social inclusion, and impact orientation – were widely internalized by the research teams.

2. **Early-career researchers**: All projects actively involved Ph.D. students, Master's students, and young researchers from both Switzerland and the partner countries. They were trained specifically in transdisciplinary approaches and were introduced to transformative research. The ComBaCaL project provides a notable example in capacity building: SolidarMed has set up an academic partnership with the University of Lesotho to enable student placements in supported health facilities.

3. **Beyond the academic sphere**: Across all four projects, key societal actors – such as healthcare workers, teachers, administrative staff and community members – were trained and empowered. In the ComBaCaL project, for example, village health workers were trained to provide community-based health services and, through accompanying entrepreneurship training, enabled to launch their own income-generating activities. In the H4H project, school staff, technicians, and local trainers received targeted training in hygiene, technology, and behavior change. AgriPath recruited a number of agricultural extension agents from the local population and trained them on their role and the usage of the Farmbetter app. The H4H project incorporated specific capacity building measures at different levels throughout the implementation period, training teachers and students on the use of infrastructure in the schools, local technicians on maintenance as well as partner staff on the behavior change methodology.

2.2 Scaling

The OECD's «DAC Guidance on Scaling Development Outcomes» define scaling as:

> «Scaling describes the process of increasing the reach and impact of a development innovation or a proven solution to create sustainable and widespread change within a specific geographical context and system to address a development problem at the scale of need. Scaling can also be the process of adapting a proven solution to another context. This process of adaptation is often framed as replication in the international development sector.»

Originally, scaling was not an explicit objective of the TRANSFORM program, nor was it a requirement for the funded projects to outline their scaling visions. Eventually, however, as the project successfully developed results, each project has started to develop scaling strategies. Therefore, **it is testament to the success of the projects, that scaling has become a goal and expectation**. However, the projects are only starting to engage in scaling activities. Therefore, we can only evaluate the scaling potential.

A common challenge across the projects is that they are in final stages of their projects, that were originally focused on research, *not* scaling. Their funding will soon run out and it is unclear how they will fund scaling activities.

Despite their thematic and geographic differences, all four projects have converged around similar approaches to scaling. We discussed four scaling approaches in our scaling workshop. In the following sections, we summarize the results of these discussions.

2.2.1 Influencing national policy

Three of the four projects seek to influence national policy in the countries in which they are active. (IFE's focus rather lays on influencing policy at the international level.) In the inclusion in national strategies and policies, the projects see the opportunity to **institutionalize the results** and to **secure long-term funding** for the implementation of their solutions and maintenance of the tools (such as hardware and software) developed by the projects.

The projects have achieved **first instances of policy impact**: H4H has, as mentioned above, successfully contributed to the implementation of WASH FIT[1] into Mali's Ministry of Health strategy. ComBaCaL has successfully influenced the national clinical guidelines. However, the projects have bigger scaling ambitions and have **not achieved all of their scaling objectives yet**. AgriPath, for instance, wants its project countries to make use of its three-in-one solution in agricultural programs.

However, influencing national policy is difficult. Key decisions lie beyond the control of the projects themselves. Whether research findings are adopted in national strategies or receive budgetary support ultimately depends on elected political decision-makers. Their priorities are shaped not only by technical quality but also by broader political considerations and

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[1] WASH FIT is a management tool developed by WHO and UNICEF to support ongoing improvement of water, sanitation, hygiene, and healthcare waste management practices in healthcare facilities, especially in low- and middle-income countries (World Health Organization and United Nations Children's Fund, 2018).

competing demands. Therefore, even the most relevant and robust evidence does not guarantee political uptake.

Most projects have established strong relationships with technical staff and mid-level bureaucrats within the ministries. However, some projects face difficulties in reaching political decision-makers at the top. Access to this group is often restricted. It depends on existing networks and informal endorsements and follows specific procedural norms. Moreover, several project teams exhibit a certain reluctance to proactively engage in one-on-one conversations with high-level politicians.

Key enablers for scaling success, according to the project teams, include:

– **Strong implementation partners**: Collaborating with well-established organizations that enjoy political credibility and trust can open doors to high-level decision-makers as well as community representatives who are trusted by their peers. For example, H4H reports that working with Terre des Hommes – widely regarded as a reliable implementing partner – significantly facilitated political engagement. The implementation partners often also have competences that complemented the competences of the academic partners. For instance, they tend to have a stronger ability to directly engage with key decision-makers.
– **Early stakeholder mapping**: Projects benefit from systematically identifying relevant stakeholders across sectors (e.g. political actors, ministries, NGOs, private sector). A clear overview enables more strategic and focused outreach. While some projects conduct this mapping proactively, others take a more opportunistic approach to engagement.
– **Knowledge of national strategies and regulatory frameworks**: A thorough understanding of national policies, priorities, and legal frameworks is essential for aligning innovations with what is politically and administratively feasible. In a different context, for instance, we have evaluated a project that operated in a country that only accepts domestically developed IT solutions. This led to significant implementation challenges for that project because it had not developed its solution with developers in that country.
– **Inclusion of political actors in the project consortium or steering structure**: Involving decision-makers from the outset – either as formal partners or members of advisory structures – can increase buy-in and political ownership. ComBaCaL, for example, directly involved the Ministry of Health in the consortium.
– **Formalized exchange platforms**: Regularly convened working groups, task forces, or conferences provide structured opportunities to present findings and maintain visibility with relevant stakeholders. Where such spaces do not exist, projects have proactively created them – IFE, for instance, organized a high-level international conference to bring together key actors.
– **One-on-one meetings with key decision-makers**: Direct conversations with senior political figures are often more effective than reports or public presentations. These meetings allow projects to convey their core messages where decisions are actually made. AgriPath, for example, succeeded in gaining national visibility after engaging a journalist in a personal meeting, which led to a broadcast on national television.

2.2.2 Influencing international policy

All four projects aim to influence international policy by engaging with global institutions such as the WHO, UNICEF, the UN, and sector-specific multilateral partnerships. H4H shares its research through the WHO/UNICEF Community of Practice on WASH in Health Care Facilities, which is moderated by a project-affiliated expert. It has also involved WHO representatives in

technical trainings and seeks to integrate WASH FIT into national policies and monitoring frameworks. ComBaCaL explicitly targets the revision of WHO guidelines on non-communicable diseases (NCDs), a high-priority area on the WHO agenda. AgriPath leverages its connection to the global WOCAT network, which collaborates with the UNCCD Secretariat and agencies like FAO and IFAD to scale sustainable land management practices globally. IFE works closely with major international education financing actors such as GPE, ECW, IFFEd, and EOF, with the aim of embedding its findings into high-level strategic dialogues – facilitated in part by SDC's presence in EOF governance structures. These are selected examples; in practice, the projects engage in a wide range of additional activities to position their work in global policy spaces.

However, influencing international policy entails structural challenges that closely mirror those encountered on the national level. Most importantly, the ultimate decisions lie outside the control of the projects. International organizations often lack the political mandate, authority, or funding to enforce change. Many global declarations remain symbolic, and multilateral processes are highly sensitive to geopolitical shifts. Even when backed by donors such as SDC, international policy initiatives may stall or fail to translate into actionable commitments. As a result, projects must navigate an institutional landscape that is both fragile and unpredictable.

Additional **barriers** arise from how international policy influence is approached. Some project teams assume that peer-reviewed scientific publications are a prerequisite for policy engagement. While strong evidence is certainly important, insisting on academic validation before initiating dialogue can delay influence opportunities. In practice, decision-makers are unlikely to read scientific journals, and earlier engagement – through briefings, dialogues, or personal meetings – can be equally, if not more, effective.

Success in this scaling pathway depends on a combination of strategic positioning and proactive outreach. Key enablers include:

- **Strong implementation partners:** As on the national level, trusted organizations with an international presence lend credibility and help open doors to high-level forums and actors.
- **Stakeholder mapping:** Identifying relevant international stakeholders and venues – such as specific WHO working groups, UN negotiation tracks, or high-level policy platforms – allows projects to focus their efforts and tailor messages.
- **One-on-one engagement with key decision-makers:** Direct conversations with influential individuals remain one of the most effective ways to promote policy uptake. Just as on the national level, targeted outreach – based on timing, mutual interest, and trust – is often more impactful than participation in large-scale conferences or passive publication strategies.
- **Knowledge of relevant venues and issue alignment:** Knowing which forums matter and whether they are receptive to a project's theme is crucial. When a topic is already on the agenda, projects can more easily contribute evidence and shape outcomes. In contrast, setting a new agenda – such as redefining the international discourse on innovative education financing, as IFE attempts – is far more demanding and politically challenging.
- **Clear and consistent messaging:** Projects need to translate their findings into concise, policy-relevant narratives that resonate across different audiences. Consistency in framing and communication builds recognition and credibility over time.
- **Field-based narratives and credible evidence:** While peer-reviewed research adds legitimacy, compelling stories from the ground – delivered by frontline practitioners – often resonate more strongly with policy audiences. Projects should combine robust data with human-centered narratives to increase their persuasive power.

