Refugee Centered Solutions
2013 INNOVATION JAM
Knowledge Map

UNHCR INNOVATION

ABOUT THIS KNOWLEDGE MAP

The insights in this Knowledge Map were gathered from the first-ever Humanitarian Innovation Jam: Refugee-Focused Solutions, held on December 5th, 2013 in Washington, DC and co-sponsored by UNHCR Innovation, Georgetown University, and UNICEF Innovation. Participants in the Jam included a diverse group of around 40 practitioners from UN offices, NGOs, academic institutions, governmental agencies and development organizations, who engaged in collaborative discussions that aimed to pinpoint current gaps within the field of humanitarian innovation, sharing good practices and challenges faced and jointly identifying potential strategic priorities or areas of collaboration for 2014.

Overview

"Innovation" has become a slogan and a silver bullet in the humanitarian as well as development realms. Innovation offices and initiatives have been created in many NGOs, government organizations, and UN Agencies, and have become a subject of research and interest in academic institutions and think tanks. Despite the belief that innovative approaches and philosophies are inherently beneficial in humanitarian work, there has not yet been a concerted effort to take a step back and analyse the true impacts of innovation on refugee communities, on organizations themselves, and on the broader world of humanitarian action.

A thorough analysis of our work requires the convening of all corners of this new innovation space - academic, humanitarian, development and eventually private - to consolidate lessons learned, share good practices and discuss common questions and challenges. Taking advantage of the academic setting and hosts, this event was a preliminary opportunity to create the space for a critical, honest, and collaborative conversation amongst like-minded partners for the benefit of refugees and conflict-affected communities.

As this first Humanitarian Innovation Jam was co-sponsored by UNHCR, the conversation was designed to complement thinking on innovations for refugees and forcibly displaced communities. Whilst participants came from a wide array of UN organizations, academic institutions, and humanitarian and development organizations, the diversity of participants allowed the contribution of knowledge and experiences from various fields in the interest of discovering good practices that can be applied to refugee-focused innovations in the future. Subsequent Innovation Jams may be focused on other thematic areas depending on the organizations, institutions, and UN Agencies that decide to cosponsor.

Knowledge Mapping

This knowledge map recognizes and shares the current knowledge of a group of stakeholders and then, through the mapping process, identifies the gaps in thinking and knowledge that still remain.

The mapping exercises conducted during the Jam sought to consolidate the information that is already known – what innovation projects various offices are working on, what actors are engaged, and what the impact has been on affected communities – and to use this foundation to better analyse the fundamental questions of innovation work around the world.

Through group discussions and thematic breakouts, the Jam addressed these guiding questions:

- What are current innovation philosophies across organizations? How do the philosophies overlap, and how are they different?

- Are there trends in current innovations, and what can be learned from them?

- How is 'success' defined in humanitarian innovation? On the ground? In organizational cultures? How can impact be measured effectively?

- How can effective partnerships be pursued and created? Should they be pursued?

- How can current innovation practices and thinking be scaled within an organization? Should innovation be scaled?

- How can the self-reliance of the people on the ground be improved? How can beneficiaries – end users – be included in innovation work?

- What best practices have been employed in defining and achieving strategic objectives?

The knowledge map that follows captures current good practices and also highlights the shared challenges that are faced in each of these areas.

Participants at the Innovation Jam at Georgetown University – December 5.

INNOVATION PHILOSOPHIES FOR HUMANITARIAN ACTORS

Innovation means different things to different organizations and people. However, discussions throughout the Jam yielded a consensus on innovation philosophies that apply at the organizational level for practitioners operating in different contexts and with different goals. Collectively, these innovation philosophies represent a snapshot of the core principles that guide the work done by participants in the Jam.

This list is by no means exhaustive, but rather captures the trends and priorities of the innovation field at the time of the Jam.

Innovation should be data-driven. Innovations should be field-tested, evidence-based and iterated. Best practice points to the importance of leveraging the power of data to measure and subsequently modify innovations, but there is room for growth and development in the monitoring and evaluation of innovation projects. Innovation should create or shorten the feedback loop so as to better inform modifications and future iterations.

The best innovations are scalable and replicable. This being said, it is always important to keep in mind different local contexts – with local iterations occurring after a testing phase

Innovations should be transparent and openly communicated. It is important to work transparently and "out loud." Innovation cannot be done in the dark. Rather, it should be shared with all interested parties and relevant stakeholders.

Design should be driven by the user. Innovations should involve users and be demand or needs driven. Innovators should be building their projects with the end users involved or at the heart of the design. In the humanitarian sector, innovations should include user communities in all aspects – from defining the challenge through to designing the solution.

Innovations do not necessarily need to be novel. Novelty is not an outcome; the final goal of any innovation should be an improved system, service, product or method. Innovations can and should adopt or adapt methods from one sector to another. The application of existing tools and good practices to a new context can lead to exciting solutions. Additionally, innovation can build on existing solutions to further improve the end product and process.

Collaboration is key. There are many different types of collaboration, each with their own opportunities, challenges, and styles. A diversity of perspectives can deliver better end results. Good practices and lessons learned demonstrate that picking partners carefully and planning for scale at the beginning of partnerships can result in better innovations.

