Startup Development Programs for Transformative Innovation

How public support can move from acceleration to system change

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Based on a comparative study of seven corporate-startup matchmaking platforms across AI, manufacturing, life sciences, forestry, and related transition-oriented domains.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Startup development programs should be treated as transition infrastructure, not only as services for young firms.
- TIP implementation needs five linked functions: mission framing, inclusive portfolio-building, protected experimentation, adoption pathways and reflexive learning.
- Strong programs develop both sides of collaboration: startup readiness and incumbents' or public buyers' capacity to absorb external solutions.
- Success metrics should include legitimacy, inclusion, learning, purchasing routes, and contribution to transition missions - not only funding raised or number of startups.

What is the problem/what was studied?

Startup programs are often designed around venture growth: mentoring, pitching, investor readiness and faster market entry. These are valuable, but they are not enough for transformative innovation policy. Startup programs should also work as implementation arenas where transition problems are framed, outsiders gain legitimacy, incumbents and public buyers become capable adopters, and experiments are connected to procurement, regulation, infrastructure, and diffusion. The study examined seven matchmaking platforms across four countries that facilitate collaboration among startups, established firms, and ecosystem actors.

What were the findings? What's new?

The main finding is that startup support works differently depending on how the program is organized. Some platforms are structured around corporate or societal challenges and are strong at creating fast pilots. Others support internal capability building inside incumbent firms, making them better early customers and adopters of startup solutions. The new policy insight is that startup development programs should be treated as transition infrastructure, not only as acceleration services. A transformative program should combine startup coaching with demand-side readiness, legitimacy-building, and spaces for experimentation. This means designing programs around system problems and adoption pathways, rather than only around startup survival or short-term deal flow.

Table 1: Program design: four tracks for a transformative startup program

PROGRAM TRACKS AND POLICY USE	
Mission challenge track For urgent transition problems. Startups respond to challenges with clear problem owners and pilot pathways.	**Adoption and venture-client track** For incumbent renewal. The program prepares firms to become capable first customers, with clear ownership, budget, procurement routes, and implementation.
Ecosystem learning/ extension track For inclusive and place-based transformation. The program builds networks, peer learning, and legitimacy for startups that need access to the ecosystem.	**Embedded testbed/colocation track** For deep-tech and science-based innovation. Startups gain access to labs, facilities, users, and a daily informal exchange for experimentation and validation.

Why does this matter?

If policy funds startup programs only through generic acceleration or short-term pilot metrics, it risks supporting startups without changing the systems that block adoption. Transformative innovation requires both directionality and inclusion: startups need to work on mission-relevant problems, while incumbents and public organizations need to become more open, capable, and accountable partners. A well-designed startup development program can therefore become a practical instrument for implementing transformative innovation policy.

WHAT IS THE ROAD AHEAD FOR POLICY?

- Design startup programs around transition missions and public problems, not only around generic entrepreneurship or investment readiness.
- Build tracks that match different needs: challenge-to-pilot, venture-client adoption, ecosystem learning, and testbed or colocation support.
- Open pathways for startups outside elite networks, including regional, social, community-based, and sustainability-oriented ventures.
- Use staged TIP evaluation: early metrics for participation and learning; mid-term metrics for pilots and adoption routes; long-term metrics for diffusion, inclusion, and mission contribution.

Table 2: How to operationalize transformative innovation policy by using matchmaking platforms

TIP principle	Program design implication
Directional problem framing	Co-define the transition challenge with stakeholders. **Output:** a validated challenge brief, not only a theme for a call.
Inclusive portfolio building	Recruit startups, adopters, testbeds, and others around the same mission area. **Output:** a balanced portfolio map.
Protected experimentation	Use pilots, sandboxes, testbeds, and demonstration projects with clear learning milestones. **Output:** evidence about technical fit, user value, and implementation barriers.
Adoption and system building	Connect experiments to venture-client purchasing, public procurement, standards, data access, and scale-up finance. **Output:** a credible route from pilot to use.
Reflexive evaluation and redirection	Review what changed in networks, capabilities, rules, and demand. Use this learning to redesign the next cohort, funding logic, and policy mix. **Output:** a future-oriented learning.

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