2.2.3 Knowledge management and adoption within the organizations of the implementing partners

In addition to supporting the uptake of project results by external actors such as governments, the implementation partners themselves (Terre des Hommes, SolidarMed, Grameen Foundation etc.) also offer substantial potential for internal scaling. Because they operate across countries and thematic areas, they are well-positioned to adopt and embed project learnings within their own institutional practices and programs. This form of scaling – through organizational learning and integration – represents a powerful but often underutilized pathway for sustaining and expanding project impact.

However, internal knowledge transfer within large organizations is complex. Successful uptake requires deliberate effort, contextual adaptation, and audience-specific communication. What works in one setting may not translate directly to another. Organizational structures, knowledge levels and working cultures differ – especially when learning and implementation must occur in parallel. In addition, uncertainties in local contexts, as seen for instance in H4H, further complicate knowledge management and institutional uptake.

The degree of internal scaling varied across projects. SolidarMed (ComBaCaL) institutionalized knowledge sharing through structured formats like learning lunches and regional exchange visits. H4H involved the Skat Foundation as a knowledge broker from the start and used tools like webinars, impact stories and applied research to support learning. Within Terre des Hommes, knowledge was actively transferred between country offices – for example, WASH FIT was shared from Mali to Burkina Faso, and RANAS tools were scaled to other behavioral domains.

To sum up, interviews and discussions highlighted several enabling factors for internal scaling:

- trusted personal relationships and informal exchange,
- fast and strategic communication via direct channels (e.g. WhatsApp),
- localisation of findings to new contexts,
- bite-sized, audience-specific communication, and
- the establishment of knowledge sharing networks, such as communities of practice.

2.2.4 Leveraging the transformative potential of digital technologies

All four TRANSFORM projects use digital tools to support implementation, knowledge dissemination, or decision-making – albeit in different ways and with varying depth. ComBaCaL employs a decision support system to guide community health workers in diagnosing and managing chronic diseases. H4H uses digital methods to optimize disinfectant dosing and integrates sensor-based tools into its broader hygiene interventions. AgriPath relies on a mobile app to recommend agricultural practices and promote peer learning among smallholder farmers. IFE, by contrast, focuses on digital repositories to curate research and practical examples, which serve as a resource for policy dialogue and advocacy. In addition, projects like AgriPath and ComBaCaL use mobile devices for structured data collection during fieldwork.

Digital tools offer substantial potential to enhance reach, efficiency, and learning:

- **Reducing transaction and coordination costs:** Digital platforms facilitate low-cost communication across geographic distances, improving collaboration between researchers, practitioners, and communities.
- **Accelerating information flow and strengthening communities:** Digital spaces are used to share timely updates, guidance, and user-generated content. AgriPath, for example, reports that farmers contribute not only successes but also failures – motivated by the opportunity to help others learn.
- **Enabling horizontal knowledge sharing:** Several projects go beyond expert-driven dissemination and promote local-to-local learning via digital tools, fostering adaptation to specific contexts.
- **Empowering non-specialists through decision support systems:** ComBaCaL and AgriPath both use structured tools that expand the capabilities of lay health workers and agricultural advisors.
- **User-driven design and co-creation:** Many tools are developed collaboratively with end users, ensuring that solutions are appropriate, accessible, and sustainable. This participatory approach reinforces ownership.

Nevertheless, several challenges limit the scaling potential of digital approaches:

- **Access barriers:** Limited internet connectivity, restrictive digital environments, and basic mobile devices ("dumb phones") constrain usability – especially in rural or politically sensitive contexts.
- **Need for offline functionality:** To address connectivity issues, most systems allow for offline use and delayed synchronization, which increases resilience but adds complexity.
- **Sustainability beyond the project cycle:** The continuity of digital tools is at risk once external funding ends. Common issues include lack of technical support, device replacement, and user motivation over time.
- **Role of public institutions:** Ministries of Health, Education, or Agriculture can help ensure long-term adoption by integrating digital tools into service systems. However, building such institutional partnerships requires time and strategic alignment – often beyond the timeframe or mandate of pilot projects.

2.3 Success factors

Based on the evaluation findings, we have identified several success factors that help generate impact and exploit scaling potential. These include:

- **Strong project consortia:** One of the most significant enabling factors contributing to the success of all TRANSFORM projects is the presence of strong, well-structured project consortia. These consortia brought together organizations with complementary strengths – combining the scientific rigor and methodological expertise of academic institutions with the practical experience, contextual knowledge, and political access of implementation partners, particularly NGOs (SolidarMed, the Grameen Foundation and Terre des Hommes) with deep local roots. These partners brought credibility, access to decision-makers, and long-standing networks in target countries, thereby facilitating entry points into national policy arenas and enabling meaningful engagement.

– **Internalization of the TRANSFORM objectives:** Our findings suggests that all four TRANSFORM projects have internalized the program's core objectives and embedded them in their research design and implementation strategies. This is notable as a challenge of many transformative research programs – or challenge-oriented programs more broadly – struggle with motivating research teams to move beyond conventional academic practices and engage with real-world change processes.

– **Social Acceptance:** Social acceptance emerged as a foundational success factor across all four TRANSFORM projects – manifesting in community uptake, institutional endorsement, and the responsiveness of international stakeholders. Each project invested deliberately in context-sensitive approaches to build trust, foster ownership, and ensure that their solutions were not only technically viable but also culturally and socially embraced. To achieve this, projects employed a variety of strategies:

  – AgriPath emphasized localized knowledge and combined digital tools with personal interactions to enhance legitimacy.

  – ComBaCaL relied on trusted community health workers and was met with high satisfaction among users and growing institutional support.

  – H4H prioritized early engagement of authorities and systematically assessed user perspectives – including those of marginalized groups.

  – IFE embedded its research in international dialogues and worked continuously to ensure that its findings resonated with key actors.

– **Multi-country approaches:** Apart from ComBaCaL, all TRANSFORM projects operate across multiple countries and contexts.

  – This geographic spread allows for a form of risk diversification and enhances the projects' overall resilience. Working in several countries allows projects to maintain momentum even when local conditions temporarily prevent progress in individual locations. This feature proved particularly valuable in dynamic or unstable environments. For instance, in the H4H project, activities continued despite conflict-related disruptions and humanitarian crises (e.g. war and conflict, natural catastrophes) in most of the implementation countries.

  – Also, the sustainability of outcomes hinges to a significant extent on the uptake and continuation of project results by local governments. Given the political and institutional uncertainties in many of the target countries, it is a strength to be able to explore and pursue multiple pathways across different contexts. The multi country approach to implementation allows projects to mitigate context-specific risks and seize opportunities where they arise.

  – Furthermore, a diverse portfolio across different countries can present an opportunity for learning. Especially regarding the evaluation of scaling potential, it is essential to know what works where and how approaches need to be tailored to local contexts.

– **Prior experience with transformative research:** A key enabler of project success was the teams' prior experience with transformative, international, and transdisciplinary research. Many project members had previously participated in R4D or similar programs and were familiar with the complexities of managing large, heterogeneous consortia. This foundation proved invaluable for navigating challenges related to coordination, stakeholder engagement, and contextual adaptation. In several cases, long-standing in-country experience further enhanced local relevance and implementation capacity.

