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Transformation through Innovation

Pre-Consultation Briefing Note for the Europe and Others Group Consultation

The purpose of this pre-consultation briefing paper is to stimulate discussions at the World Humanitarian Summit Regional Consultation for the 'Europe and Others' group in Budapest on February 3 and 4, 2015.

This initial briefing paper has been prepared by the Regional Steering Group and will be followed up by a more detailed background paper closer to the regional consultation in Budapest. The discussions are expected to provide perspectives and recommendations in the lead up to the World Humanitarian Summit in Istanbul in May 2016.

This paper posits that the humanitarian sector should adopt a clear, open and systematic sector-wide approach to innovation. This would help to ensure that the sector can effectively adapt to social, economic and environmental changes, continually improve outcomes, and harness the potential of innovations to create positive system wide impactdisaster hotspots ("intensive risk"), which is even more difficult and expensive to efficiently manage.

Innovation is commonly understood to be a dynamic process of change and improvement. The Transformation Through Innovation Thematic Team uses the following definitions for innovation:

- Doing things better or in new ways
- Fresh thinking that creates value (recognizing the need for new



but also focusing on the impact)

- Creative problem solving (recognizing that it is not just about novelty but results/benefits)
- Process for adaptation and improvement
- New models that realize breakthroughs

Innovation often works in a four step process, as outlined in the diagram below:



Based on Tidd and Bessant (2013), the products of this innovation process can take various forms:

- Product innovation: introduces or improves a product or service
- Process innovation: how products are created or delivered
- Position innovation: changes how a product or process is perceived
- Paradigm innovation: change on an organizational or system level

In practice, innovation is therefore not simply about new technologies or inventions, but also the creation and adaption of new products, processes and positions - often in combination – to solve problems.

Humanitarian action is a process of constant creative problem-solving. The number of people requiring international humanitarian assistance has increased significantly over the last decade and the financial resources available to assist have not kept pace. Global shifts in power and trends like climate change, population growth and urbanization must be taken into account. New actors must be involved in decision-making and new partnerships must be leveraged. These challenges, however, can also inhibit creativity and experimentation due to the need to be as effective as possible with finite resources. This results in the strengthening of existing practices and norms rather than innovation.

The humanitarian sector needs to identify new tools, products and services to respond to more complex operating environments and needs. Based upon our limited capacity we also need to focus on adapting existing resources and tools to meet current and future needs. This paper therefore argues that the humanitarian system needs to adopt a clear, open, inclusive and systematic sector-wide approach to

innovation, founded on strong institutional leadership and committed resources. Some humanitarian organizations have set up innovation 'labs' or 'units' as well as funds to incentivize staff and partners to develop, test and share innovations. Without a comprehensive approach to innovation, however, such positive examples remain mainly focused on small scale projects or specific organizational mandates, and the potential for the cross fertilization of ideas and system-wide impact remain limited.

Areas for discussion

The regional consultations are excellent opportunities to identify key challenges in the humanitarian sector that could benefit from an innovation focus, and ways to make the sector more innovation friendly. It is a chance to reflect on questions like: what systems do we need in place to identify, develop, and implement innovative solutions (ie do we have the necessary infrastructure, including funding and expertise, to support rigorous problem identification and idea generation processes, evaluations, etc)? How can the humanitarian system accelerate the uptake of proven innovations and capture the benefits from them?

As participants reflect on these topics they should take into account their links to cross cutting issues such as gender; vulnerable groups, including children, the elderly and people with disabilities; and the environment. The Transformation Through Innovation theme should also not be considered in isolation from the other WHS themes. The innovation process could help to identify more effective ways to build national capacity, determine different approaches to manage and mitigate disaster risk, and find novel ways to meet the needs of people in conflict zones.

1) Problem identification

To focus our efforts, we need to identify the key areas where innovative approaches could have a significant impact on humanitarian work. These areas could be sectorial (ie WASH, shelter, etc), managerial/process focused (ie do staff have the time and support to try new projects?), or require a regional approach. The process of problem identification should be question-led rather than solution-driven. It should also leave room for the unexpected, as not all aspects of innovation can be pre-planned. Here are a few examples of key challenges to potentially discuss:

- **Partnership building and collective, inclusive innovation processes:** Partnership management is a common problem in humanitarian action. Pressure for quick results creates a tendency to ignore local capacity, and the potential partners who do exist may also be few in number or lack technical capacity. In many cases, the partnerships that do happen are just sub-contractor relationships. Innovative approaches and products created by affected populations are frequently overlooked, and there is insufficient collaboration between humanitarian and development actors. To address these bottlenecks, the humanitarian community needs new approaches to partnerships. This is particularly important if the humanitarian sector aims to establish an open and inclusive approach to innovation. Open innovation is important to build ownership and trust in a decentralised system and capture 'bottom-up' approaches. It furthermore helps humanitarians to adopt innovations from outside the usual humanitarian partnerships. Innovation processes in the humanitarian system will therefore require the engagement of all organizational levels and stakeholders, including crisis-affected communities who are often innovators themselves or the 'end-users' of innovation in humanitarian aid. Related issues include:
 - Do we have the right mix of partners (ie the diaspora, private sector, scientists, researchers, etc) to deal with today's humanitarian challenges? Are there potential partners we should be talking to? Do we have the right platforms and networks to facilitate the partnerships we

need?

