What does an entrepreneur support system look like?

Many regions claim that they have a small business support system in place, but, in most cases, these "systems" are simply a loose federation of non-profits and other support providers. A true system links all relevant service providers, operates according to common procedures, and offers a customized and comprehensive set of public and private services for local entrepreneurs. Several characteristics are essential:

- **Common intake procedures**: All local service providers are trained to perform a brief intake and diagnosis of an entrepreneur’s issues and service needs. Thus, when an entrepreneur calls a service provider, she is not given an immediate referral. Instead, her basic information is obtained and entered into the system. At that point, she will be referred to the appropriate local service provider. For example, if her firm is looking for export opportunities, she will be referred to a local expert in that process.

- **Clear referral systems**: Referrals are the cornerstone of the system. The process must be clear to both entrepreneurs and service providers. This requires that service providers explicitly state their specific areas of expertise. They can no longer simply serve all entrepreneurs; they must focus on a specific set of issues or types of businesses. For example, a non-profit might identify its niche as "training entrepreneurs to work with institutional venture capitalists." Effective referrals also mean that providers must understand the system and each organization's role within it.

- **Clear guidelines for entrepreneurs**: As noted above, the system must be understandable to entrepreneurs. They must understand the purpose of the initial diagnostic process and why they have been referred to a certain service provider. Finally, the type and level of support to be provided must be clearly understood.

- **Regular collaboration**: The system will work if the partners effectively collaborate with one another. They must meet on a regular basis, and regularly review how the system is serving local businesses. In addition, service providers must create a single "brand" for the system so that entrepreneurs are supported by the "system" and not by a single service provider. For example, North Carolina has created a single "Business Resource Alliance," Georgia’s service providers have united as the "Georgia Small Business and Entrepreneur Support Network."

Every region must develop its own set of program offerings targeted to the needs of local entrepreneurs. A recent study from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation highlighted some of the key program offerings to be found in comprehensive entrepreneur development systems:

- Entrepreneurship education – including the introduction of entrepreneurship concepts in K-12 and more advanced adult education and training in community colleges, colleges and universities.
- Access to capital – sources of capital to match the financing needs of entrepreneurs at various stages of development, from seed capital to loans to equity.
- Access to networks – opportunities for entrepreneurs to connect with peers and mentors and to form strategic alliances to benefit their businesses.
- Entrepreneurial culture – a culture that recognizes, embraces and celebrates entrepreneurs, creating a place where entrepreneurs choose to live, work and play.