2.4 Challenges and constraints

The evaluation findings also point toward the following constraints:

- **Managing large consortiums:** As noted above, the composition of the consortia is a clear asset of the TRANSFORM projects. The integration of partners with complementary strengths has contributed to their success and broad reach. At the same time, the size and complexity of these consortia present considerable management challenges. Coordinating multiple institutions, which might have different priorities, across different countries requires substantial administrative effort, careful communication structures, and strong leadership.
- **Reluctance to target decision-makers:** While all TRANSFORM projects show a clear ambition to inform policy processes and have achieved some degree of influence – particularly among technical staff in ministries – there appears to be a recurrent challenge in reaching elected political decision-makers. Most projects engage primarily with technocrats and mid-level civil servants, who tend to be more responsive to scientific arguments, evidence-based reasoning, and technical dialogue. This is particularly evident in settings such as Ministries of Health, where the living lab approaches have reportedly resonated well with administrative staff. However, long-term institutional uptake and policy change often depend on the support of elected politicians – actors who typically operate under different logics and motivations. Unlike technical staff, politicians often lack scientific training and may not be swayed by academic evidence alone. This raises the question of whether the projects have found effective ways to frame their messages in a language that resonates with this group and aligns with their political interests and priorities.
- **Sustainability dependent on future funding opportunities:** Ensuring the long-term impact of TRANSFORM projects remains a central challenge. While many positive outcomes – such as capacity building, career development, and the orientation of researchers toward transformative and SDG-focused work – are likely to outlive the funding cycle, their continuation depends heavily on future funding opportunities. Many researchers will return to institutional environments that offer limited support or incentives for transdisciplinary and solutions-oriented research. Without targeted follow-up funding, even successful innovations risk remaining isolated or underutilized. The projects themselves illustrate the structural fragility of sustainability efforts. Several interventions – such as AgriPath's digital advisory services or ComBaCaL's community health worker model – require sustained engagement and financing beyond the pilot phase. In ComBaCaL, for instance, the continued remuneration of lay health workers remains an unresolved issue. IFE-2-LNOB faced difficulties in reaching its intended number of beneficiaries due to dependencies on external donors, whose funding cycles and priorities did not always align with the project's logic – leading to target adjustments and implementation delays. More broadly, many local stakeholders rely on continued external support to sustain and institutionalize project results.

3. Portfolio level

3.1 Justification of the program

SDC is *not* a research funding institution. However, SDC has selected and manages the the four flagship by itself. By contrast, the SOR4D, Tech4Dev and ETH4D programs are co-managed with the SNSF, EPFL and ETH. Therefore, the question arises why SDC should act as a research funder that does not only provide financial resources but also runs the project selection and monitoring

of the funded projects? There are two reasons why it is both appropriate and strategically important for SDC to support transformative research:

1. **SDC itself is a potential user of the knowledge generated**. TRANSFORM may provide evidence base for program development, support organizational learning, and contributes directly to the achievement of SDC's development goals. As such the program is fully aligned with Switzerland's International Cooperation Strategy 2025–28 with its objective to employ evidence-based approaches to enhance the effectiveness of Swiss development cooperation.
2. **SDC brings unique added value to the implementation and scaling of research results**. Through its country offices and diplomatic channels, SDC can assess the relevance of research questions in context, promote uptake through local partnerships, and disseminate findings in international policy arenas. This multiplier role distinguishes SDC from conventional research funders and strengthens the link between research and real-world impact.

3.2 Positioning of the program

TRANSFORM fills a funding gap: Neither SNSF nor Innosuisse finance applied, transdisciplinary research explicitly addressing practical development challenges in LMICs. Several grantees noted they could not have conducted this work under existing Swiss schemes. [2]

The SOR4D program, which is part of TRANSFORM, also funds transdisciplinary research collaborations between Swiss and LMIC partners. However, the delineation between SOR4D and the flagship projects – evaluated here – appears less clear. Maybe the TRANSFORM flagship projects could be differentiated from SOR4D more strongly by taking a clearer step beyond research and focus more deliberately on application and scaling?

The findings from our evaluation of the four flagship projects suggests that producing a proof of concept alone may not be sufficient to achieve real-world uptake. While all projects have demonstrated technical or conceptual feasibility, none have yet succeeded in triggering large-scale interest from donors or strong uptake by governments or implementing agencies in partner countries. There is no queue of actors waiting to adopt the solutions developed by the project.

This points to a potential "valley of death" – a well-known phenomenon in innovation funding – that may also exist in transformative research. Just as in technology development, where public funding typically supports early-stage innovation, but private investors hesitate to engage without further validation, transformative development solutions may require additional support to become adoptable. This includes funding for field validation, stakeholder engagement, and institutional anchoring.

This would not only sharpen the program's profile but also enable a more targeted selection of projects. Projects could be invited to apply for follow-up funding only after having completed a research phase, allowing for a more informed assessment of their scaling potential.

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[2] Federal offices such as the Swiss Federal Office for Energy (SFOE), the State Secretariat for the Economy (SECO) or the Federal Office for the Environment (FOEN) also support applied research related to sustainability (e.g. through "Ressortforschung"), but these instruments tend to be thematically narrower and often lack the explicit focus on systemic change.

3.3 Program design

3.3.1 Funding requirements

The TRANSFORM program builds on earlier instruments such as the r4d program, continuing Switzerland's support for inter- and transdisciplinary research addressing global development challenges. While maintaining the dual emphasis on scientific excellence and practical relevance, TRANSFORM introduced a structural innovation: the **mandatory inclusion of implementation** partners as equal members of the project consortia from the outset. Our evaluation findings suggest that this design feature has been a key success factor.

Inclusion of gender and social inclusion: Also, the TRANSFORM program made gender and social inclusion an explicit project requirement. This is an evolution from the r4d program, where this was not a formal requirement – though many projects had ended up addressing these issues anyway. By requiring early attention to gender and inclusion, TRANSFORM ensured that these dimensions were integrated more strategically and consistently across the portfolio.

3.3.2 Portfolio approach

The TRANSFORM project is also characterized by its portfolio approach. Through its portfolio approach, TRANSFORM seeks to become more than the same of its parts – the four projects. The portfolio approach provides a set of advantages:

1. **Opportunities for peer-learning:** TRANSFORM's portfolio approach offers a strong basis for peer learning but needs active facilitation. Although workshops and learning events were held, participants indicated an unmet demand for exchange, partly due to COVID-19 limiting early networking. Going forward, SDC could add measures such as regular thematic sessions, moderated peer consultations or communities of practice to strengthen cross-project learning.
2. **Comparative lessons:** The choice of the portfolio approach is also justified by the fact that it allows the program management to draw comparative lessons that can inform the management of the program and the design of future interventions. One such lessons, for example, is that ComBaCaL, AgriPath and H4H could build on existing partnerships and previous collaborations. The IFE2LNOB consortium is relatively younger. Consortium composition and set-up therefore took longer. This demonstrates that a) networks are important, b) they take time to build and c) the projects need to be awarded the time to build these networks. We shall return to this point in the conclusion where we discuss the strategic lessons.

Missed opportunity for portfolio balancing through diversification? The portfolio concept is originated in the investment context. There, the portfolio approach is used to balance risks. High risk, high award investments are balanced with low risk, low yield investments. A venture capitalist, for instance, invests in multiple start-ups hoping that few start-ups succeed, while knowing that most will fail. In the TRANSFORM program we do not see such balancing strategies applied. Maybe this is a missed opportunity, as the balancing strategy might have the following advantages:

– **Selection of projects with different risk profiles**: SDC could deliberately fund a minority of high-risk projects, balancing this against projects with lower risks of failure.

– **To achieve the program objectives not every project may need to achieve the program objectives**. Following on from the point raised in the previous section, SDC may be overburdening the individual projects with rather high expectations. Instead, SDC could consider adopting a more explicit portfolio logic: not every project needs to fulfill all TRANSFORM objectives equally (while GESI requirements are non-negotiable). What matters is that the portfolio achieves the intended transformative goals.

Limits of the portfolio approach: While the portfolio approach is conceptually promising, there are also practical limits. Firstly, its potential is limited by the small number of funded projects. Four flagship projects (plus the completed DYNAMIC project as well as the SOR4D, Tech4Dev and ETH4D programs outside the scope of this evaluation) may be too small of a number to leverage the above-mentioned opportunities of risk diversification and peer learning. To unlock the full value of a portfolio-based funding strategy, a larger set of projects may be needed.

One relatively simple way to strengthen the portfolio logic could be to broaden the scope of the portfolio and link the flagship projects with other components of the TRANSFORM program: SOR4D, Tech4Dev, or ETH4D. This would increase the number of active projects, enhance opportunities for thematic clustering, and foster synergies across complementary initiatives. Additionally, SDC might want to explore opportunities for collaboration with other funders in Switzerland (e.g. SECO) or abroad (e.g. Formas, GIZ etc.).