Innovation is more than technology. Innovation is not synonymous with technology, and not every solution needs to have a technical component. Innovations can occur through new processes, products, systems, and cultural shifts.

The acceptance of failure is a necessary pre-condition of innovation. In order to develop new methods and systems, the space must be created for the possibility of failure and to benefit from learning from mistakes. It is always best to take risks early to learn quickly from failed prototypes – and also to ensure that the appropriate research was done ahead of time to learn from previous mistakes.

Good innovation initiatives can eventually create a culture of innovation within organizations or operations. True innovation breaks silos. This entails incorporating change principles and change management into policy, encouraging continuous learning, and allowing dissent. In many cases, instilling a culture of innovative thinking in an organization can necessitate a fundamental shift in approaches and mindsets.

Innovators must be agile. Flexibility is crucial to innovation. The ability to adapt and learn in new circumstances and under difficult conditions is a necessity in all humanitarian work – and is even more important when trying to use new processes or products. Innovators should be willing to tolerate risk in new ventures and to adapt to non-ideal circumstances.

Identifying organizational philosophies.

PRIORITY THEMES

Through brainstorming and discussion exercises, participants in the Jam identified five themes that they deemed challenges in their present work and complementary to their strategic objectives for the following year. These specific themes emerged from a prioritization exercise and represent some shared concerns of participating organizations in their approaches to innovation.

They include:

1. Building Effective Partnerships
2. Measuring Impact and Success
3. Developing Strategic Direction
4. Scaling
5. Inclusive Approaches to Innovation

Theme 1: Building Effective Partnerships

There is increasing awareness of the need for more integration across humanitarian and development spheres, as well as for better learning across these sectors.

New forms of partnerships between donors and organizations can create closer relationships, leading to longer term funding streams, direction, mentorship, and external expertise.

Collaboration with the private sector and governments is also increasing, and should continue to do so, based on an understanding of sometimes-divergent goals and motivations and with knowledge of and respect for humanitarian principles.

However, a continuing challenge is the identification of who does what. Questions around who to include in partnerships and what their roles should be continue to arise. A systematic recognition of the capacity of partners who may be able to affect change in a meaningful way is still lacking. Thoughtful consideration should be given to non-traditional partners; for example, the variety of potential opportunities from universities, private sector foundations, and individuals working for corporate institutions.

Documentation and the institutionalization of research and best practices should be improved. While the process of innovation in different projects is being documented to some extent, successes, failures, and road blocks should be further mapped and recorded- during the process as well as afterwards. Failed partnerships should be examined and learned from, while working partnerships should be shared and better

understood. Universities have been key in documenting these successes and failures in the past.

The logistics of working with multiple organizations and donors remain a challenge. Consideration for who is executing a partnership and how the collaboration is designed and driven will ensure better expectation management in the long run.

Flexible funding can allow for more flexible programming. Flexible funding has proven helpful to several of the participating organizations, as it allows for more agile and collaborative projects.

"Resilience" of beneficiary communities has become a shared goal of both the humanitarian and development sphere. This shared goal could be used to bring development and humanitarian actors closer together, allowing for better exchanges of ideas and flows of information. This collaboration could also create initiatives that better respond to landscape changes and attract common donors.

Theme 2: Measuring Impact and Success

In order to measure the impact of innovation, it is important to first define the goals of innovation. Innovation can mean different things to different people and organizations. Thus, defining the goals of innovation is a necessary precursor to accurate monitoring and evaluation of the success of innovation projects. It can be complicated to establish clear-cut and consistent objectives; measure them effectively; and clearly document and communicate the results. Early and clear articulation of what success means in a specific organization or project can help manage perceptions and expectations.

Agreement on metrics and common metrics can help to better codify and consolidate good practices in innovation work. Different organizations have created different frameworks and metrics to measure success, making it difficult for comparisons across organizations or sectors. Agreement across organizations can lead to better monitoring and evaluation practices.

Measuring the impact of innovation must also take into account unexpected or unintended outcomes, as well as ripple effects of innovation. Success and impact can occur outside the direct outcome of a project, through the eventual embedding of innovative thinking into processes, new measures being introduced, and new partners being brought into the conversation. These benefits can affect the change management process itself and can engender a cultural shift in approach to solving problems. In the end, innovation should not be an end itself but rather a process of gradual improvement in how an organization delivers on its mission.

Measuring and testing for impact in humanitarian innovation can encounter several issues. Measurements should be rigorous and scientific, but issues such as keeping variables apart, attribution and causation, and multivariate outputs complicate monitoring and

evaluation efforts. Randomized control tests can create ethical dilemmas, as some communities are given services while others are not.

Theme 3: Developing Strategic Direction

Innovation is at a crossroads. Innovation is occurring in a number of disparate, as well as complementary, directions. Agreed-upon key principles and an outline for innovation in the humanitarian sphere can potentially lead to an easier path for collaboration, support and better informed partnerships.

