

From King's Cross to Karachi: a toolkit to help social and creative enterprises scale up

by Andrew Thompson

Do you like biryani? This mixed dish of Indian spices, rice, vegetables, meat or eggs originated in the Indian subcontinent. It can be found in most major cities around the world. The name comes from a Persian word, *birian*, which means fried before cooking.

If you are in Islamabad you can order biryani, and a lot of other tasty dishes, in a novel way. A start-up company called Plate 101 will let you order the food for home delivery. Admittedly a whole range of internet-based food delivery companies are operating in most of the world's cities. But Plate 101 is different. It is a start-up social enterprise and it is focusing on women who work at home – housewives – who cook for their families. The idea is that through a technology platform women who are already cooking dishes for their families can take extra, top-up orders for delivery to paying customers. The customers get high-quality home cooking. The women get an additional source of revenue. Plate 101 calls its cooks 'hometrepreneurs'.

Kalsoom Lakhani is founder and CEO of [invest2innovate](#) (i2i) a Pakistan-based start-up accelerator and a partner in i2i Ventures, a fund that can invest in startups like Plate 101. He explains a little more about how this particular company operates. The 'hometrepreneurs' are carefully selected and given training in the preparation of hygienic healthy home food. They and their dishes are profiled on the website to enable the customer to select the dish that they'd like delivered and the cook who prepares it. Kalsoom says "if I order biryani, the woman who is already making it at home for her family cooks an extra kilogramme of it and Plate 101, as a technology platform, does all the work of collection, delivery and fulfilment and pays the cook her share of the sale."

The company has grown rapidly and is taking more than 2,000 orders a month. A lack of mobility has traditionally limited Pakistani women's access to the labour market, a problem at least partly resolved in this case by bringing the work to them. The start-up also requires the women to register in the formal labour market, which means that they will be able to apply for micro-loans to extend the work they are doing. "Women can work from the comfort of their own homes, while also being part of a community. And then at the same time they can earn money. That's pretty great. It is a company that is actually doing quite well in terms of making revenue right now," says Kalsoom

There is however a problem. A lot of promising start-up companies like Plate 101 are springing up all around Pakistan, with exciting new ideas and good job-creating prospects. Yet a number of them simply don't make it. Starved of investment, they die. It is now accepted that start-ups, wherever they are in the world, need a supportive "eco-system" made up of incubators (companies that are catalysts for new ideas) accelerators (those that help them scale up for commercial operation) and venture capital and other types of investors that provide the money for expansion.

A report by i2i highlights that some progress has been made, but more is needed. Pakistan now has over 24 incubators and accelerators, 80 co-working spaces, and approximately 20 formal investors. Yet there are big investment and gender gaps. Kalsoom says there is a "massive" gap between companies that are "investment worthy, but not investment ready". There is also a gender gap. The report notes that

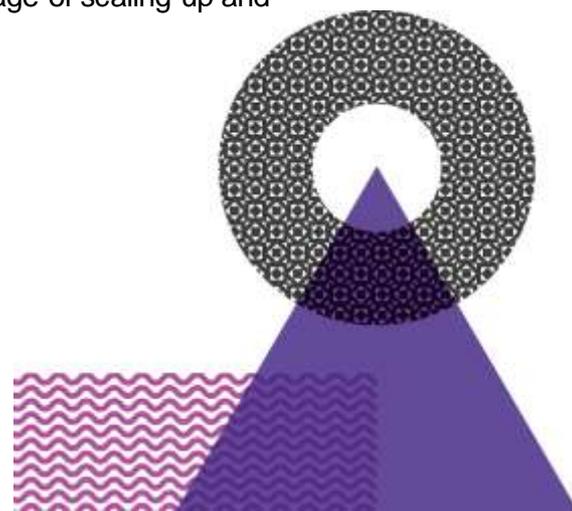


“start ups run by men raise investment more often than their female counterparts”.



Noor Us Saba, founder and CEO of Plate 101.
Source: <https://plate101.com/about/>

To try and tackle both those gaps i2i and UK-based [Impact Hub King's Cross](#) have been working together on a British Council DICE fund project called RISE – an acronym for “Ready for Impact through Scaling Enterprise”. The idea is simple: to strengthen the ecosystem to support social and creative enterprises in Pakistan. Nayla Attas, who works for Impact Hub, explains it is an international network of co-working spaces for start-ups which has also developed a curriculum of business support programmes. The programme involves the two partners jointly creating what they call a “toolbox” that will help Pakistani start-ups better navigate their development up to, and past the crucial stage of scaling up and attracting investment. Rohma Labeeb, a project manager at i2i, makes the point that “a lot of amazing entrepreneurs in Pakistan who have incredible ideas about change find that their businesses die because they are not able to get the right resources to scale up and secure impact. We need the companies to survive and make real change. The toolbox is one thing in their arsenal to help them do that.”



To build the toolbox there were exchange visits with key eco-system players from Pakistan travelling to London and Bradford, and UK players going to Pakistan. The toolbox is a co-created, co-designed online guide, a kind of do-it-yourself course for social entrepreneurs trying to scale up their businesses to different markets. Nayla says “It has a self-diagnostic element and a step-by-step guide depending on the diagnosis. Each entrepreneur has different strengths and weaknesses, so it is about understanding where they are and where they need to go, along with some suggestions based on experience about the best way to get there.” Some elements come from course materials originally developed by Impact Hub in the UK, but others are tailored specifically to address the challenges of the Pakistani eco-system.

For Plate 101 the big challenge is to take the business to other Pakistani cities and possibly beyond. Other start-up companies like it are looking to the regional market including neighbouring countries like Nepal and Bangladesh. Part of the scaling up process is to understand how best to navigate cross-border expansion. For the moment however in Pakistan the focus is very much on launching the toolbox. “We’ve seen a lot of interest from everyone we’ve talked to here, including small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) and various types of stakeholders. They have all shown so much interest in taking part in this and we are looking forward to taking it further” says Rohma.



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