3.4 Program management

3.4.1 Project selection

The success of the TRANSFORM program and the funded projects is closely linked to the strong project selection process conducted by SDC. Many of the success factors – transformation potential of the generated knowledge, strong implementation partners, strong social acceptance, the internationalization of the program objectives – have as much to do with the project selection as the projects themselves. Many of these success factors are supported by preexisting capabilities and preferences and SDC had the clarity of vision to recognize and select these projects.

The high number of pre-proposals – 91 in total – indicates that the call was effectively disseminated and reached relevant networks and communities of practice. This points to both strong visibility and strategic targeting in the communication of the call. From this broad base, nine projects were shortlisted and four ultimately selected for funding. The subsequent quality and relevance of these projects, as well as the results they have achieved to date, suggest that the selection process was not only competitive but also discerning. It ensured that resources were allocated to consortia with both high potential and solid foundations, many of which built on pre-existing, functioning networks.

3.4.2 Project support

Compared to other funding programs, the managers of the TRANSFORM program are comparatively active. This seems justified considering that TRANSFORM is still a comparatively novel type of funding program. The program management needs to make sure that the programs align

with the portfolio objectives and the management wants to learn from the program. Some of the project participants said that they value the engaged management style. The close and constructive exchange with the managers affords them a degree of flexibility that they do not know from other funding programs.

3.4.3 Coherence with internal SDC structures

Our findings suggest that there may be untapped potential for supporting the implementation and uptake of TRANSFORM-funded research – both within its own operations and through its influence in the international cooperation system. However, this potential does not yet appear to be systematically realized. There are two distinct but complementary roles SDC could play more actively.

1. **SDC itself can act as a direct implementer of project results**. Many of the funded projects generate knowledge, tools, or approaches that are highly relevant to SDC's thematic priorities and operational programs. This creates opportunities for internal uptake – for example by integrating findings into bilateral programs, policy development, or strategic planning. To date, these opportunities have not been systematically pursued.
2. **SDC is uniquely positioned to act as a facilitator and enabler of external uptake**. Through its field offices, diplomatic presence, and networks with multilateral organizations, partner governments, and donors, SDC has access to key decision-making arenas where project results could be positioned for broader use. It can help open doors, build credibility, and connect projects with actors who have the mandate and capacity to implement and scale solutions. This ability to strategically amplify research findings through channels of influence is a distinctive added benefit that SDC brings to the research funding landscape – one that conventional funders such as SNSF or Innosuisse cannot provide in the same way.

Interviewed project teams expressed a clear expectation that SDC would play a more active role in this regard. Several teams hoped for stronger support in gaining access to relevant policy actors and institutional frameworks. These expectations were only partially met.[3] To fully realize this dual role, TRANSFORM needs stronger internal anchoring within SDC. This might be achieved through the following steps:

–   **Raising awareness** of the program and its outputs across thematic units and field offices.
–   **Knowledge management systems**: Currently, SDC lacks such as system. Without this, it is difficult for the organization to act as a coordinated supporter and user of research.
–   **To build ownership and ensure alignment with operational needs**, SDC staff across the organization may need to be involved earlier and more actively in the life cycle of projects – for example during project selection, inception, or review phases. It is widely recognized that early involvement of intended beneficiaries is a key success factor in applied and particularly in transformative research. Involving relevant SDC units from the outset – not just as passive recipients but as co-shapers – can help ensure alignment with operational realities, foster ownership, and significantly increase the likelihood that results are taken up and used in practice.
–   **SDC may need to allocate resources** internally not only to the TRANSFORM program management, but also to other relevant units across the organization that are well positioned

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[3] Similar concerns were raised in the evaluation of the earlier r4d program , indicating that this may be a recurring structural challenge. (https://www.r4d.ch/en/eR0H1WVwU4TDpSG4/news)

to support uptake. These resources would enable SDC staff – at headquarters and in the field – to engage more actively in promoting research results, opening strategic doors, and helping translate project outcomes into real-world use.

– **The portfolio management team could assume the role of knowledge broker and policy entrepreneur**, connecting research projects with relevant practitioners and operational staff within SDC. This may include active matchmaking efforts, for example through targeted internal events that bring together project teams and SDC units working in related thematic or regional areas, and by identifying concrete entry points for collaboration and uptake.

3.5 Sustainability

3.5.1 The transformative research landscape

TRANSFORM has benefited from foundations laid in previous funding programs, most notably the r4d program. Many of the selected projects could draw on well-established networks and prior experiences with transformative research. This clearly contributed not only to the quality of the proposals but also to the high number of applications (91 in total), reflecting a research community that had already been mobilized and prepared.

TRANSFORM funding has allowed consortia to consolidate, deepen, and in some cases strategically expand these networks. This added value should not be underestimated. At the same time, it points to both a strength and a structural limitation: strong consortia often rely on pre-existing relationships. Without continued or renewed funding, these networks risk losing momentum or dissolving altogether.

This highlights a key challenge: **How can long-term collaborative capacity be sustained beyond individual funding cycles?** There may be a need for mechanisms that foster institutional continuity and anchor transformative research more permanently within the Swiss research system. As it stands, transformative research remains a niche.

3.5.2 Critical mass

The success of future transformative research funding programs will depend on the availability of a critical mass of expertise, partnerships, and institutional engagement over the long term. With potential funding cuts may erode the transformative research landscape that still exists. Potentially, even the existing funding may already be too small to maintain the necessary critical mass.

Hence, **SDC may look for opportunities to leverage its funding.** It might for instance collaborate with other donors and funders – in Switzerland and abroad. Collaboration with such partners could potentially provide greater continuity and critical mass of transformative research funding: Coordinated or pooled funding may help ensure a more stable funding environment and reduce fragmentation across funding cycles and institutions.

3.5.3 Potential benefits of collaborating with other funders

In addition to critical mass, collaboration with such partners could potentially open SDC to a range of other opportunities that include:

1. **Peer learning and joint capacity building at the management level**: Funders do not need to reinvent the wheel. Sharing experiences and learning from each other can help improve program design and implementation.
2. **Peer learning at the project level**: A bigger portfolio would also increase the potential for peer learning among the funded projects.
3. **Increased competition among potential grantees**: Bringing together different funding instruments and target groups – including across countries – can raise the level of competition and improve the quality of funded projects.
4. **Maximize the potential of the portfolio approach**: To leverage the potential of a portfolio approach, a portfolio might need to include more projects than are funded through the TRANSFORM program. With a critical mass of projects, the portfolio approach might open opportunities to risk diversification, stronger peer learning and specialization.
5. **Transforming the funding landscape**: By partnering with classic research funders, such as the SNSF or Innosuisse, SDC might help catalyze change within these organizations. Through collaboration, over time, they might come to realize the benefits and relevance of transformative research and thus adapt their funding portfolio more broadly.

4. Gender and social inclusion

Gender equality and social inclusion (GESI) are **clearly established as core priorities at the portfolio level of the program**. SDC requires that GESI be considered throughout all phases – strategy, portfolio, and project implementation. This reflects the program's focus on fostering systemic change that benefits vulnerable populations in LMICs. These expectations have clearly influenced project design and implementation: all four projects have strongly aligned with and internalized the program's GESI goals.

– AgriPath applied a gender- and youth-sensitive framework to assess the adoption of digital advisory services (DAS) and developed a project-wide Gender Strategy. It addressed gender in human-centered design, interface development, and field implementation, including the promotion of female agents and women's savings groups. Gender was also a cross-cutting theme in the AgriPath toolkit and training components.
– H4H implemented gender-sensitive WASH interventions, explicitly considering the needs of women and girls – including menstrual hygiene management in schools and maternal health in clinics. A gender analysis informed project design and indicators were monitored accordingly. Data collection and user engagement methods applied a gender lens throughout.
– ComBaCaL disaggregated capacity-building data by gender and emphasized inclusive representation in training and decision-making processes. While specific evidence on governance structures was limited, the project's approach reflects a strong commitment to social inclusion.
– IFE-2-LNOB integrated GESI at the level of outcome indicators and evaluation frameworks. However, results were mixed: while the intention to reach marginalized populations was clear,

achieving gender-related targets proved difficult, partly due to misaligned donor priorities and structural constraints in implementation.

5. Conclusions

5.1 Overall assessment

The TRANSFORM projects have successfully addressed complex global challenges while creating innovative solutions. The projects are on track to achieving their intended objectives. And while at the start of the projects they were not expected to scale the solutions developed by them, all projects are now taking steps to do just that.