The innovation process is as important as the outcome. The best outcomes occur when the strategic vision of innovation work is consistently kept in mind. The goals of innovation should be identified during strategy and project development, but should also allow for fluidity in the process.

Labs have proven to be a useful model (but can come in many forms). Labs - whether they are thematic, virtual, or physical – can provide a safe space for experimentation, allow for better focus and provide an avenue for inter-agency cooperation. Physical or virtual labs can also become a hub of creativity, where innovators can share and collaborate on ideas.

Prioritization of challenges is a difficult necessity. Innovators, often faced with limited resources, must have a clear understanding of their priorities and thematic orientation and be willing to make tough decisions. Moreover, those who are tasked with 'innovating' within an organization must be aware that they may not have the full perspective of the challenges and opportunities driving innovation in the field, and must be open to disruptive and iconoclastic ideas.

Theme 4: Scaling

Scale is not yet well defined. The goals of scaling need to be articulated and discussed, to ensure that scaling is not achieving growth only for the sake of growth. The reasons for scaling a particular project must be defined and clarified early in the process.

A gap exists in between the pilot and scaling stage. Stakeholders should define criteria by which a pilot is mature enough to be scaled.

Considerations for scaling should include demographic and geographic factors, and an understanding of the characteristics of different environments. Demonstrating cost effectiveness is an important metric when deciding to scale a project; resources should not be spent on a project that cannot scale sustainably.

It is important to understand partners and the diverse goals they may have for scaling. For instance, government partners require different outcomes and analysis than community-based partners; all partners require a certain degree of expectation management.

Scaling can also be an experimental and iterative process. Some things may work on a large scale but not on a smaller scale, and vice versa. Scaling involves innovation at several levels in an organization, and depends on people and cultural factors as much as on logistical or budgetary limitations.

When scaling a particular model, community buy-in, both in the design of the scaling as well as throughout the process, is key to success. The broader the buy-in, the more the likelihood of successful scaling is increased.

Theme 5: Inclusive Approaches to Innovation

Developing an inclusive approach to innovation entails bringing in community opinions and placing the users at the centre of design from the beginning of the process.

Good ideas can come from anywhere. Solutions can be crowd sourced from all around the world and can originate from diverse locations and stakeholders. Innovation ultimately comes from people, not organizations.

Organizational cultures can create challenges to fostering inclusive approaches. Incentives within organizations should encourage a focus on the user throughout project design, but currently many systems do not. There can be pressure to quickly implement projects rather than taking the time to reach out to user communities.

Structural problems can also create challenges in inclusivity. Funding streams may be rigid and do not often allow for the risk of failure. Programming cycles and budgeting can also make inclusive approaches difficult.

Listening is key. We do not always fully understand the populations we work with and for. To move forward, innovators should listen, better and more carefully, to the populations that we work with and meaningfully involve these populations in identifying challenges and sourcing solutions.

CONCLUSION: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR GROWTH

Defining success remains a challenge. A dearth of assessment tools, and a lack of agreement on indicators of success, makes monitoring and evaluation of innovation difficult for organizations. Measuring the efficacy of innovations in serving the end-users is fraught with complications; there is a need for additional research in this field. Additionally, success is often in the eye of the beholder; these different definitions can limit scaling across organizations or with new partners.

Funding remains a perennial challenge. The particularities of innovation – with its consistent pursuit of new approaches and need for flexibility—makes traditional funding difficult, and could make separate or protected budgets the most appropriate funding option in some instances. Organizations like the Humanitarian Innovation Fund and others are taking the first steps to solve these issues.

A lack of documentation of successful processes makes it difficult to refer back to best practices. There is a significant opportunity for organizations and innovators to learn from each other, but more and better documentation is required. Better codification and a common language of understanding across disciplines and sectors would allow for more collective learning.

Additionally, lack of due diligence can lead to unnecessary failures. Projects may not take into account similar initiatives in the past and the reasons they were not successful. This lack of research can lead to wasted time and money for an organization, and a disenchanted user population.

Innovation occurs across systems, processes and products. It is not just knowledge sharing and information sharing, but process sharing. Leadership can be valuable in promoting this sharing through an organization; however, it requires buy-in from all levels of the hierarchy.

AREAS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

A common set of innovation indicators could be extremely useful for improved monitoring and evaluation of innovation work in the humanitarian and development fields. What can these indicators look like and how can we collectively agree on such a set of indicators? How can they capture the multivariate nature of innovation?

What does it mean to scale? What is the purpose of scaling? What techniques exist to improve the transition from pilot to "scale"? There are frameworks in place at various organizations for scaling up, but there has not been a comprehensive evaluation or comparative review of these varied approaches.

In building effective partnerships, how can we best incorporate the private sector further, and whom should we innovate with? Opportunities for further private sector partnerships exist, but how can and should humanitarian and development organizations best work with the private sector?

How can innovation successfully be mainstreamed into humanitarian action? How would this change the humanitarian sphere?

How can diverse innovation initiatives in different organizations work in complementary ways? What opportunities are there for collaboration?

Participants discuss good practices at the Innovation Jam.

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If you have questions or comments,

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