While the r4d program demonstrated that transformative research can be scientifically excellent, the TRANSFORM program shows that transformative research can also deliver real impact with significant potential for scaling. Therefore, we recommend that SDC generally continues funding transformative research in the future.

5.2 Design and positioning of the program

The success of the projects confirms some of the design choices that SDC made with the TRANS-FORM program. The requirements to include implementation partners and to explicitly address gender and social inclusion issues were both success factors. Also, the portfolio approach proved to be of value, while the overall number of projects may be too small to leverage the full potential that the portfolio approach has to offer (risk diversification, peer learning etc.).

At the same time, our findings indicate that a funding gap may remain after the research phase – particularly regarding application, implementation, and scaling – suggesting that TRANSFORM may not fully close the existing funding gap. As mentioned above we therefore recommend that SDC provides additional funding.

5.3 Sustainability

The TRANSFORM projects have successfully developed robust **proofs of concept**. However, most are **not yet ready for direct uptake** by governments, NGOs, or other potential implementers. Additional work is needed to validate and adapt solutions, build institutional anchoring, and engage relevant stakeholders. Without follow-up support, there is a risk that the progress achieved to date could lose momentum and eventually dissipate. We therefore recommend that SDC provide additional funding to support scaling.

Sustainability of the research ecosystem: The TRANSFORM benefited from the availability of researchers with the right skills, motivation, and networks to engage in transformative research. These capacities – both at individual and institutional levels – require time and consistent

support to develop and sustain. Without long-term investment or continued funding, this promising field risks weakening. It could lose visibility within the Swiss research landscape.

6. Recommendations

Overall

1. **Continue funding transformative research:** We recommend that SDC continues to fund transformative research. The evaluation demonstrates the relevance of this type of funding, as well as its potential to generate meaningful impact and value for international cooperation. Moreover, TRANSFORM fills an important gap in the Swiss funding landscape.
2. **Provide follow-up funding to the four flagship projects**: All four projects have demonstrated scaling potential. However, they the projects were not initially required to plan for scaling activities, and they have not budgeted for this. Given the funding-gap, we recommend that SDC provides follow-up funding for the scaling activities.

Project-level

3. **In the future, require projects to outline scaling strategies at the proposal stage**: We recommend that future programs require applicants to include a clear reflection on the scaling of project results in their Theory of Change during the proposal phase. The aim is not to hold projects accountable to this but to foster early, systematic thinking about how results could be taken up and scaled. This would help identify realistic pathways to influence, anticipate potential barriers, and better align project design with long-term change processes.
4. **Provide targeted support for scaling through coaching, sparring sessions, and strategic guidance**: While sufficient informational materials have already been distributed and are available, we recommend shifting focus toward more targeted support for scaling.
   4.1 **Coaching and sparring sessions**: These sessions should allow project teams to discuss scaling opportunities, challenges, and strategies, fostering cross-project learning and the exchange of practical insights. Experts can provide guidance on refining scaling strategies. The coaching could also help address potential hesitations about approaching key decision-makers by offering coaching on initiating and navigating high-level one-on-one conversations, which could boost confidence in engaging with policymakers.
   4.2 **Communication strategy development**: Provide targeted support to help projects create tailored communication strategies that clearly highlight their outcomes and scaling potential. This would improve their ability to engage effectively with decision-makers and key stakeholders.
   4.3 **Expanding partnerships**: Consider offering a supplementary budget to bring in additional partners with the necessary communication and dissemination expertise. This would help projects develop and execute more effective outreach strategies, further enhancing their visibility and impact.

Portfolio level

5. **Establish regular peer-learning formats across projects**: Multiple project teams expressed a strong interest in more structured opportunities for peer learning. We therefore recommend establishing a regular peer-learning format, for example through in-person workshops. In addition, online sessions could be offered on specific cross-cutting themes – such as gender and social inclusion, the use of digital tools, or stakeholder engagement strategies. Creating these spaces for structured, facilitated exchange would help projects reflect on their own practice, learn from others, and generate new insights relevant to both implementation and scaling.

6. **Focusing future funding more strongly on implementation and scaling** – rather than on conducting new research: Since the SOR4D program (as part of TRANSFORM) already supports transformative, application-oriented *research*, there is a risk of overlap if flagship projects continue to fund similar activities. Instead, these projects could be used strategically to bridge the "valley of death" between research and uptake by supporting those that have demonstrated a proof of concept and show strong potential for real-world application and scaling.

7. **Strengthen the institutional embeddedness of TRANSFORM within SDC:** To fully realize the added value that SDC can bring to transformative research – both as a potential user and as an enabler of uptake – TRANSFORM must be more strongly embedded within SDC. This may require targeted measures to improve coordination, to raise awareness, to enable ownership, and to activate SDC's operational and diplomatic leverage. The following steps could help achieve this:

   7.1 **Promote internal ownership and alignment**: Involve operational staff (e.g. field offices, thematic desks) earlier and more systematically in the project cycle, especially during selection and design. Consider moving from a strictly bottom-up to a more demand-informed model, where research priorities are partially shaped by SDC needs.

   7.2 **Enable internal uptake and relevance**: Raise awareness of TRANSFORM and its results across the organization. Communicate outputs in formats that are actionable and relevant to SDC program staff.

   7.3 **Support implementation and scaling through internal resources**: Allocate budgets not only to program management but also to SDC units that can facilitate implementation and scaling (e.g. geographic divisions, field offices). Use existing SDC structures more strategically as users, brokers, and amplifiers of results.

   7.4 **Activate the portfolio management team as connector**: Position the portfolio team as a knowledge broker and policy entrepreneur. Organize matchmaking events to connect project teams with SDC operational units and identify opportunities for implementation and scaling.

8. **Explore national and international collaboration opportunities**: We recommend that SDC systematically explores cooperation opportunities with both international and national funding agencies engaged in transformative research and innovation. This includes organizations such as GIZ (Germany), FORMAS (Sweden), or Canada's IDRC, as well as domestic actors such as the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF), Innosuisse, the Swiss Federal Office of Energy (SFOE), and the Federal Office for the Environment (FOEN). Cooperation enables funders to exchange experience, identify good practices, and jointly address shared challenges. This supports mutual learning and reduces redundancy in program development. Given the fact that with TRANSFORM SDC address global systemic issues, international collaboration is essential. It is neither efficient nor justifiable for individual countries to

develop isolated solutions. Coordinated funding approaches are therefore a necessary step to ensure coherent and scalable responses.

- **Foster peer learning** at the management level across funding institutions, but also at the project level (see recommendation 5).
- **Increase competition**: joint calls can broaden the pool of applicants and raise the standard of proposals.
- **Maximize the potential of the portfolio approach**: a larger, more diverse project portfolio improves risk diversification, specialization, and synergies.
- **Catalyze change in the broader funding landscape**: collaboration with traditional research funders may encourage them to adopt and integrate transformative research more systematically over time.
- **Ensure critical mass:** The TRANSFORM program is potentially too small to ensure that there always is a critical mass of researchers, institutions, and funding opportunities in the field of transformative research. Collaborating with other funders can help build continuity, reduce fragmentation, and strengthen the ecosystem, nationally and internationally.

A. Evaluation questions

Table 1 below lists the evaluation questions, and the methods used to answer them.

**Table 1: Evaluation questions and methods**

	Evaluation Questions	Methods
Project Level	With regard to the TRANSFORM objectives (generate transformative knowledge and technology, foster utilization of research-based knowledge, technologies and innovation, enhance scientific skills and knowledge) and the program's overall goal of strengthening the link between research and practice, what are the projects' main achievements ("best practices") including strengths, opportunities and successes? What are the main challenges ("bottlenecks") including risks and failures?	Exploratory interviews, document analysis and self-evaluation workshop.
	What is the research approach of each of the examined projects and how is it utilized to achieve greatest possible development impact?	We used the exploratory interviews and the self-evaluation workshops, in which we retrace each projects ToC, to better understand the project design and scaling vision.
	Do the projects succeed to translate the research results into practice? What measures are taken? What strategies and partnerships do they apply in order to make the use of their research results sustainable? How is the research evidence put into policy and practice?	Self-evaluation workshop with project teams and stakeholders
	How has gender equality and social inclusion been taken into consideration in the design and implementation of the projects?	All phases of the project. Specific questions were asked in the self-evaluation workshop and the capitalization workshop. We used the summative workshop with SDC to take stock of the extent that gender equality and social inclusion have been internalized.
	Are the projects adequately considering gender issues and contributing to closing the gender gap (in the academic world, at beneficiaries' level, etc.)? What are the project's strengths in this regard? What is missing?	
	To what extent have the projects integrated scaling considerations (and at what stage of the project) in their project conceptualization and planning, as well as steering?	This was a central topic of the self-evaluation workshops.
	What strategies and concrete actions should the projects apply in order to enable and prepare the transition to optimal impact at scale?	This, too, was central for the self-evaluation workshops. In the capitalization workshop, through peer learning, we will expand on this.
Portfolio Level	Are the TRANSFORM objectives being adequately pursued by each project? What works well? What are the blind spots?	We used the self-evaluation workshop to examine to what extent this is the case. In the summative workshop with SDC we compared the project and portfolio level objectives.

Evaluation Questions	Methods
What are the common denominators (i.e., approaches, strategies, partnerships, etc.) and what comparative lessons can be drawn out of the four projects?	This was a central topic of the capitalization workshop.
What are the main strategic lessons from the projects for improving the orientation of SDC's TRANSFORM portfolio?	This was discussed with SDC in the summative workshop. We make recommendations in the present final report.
Is gender equality and social inclusion sufficiently considered in the TRANSFORM program?	We explored this question based on reports, the self-assessment workshops and re-visit the question with SDC.
What can be done to improve that gender equality and social inclusion get mainstreamed and applied?	
What are the main strategic lessons learned from the projects which are relevant for the transition to scale with regard to research findings and integration into the national sector strategies?	Self-evaluation and capitalization workshop
What are the prerequisites for reaching large scale positive change (enabling environment)? What are the good practices in this regard?	Self-evaluation and capitalization workshop
Based on the projects experiences and lessons learnt, what is the Theory of Change (ToC) that should inform research for development projects in order to reach optimal impact at scale?	Self-evaluation and capitalization workshop

B. Methodology

The methodological approach centered around a series of three workshops.

Figure 1: Evaluation workshops
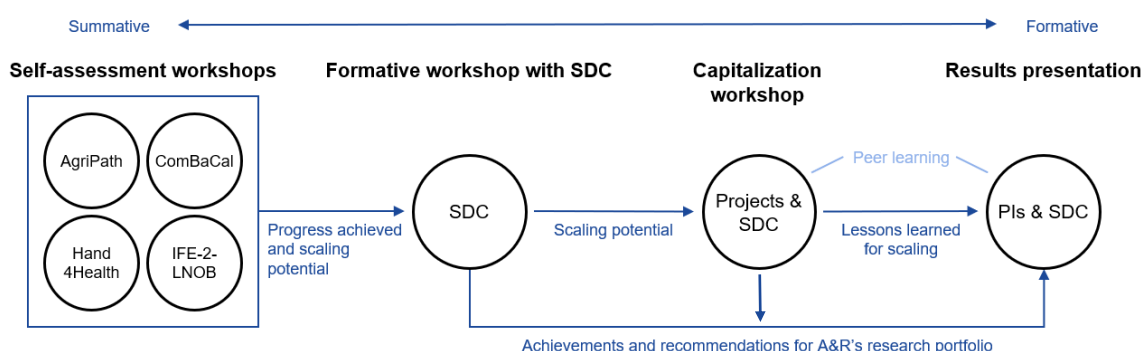
B.1 Exploratory interviews

We conducted six exploratory interviews with project leaders of the four projects. The interviewees and dates for the interviews are listed in the table below.

Table 2: Interview partners and dates (names of Interview partners available only internal)

Project	Interview partner	Date and place
AgriPath		9.1.2025, online
AgriPath		14.02.2025, online
ComBaCaL		13.1.2025, online
ComBaCaL		21.1.2025, Basel
ComBaCaL		27.1.2025, online
H4H		30.1.2025, online
IFE-2-LNOB		27.1.2025, online

The exploratory interviews allowed us to:

1. Clarify our open questions for each project
2. Deepen our understanding of the individual scaling strategies
3. Ask what project representatives expected from the evaluation
4. Elaborate on the goals for the first workshops
5. Talk about potential workshop participants

B.2 Workshops

Table 3: Workshops

Work package	Objectives	Methods and sources
1. Self-evaluation workshops with the projects	– Assess progress toward goals and TRANSFORM objectives (generate transformative knowledge and technology, foster utilization of research-based knowledge, technologies and innovation) – Identify opportunities and constraintsReflect and adapt impact model with focus on scaling	– 4 online or hybrid workshops, one with each project team (internal and external stakeholders) – Preparation based on results of the inception phase – Follow-up interviews
2. Summative workshop with SDC	– Present and discuss progress at project level – Compare project-level progress with portfolio-level objectives and initial expectations – Consolidate scaling visions	1 online, hybrid or in person workshop with the portfolio managers and other stakeholders at SDC

Work package	Objectives	Methods and sources
3. Capitalization workshop	– Discuss opportunities and constraints with the project teams – Develop approaches to deal with constraints and definition of good practices – Enable peer learning among projects	– 1 online or hybrid workshop with all 4 project teams (internal and external stakeholders) and SDC representatives – Follow-up interviews

B.2.1 Self-evaluation workshops with the project teams

We began the data collection phase with a series of four workshops, one with each project team (direct participants, implementation partners and external stakeholders).

The objectives of these workshops were:

1. Assess project progress toward objectives, identifying key achievements and challenges.
2. Identify opportunities, constraints, and lessons learned, with a focus on research-practice linkages.
3. Reflect on and adapt the impact model, emphasizing scaling strategies and sustainability.
4. Evaluate how gender and social inclusion is considered at every step of the project, including in the scaling vision and sustainability vision.
5. Reflect on how the projects align with the three TRANFORM objectives.

We deliberately choose to separate the projects at this stage because we want to be able to go into depth on each project. We also do not want the projects to compete. By separating the projects, we want to create a safe environment for an honest self-evaluation. Peer learning will be enabled in the subsequent workshops.

The workshop includes the core project teams and other external stakeholders. The stakeholders have been identified during the inception phase, based on project documents and exploratory interviews. The participants from the core project team and the suggested external stakeholders, along with the exact dates for the workshops, are listed in the table below.

Table 4: Workshop participants and dates   (names of Core team members available only internal)

Project	Core team	Suggested stakeholders	Possible dates and place
AgriPath			12.3., online

Project	Core team	Suggested stakeholders	Possible dates and place
ComBaCaL			12.3., online
H4H		Country-specific, see below*	18.3. (Nigeria) 17.3./19.3./20.3. (Burkina Faso and Mali), online
IFE-2-LNOB		Four academia Partner SDC educational unit (if desired)	11.3., online

B.2.2 Summative workshop with SDC

On April 1st, 2025 from 10:00 to 12:00 at SDC in Bern.

The summative workshop allows discussing our results from the first workshops with the portfolio managers at SDC. Beforehand, the MIRO boards and a summary of the self-evaluation workshops will be shared with them. We structure the summative workshop as follows:

6.   We present the results of the self-evaluation workshops, including the project's progress.
7.   We discuss these results with SDC.
8.   We then present identified gaps between the project-level impact goals and the portfolio-level impact goals.
9.   This allows discussing with SDC whether there is a need to adapt the respective objectives and expectations.

Participants

Participants include the portfolio managers at SDC and the evaluation team. We invite the portfolio managers to specify which additional SDC-stakeholders they would like to include in the workshop.[4]

B.2.3 Capitalization workshop

On May 8, 2025, we conducted the capitalization workshop. The objectives were:

1.   Conduct an in-depth discussion of opportunities and constraints within and across projects.
2.   Develop peer-driven strategies to overcome challenges and maximize scaling opportunities.
3.   Strengthen synergies at the portfolio level by identifying shared approaches, lessons, and best practices.

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[4] Potentially, the project leaders could also be invited to participate. At this point, however, we lean toward leaving them out. Pros and cons of involving the project leaders can be discussed during the method workshop.

Table 5: List of participants (names of stakeholders available only internal)

Project/stakeholder	Participants
AgriPath	
ComBaCaL	
H4H	
IFE	
SDC	Odile Robert
	Martina Schmidt
	Bärtschi Manuela
	Céline Stutz
Consultants	

Project/stakeholder	Participants

Schweizerische Eidgenossenschaft
Confédération suisse
Confederazione Svizzera
Confederaziun svizra

Management response to the Evaluation of the TRANSFORM program

October 2025

The Management Response (MR) states the position of the SDC on the recommendations of the external Evaluation of the TRANSFORM program (2025). The MR provides a solid basis for strategic decision-making and portfolio orientation.

Assessment of the evaluation

The evaluation was conducted by a team of independent experts of BSS Volkswirtschaftliche Beratung AG and Mainlevel Consulting AG in accordance with international standards. The evaluation process was well managed and included close involvement of SDC's Analysis and Research Section.

The evaluation focuses on the four flagship projects of the TRANSFORM program: AgriPath, ComBaCaL, Hands4Health and IFE-2-LNOB. It assesses whether the four projects are on track to achieving their intended outcomes and contribute to the overarching goals of the TRANSFORM program. Building on the findings, the evaluation makes recommendations toward the strategic development of the portfolio, with a strong focus on potential for scaling.

The evaluators have fully met the objectives. SDC appreciates the thoroughness of the evaluation report, whose well-founded analysis and actionable recommendations offer valuable guidance for strengthening the strategic orientation of the TRANSFORM program.

Main findings

The evaluation was using a participatory approach, combining a review of available documentation, exploratory interviews with project participants, and a series of workshops from which the main findings were drawn.

For the project level, the evaluation concluded that all initiatives are on track towards achieving their intended results and have shown strong potential to generate transformative knowledge in their respective fields. They have demonstrated influence on national and international policy, for example through integration into national guidelines and contributions to global policy dialogues, with implementation partners playing a decisive role in ensuring contextual relevance and effective policy engagement. Capacity building has taken place at multiple levels, ranging from early-career researchers to local health workers, teachers, and smallholder farmers, thereby strengthening both local and global expertise.

While scaling was not an initial requirement, its emergence as a central topic underscores the projects' success, as each has produced proofs of concept and large-scale uptake appears to be a valuable option. The program design, particularly the mandatory inclusion of local implementing partners and gender and social inclusion requirements, has proven to be a key success factor, together with the portfolio approach that shall enable peer learning and comparative insights.

For the portfolio level, the evaluation confirms that a funding gap persists between research and real-world application. Follow-up support for validation, stakeholder engagement, and institutional anchoring is essential. Long-term impact ultimately depends on sustained funding and deep institutional integration within national ecosystems.

To build on demonstrated impact and relevance, the evaluators recommend that SDC continues to fund transformative research projects and provide follow-up support for scaling activities of flagship projects. Moreover, future projects should include clear scaling strategies from the outset, complemented by targeted support such as coaching, communication planning, and strategic partnerships. Regular peer-learning formats should be established to maximize the benefits of the portfolio approach. SDC's role as both a user and enabler of research uptake should be strengthened by embedding the TRANSFORM

program more systematically into SDC's operational structures. Finally, exploring co-funding opportunities with national and international donors could help secure a critical mass of resources and enhance the long-term sustainability of transformative research.

Out of 8 recommendations, 7 are 'fully agreed' (green), 1 is 'partially agreed' (orange) and 0 are not agreed ('disagree', red), see table below. SDC agrees to seize this opportunity to improve its results by taking specific measures in line with the recommendations.

Overview of recommendations, management response and measures

1.	Continue funding transformative research	🟩
2.	Provide follow-up funding to the four flagship projects	🟧
3.	In the future, require projects to outline scaling strategies at the proposal stage	🟩
4.	Provide targeted support for scaling […]	🟩
5.	Establish regular peer-learning formats across projects	🟩
6.	Focusing future funding more strongly on implementation and scaling	🟩
7.	Strengthen the institutional embeddedness of TRANSFORM within SDC	🟩
8.	Explore national and international collaboration opportunities	🟩
Fully agree	Partially agree	Disagree

Overall

Recommendation 1
Continue funding transformative research: BSS recommends that SDC continues to fund transformative research. The evaluation demonstrates the relevance of this type of funding, as well as its potential to generate meaningful impact and value for international cooperation. Moreover, TRANSFORM fills an important gap in the Swiss funding landscape.

Management response		
Fully agree	Partially agree	Disagree
Transformative research is at the core of SDC's approach to research for development, as embodied in the Research Concept 2025-28 and anchored in the International Cooperation Strategy 2025-28 as well as the Education Research and Innovation Policy 2025-28. By fostering transdisciplinary approaches and involving implementation actors from the outset, TRANSFORM enhances the relevance, legitimacy, and sustainability of research outcomes. It reflects SDC's strategic commitment to innovation, inclusion, and impact, ensuring that research is not only academically excellent but also socially and politically meaningful, accepted and ultimately impactful. Transformative research builds on equal partnerships, promotes mutual learning and prepares for effective uptake. It grounds research in real-world challenges and empowers communities, practitioners, researchers and policymakers to shape and own the solutions, building trust, enhancing adaptability, and strengthening long-term impact.		

Measures	Responsibility	Timing
a) Continue transformative research funding as part of SDC's TRANSFORM program (2020-2030)	SDC	ongoing
b) Continue strategic partnerships with SNSF/SOR4D, ETH/ETH4D, and EPFL/Tech4Dev. These programs cover the entire spectrum from technology innovation (ETH/EPFL) and more social, environmental and ecological innovations (SNSF) by combining scientific rigor with practical expertise, creating fertile ground for scalable, high-impact solutions. They also provide the necessary mechanisms for identifying new projects (pipeline)	SDC	ongoing
c) Assess the continuation of current collaboration with the TRANSFORM flagship projects (AgriPath, ComBaCaL, Hands4Health, IFE-2-LNOB)	SDC	throughout 2026/2027

Recommendation 2
Provide follow-up funding to the four flagship projects: All four projects have demonstrated scaling potential. However, the projects were not initially required to plan for scaling activities, and they have not budgeted for this. Given the funding gap, BSS recommends that SDC provides follow-up funding for the scaling activities.

Management response		
Fully agree	**Partially agree**	Disagree

The TRANSFORM call for proposal did not include the scaling component. Its emergence as a central topic 5 years later underscores the projects' success. While all four flagship projects have demonstrated potential for scaling, not all have concluded their initial research phase and reached their proof of concept. Follow-up funding shall be **conditional** on each project demonstrating its potential for impact at scale and presenting a clear scaling strategy to reach the defined optimal scale.

Moreover, the challenge extends beyond funding alone. To effectively support the successful transition to scale, projects could benefit from being accompanied by professional scaling coaching, helping them to identify viable pathways, build strategic partnerships, and translate research into

actionable solutions.For the sake of coherence, SDC is exploring the possibility of supporting a Transition to Scale phase (financially and through coaching) of its research projects moving forward.

Measures	Responsibility	Timing
a) Exploration and development of funding mechanisms to support a Transition to Scale phase	SDC	2025/26

Project-level

Recommendation 3
In the future, require projects to outline scaling strategies at the proposal stage: BSS recommends that future programs require applicants to include a clear reflection on the scaling of project results in their Theory of Change during the proposal phase. The aim is not to hold projects accountable for this but to foster early, systematic thinking about how results could be taken up and scaled. This would help identify realistic pathways to influence, anticipate potential barriers, and better align project design with long-term change processes.

Management response		
Fully agree	Partially agree	Disagree

Integrating reflections on scaling and articulating a scaling vision from the outset is widely recognized as good practice in scaling (such as outlined in the DAC Scaling Guidance). In 2020, TRANSFORM was a new instrument of SDC and at the time the main innovation was the inclusion of an implementing partners in the project consortia to strengthen the link between research and operations. Given the success of several projects and a growing emphasis on sustainability within the portfolio, impact at scale is increasingly becoming a central goal of research for development funding. As such, the importance of embedding scaling considerations early in the project lifecycle is gaining momentum.

Measures	Responsibility	Timing
a) Introduce a scaling vision requirement in project proposals in TRANFSORM projects (incl. SOR4D, ETH4D, Tech4Dev)	SDC, in collaboration with programs	n/a
b) Monitor and evaluate scaling potential in TRANSFORM projects	SDC, in collaboration with program leads	ongoing

Recommendation 4
Provide targeted support for scaling through coaching, sparring sessions, and strategic guidance: While sufficient informational materials have already been distributed and are available, BSS recommends shifting focus toward more targeted support for scaling.

4.1. **Coaching and sparring sessions**: These sessions should allow project teams to discuss scaling opportunities, challenges, and strategies, fostering cross-project learning and the exchange of practical insights. Experts can provide guidance on refining scaling strategies. The coaching could also help address potential hesitations about approaching key decision-makers by offering coaching on initiating and navigating high-level one-on-one conversations, which could boost confidence in engaging with policymakers.

4.2. **Communication strategy development**: Provide targeted support to help projects create tailored communication strategies that clearly highlight their outcomes and scaling potential. This would improve their ability to engage effectively with decision-makers and key stakeholders.

4.3. **Expanding partnerships**: Consider offering a supplementary budget to bring in additional partners with the necessary communication and dissemination expertise. This would help projects develop and execute more effective outreach strategies, further enhancing their visibility and impact.

Management response		
Fully agree	Partially agree	Disagree

SDC shall consider recommendation 4 for upcoming / future projects in which scaling is in from the outset. In principle, SDC agrees that scaling coaching would be an asset for the TRANSFORM program moving from a transformative research funding scheme towards a more impact-oriented program, putting scaling considerations at the core. In addition, SDC sees the value of professional support in communication and dissemination efforts for better understanding and acceptance of proof-of-concept stage research.

No measures defined at this stage

Portfolio level

Recommendation 5
Establish regular peer-learning formats across projects: Multiple project teams expressed a strong interest in more structured opportunities for peer learning. BSS therefore recommends establishing a regular peer-learning format, for example through in-person workshops. In addition, online sessions could be offered on specific cross-cutting themes – such as gender and social inclusion, the use of digital tools, or stakeholder engagement strategies. Creating these spaces for structured, facilitated exchange would help projects reflect on their own practice, learn from others, and generate new insights relevant to both implementation and scaling.

Management response		
Fully agree	Partially agree	Disagree

The added value of peer learning among TRANSFORM partners has been highlighted on multiple occasions, notably following the SDC organized event in May 2024 and the various workshops held as part of this evaluation. At the same time, it must be acknowledged that peer exchange has limitations (differences between topics, approaches and project constellations). What results to be most relevant is the network and thematic exchange established among project partners.

Measures	Responsibility	Timing
a) Maintain a community of practices that allows to share experiences in those areas where needs / interest exists	SDC, in collaboration with project teams and upon their request / initiative	ongoing
b) Allow for thematic exchange, i.e. between TRANSFORM projects and thematic SDC units	SDC, in collaboration with thematic units of SDC and upon request of the project teams	ongoing

Recommendation 6
Focusing future funding more strongly on implementation and scaling, rather than on conducting new research: Since the SOR4D program (as part of TRANSFORM) already supports transformative, application-oriented *research*, there is a risk of overlap if flagship projects continue to fund similar activities. Instead, these projects could be used strategically to bridge the "valley of death" between research and uptake by supporting those that have demonstrated a proof of concept and show strong potential for real-world application and scaling.

Management response		
Fully agree	Partially agree	Disagree

Since past research projects have very successfully managed to proof concepts in their respective fields and therefore, a solid pipeline of projects exists, SDC shall move more towards transition to scale and scale and therefore slightly adapt its approach.

The early stages in the innovation process (idea, research, and proof of concept) will continue to be anchored in SDC's successful partnership programs with SNSF (SOR4D), ETH (ETH4D), and EPFL (Tech4Dev) and its four flagship projects. A new call for flagship projects within the TRANSFORM program shall not be opened in the near future. Instead, emphasis shall be put on transition to scale / scale leveraging successful projects resulting from SOR4D, ETH4D and Tech4Dev, as well as other interesting results from research to development projects.

Measures	Responsibility	Timing
a) Exploration of "next step" funding modalities allowing projects from the pipeline to move towards scale	SDC, in conversation with partners	2025/26

Recommendation 7

Strengthen the institutional embeddedness of TRANSFORM within SDC: To fully realize the added value that SDC can bring to transformative research, both as a potential user and as an enabler of uptake, TRANSFORM must be more strongly embedded within SDC. This may require targeted measures to improve coordination, to raise awareness, to enable ownership, and to activate SDC's operational and diplomatic leverage. The following steps could help achieve this:

7.1. **Promote internal ownership and alignment**: Involve operational staff (e.g. field offices, thematic desks) earlier and more systematically in the project cycle, especially during selection and design. Consider moving from a strictly bottom-up to a more demand-in-formed model, where research priorities are partially shaped by SDC needs.

7.2. **Enable internal uptake and relevance**: Raise awareness of TRANSFORM and its results across the organization. Communicate outputs in formats that are actionable and relevant to SDC program staff.

7.3. **Support implementation and scaling through internal resources**: Allocate budgets not only to program management but also to SDC units that can facilitate implementation and scaling (e.g. geographic divisions, field offices). Use existing SDC structures more strategically as users, brokers, and amplifiers of results.

7.4. **Activate the portfolio management team as connector**: Position the portfolio team as a knowledge broker and policy entrepreneur. Organize matchmaking events to connect project teams with SDC operational units and identify opportunities for implementation and scaling.

Management response		
Fully agree	Partially agree	Disagree

Greater use of SDC's internal capacities to strengthen the uptake of research results and foster the scaling of innovative solutions is an important element for the research and innovation approach of the A&R section. As an initial step, more efforts shall be allocated to communication and community building within the organization to increase visibility and engagement around TRANSFORM. This will help create a stronger internal network and foster a shared understanding of the portfolio's relevance and potential.

In addition, there is an important need to better align research activities with internal demand, build ownership across operational units, and enable more systematic uptake and scaling. These aspects require further exploration and targeted efforts, including closer collaboration with field offices and thematic units that allow to break existing silos.

Clarifying SDC's role as both a user and/or enabler of transformative research results and distinguishing between internal and external uptake will enhance overall understanding, support strategic decision-making, and strengthen communication.

Measures	Responsibility	Timing
a) Strengthen internal communication and visibility of SDCs research portfolio	SDC, in collaboration with thematic and geographic units	ongoing
b) Foster community building, engagement and ownership, by involving thematic and geographical units in the project selection where opportune	SDC, in collaboration with thematic and geographic units	ongoing
c) Align research with operational demand, by contributing to fill eventual evidence gaps for larger SDC projects	SDC, in collaboration with thematic and geographic units	ongoing

Recommendation 8

Explore national and international collaboration opportunities: BSS recommends that SDC systematically explores cooperation opportunities with both international and national funding agencies engaged in transformative research and innovation. This includes organizations such as GIZ (Germany), FORMAS (Sweden), or Canada's IDRC, as well as domestic actors such as the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF), Innosuisse, the Swiss Federal Office of Energy (SFOE), and the Federal Office for the Environment (FOEN). Cooperation enables funders to exchange experience, identify good practices, and jointly address shared challenges. This supports mutual learning and reduces redundancy in program development. Given the fact that with TRANSFORM SDC address global systemic issues, international collaboration is essential. It is neither efficient nor justifiable for individual countries to develop isolated solutions. Coordinated funding approaches are therefore a necessary step to ensure coherent and scalable responses.

- **Foster peer learning** at the management level across funding institutions, but also at the project level (see recommendation 5).
- **Increase competition**: joint calls can broaden the pool of applicants and raise the standard of proposals.
- **Maximize the potential of the portfolio approach**: a larger, more diverse project portfolio improves risk diversification, specialization, and synergies.
- **Catalyze change in the broader funding landscape**: collaboration with traditional research funders may encourage them to adopt and integrate transformative research more systematically over time.
- **Ensure critical mass:** The TRANSFORM program is potentially too small to ensure that there always is a critical mass of researchers, institutions, and funding opportunities in the field of transformative research. Collaborating with other funders can help build continuity, reduce fragmentation, and strengthen the ecosystem, nationally and internationally.

Management response

Fully agree	Partially agree	Disagree

Investing in strategic partnerships is essential to advancing transformative research and enhancing its impact. In the early stages of the innovation process (idea, research, and proof of concept stages) TRANSFORM is built on strong existing partnerships that deliver high-quality results.

Looking ahead, the transition-to-scale phase represents a critical juncture where additional support and strategic collaboration are required. This phase will be a key focus moving forward, as it holds significant potential for amplifying impact. A recent study on mainstreaming scaling within the TRANSFORM program, conducted by the Scaling Community of Practice (SCoP) for SDC, has

provided valuable insights into practices from a range of innovation funders. These findings will be further explored to identify concrete opportunities for action.

SDC is exchanging with other research-for-development and innovation funders, with the aim of building and maintaining a strong network that fosters collaboration and mutual learning, eventually resulting in pooled funding.

Measures	Responsibility	Timing
a) Explore opportunities for partnerships in the transition to scale phase and beyond.	SDC, in conversation with other donors	as of 2025, ongoing

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