- How can humanitarian actors draw on local resources, expertise and networks to support local partners and capacity building? How do we ensure that “non traditional” partners understand humanitarian principles? How do we encourage non-traditional actors to ‘adopt’ the problems we have identified in the humanitarian sector and invest their time and resources in solving them?
- How can innovation improve accountability, programme effectiveness, and the ability of affected populations to identify their requirements, access assistance, and claim their rights? This could be through innovations like improved needs assessments, enhanced programme monitoring, technology, cash versus in-kind assistance, etc.
- How can we better adapt and integrate innovative measures to local contexts?
- How can we foster a more open mindset towards information sharing? What are the implications of open data, including issues of legality and access?

- **Building organizational structures that enable innovation:** The innovation cycle is a long, challenging process that needs to be innovative itself in order to efficiently produce desirable outcomes. We should therefore take a deeper look at operational and organisational obstacles to humanitarian innovation and be frank about the limitations different actors have. One major challenge is that actors define innovation is differently. Without a common approach, actors often mistakenly associate innovation with technology, rather than a rigorous problem solving process. Validating ideas through individual pilots is also not enough. The humanitarian sector often fails to directly compare different innovations and scale up the successful ones. Scaling will require negotiation and leadership underpinned by innovation management approaches. Moderation and standard setting will also be needed to help actors decide which innovative solutions should be taken to scale. Related issues include: How can we foster a culture that embraces innovation? Are people, including affected populations, donors, and humanitarian staff, financially and institutionally supported to come up with new ideas and test them out? Are they encouraged to learn from people working in different fields? Do we have the right skills in our organizations to innovate?

- What principles should underpin cross-sectorial innovation for humanitarian response?
- How do we move beyond conducting individual pilots to rigorously comparing projects, identifying the most effective ones, and scaling them?
- How can innovation projects decrease expenses while improving impact?
- What policymaking and organizational lessons that can be drawn from recent behavioral and social science research? The 2015 World Development Report (WDR) explores how social contexts, norms, and biases shape individual decision making. For instance, in a highly complex and fast moving environment humanitarian workers may be overloaded with information and unconsciously rely on biases or rules of thumb to guide their decisions. How can we frame the choices available to humanitarian workers to help them deal with information overload, counter biases, and ultimately make it easier to make better, more innovative decisions?

- **Creating the space for responsible risk and failure:** Humanitarian organizations are generally risk averse. They have little incentive to invest their limited budgets in risky projects that may fail

to give them value for money. There are also ethical questions involved, as failures may have dire consequences for the health, safety and dignity of the vulnerable populations that humanitarian organizations often work with. Humanitarian organizations need to find a way to take risks responsibly, so they can try out new approaches without harming beneficiaries. Alternatively, humanitarian organizations need to learn how to better communicate the scope of a problem and engage others to work on it. Related issues include:

- How can we incentivize donors and humanitarian and non-humanitarian organizations to engage in more responsible risk taking and the testing of new and potentially very beneficial approaches, products, etc?
- How can we ensure that failures do not harm the health, safety or dignity of beneficiaries?
- What is the role of partnerships and coordination in responsible risk taking and failure?
- Are there adequate guidelines and ethical standards in place to clearly identify what risks are acceptable and which are not when implementing new projects?
- How can we foster a more open mindset towards sharing information on and learning from failed projects?
- Is there adequate financing available to support new, smaller scale, riskier (but potentially highly innovative and high impact) projects?

- **Building evidence and the 'long-term' into humanitarian action:** The humanitarian sector is often focussed on the immediate - getting the core life-saving and protection mandate delivered as we are best able with the resources we have. One over-arching point for reflection is how to build in 'foresight' work and long-term opportunities to make change. Related issues include:
 - Do we need different funding and/or organizational structures to in order to successfully take a long-term approach to innovation and change? How can we more effectively include local actors and capacity building in long term strategies?
 - How do we institute systematic reflection and evaluations that consider the impact/effectiveness of humanitarian innovation programmes/policies?
 - How can lessons drawn from longer term 'foresight' and evaluation processes be integrated into immediate crisis responses, and vice versa?

2) The way forward

What are potential barriers to adopting innovative processes and approaches? Barriers could include:

- A mismatch of skills and challenges – those who have the appropriate expertise may not work in the humanitarian sector
- Staff do not have the time, resources, or general support to analyze what problems or systemic constraints innovation may be able to address
- Insufficient connections between humanitarian action and broader development work
- A reluctance to engage with and learn from “non-traditional” partners
- Fear of unintended/unpredictable negative consequences from piloting new programmes, approaches, products, etc.

Some of the issues likely to be explored in greater depth in the Europe and Others consultation include:

1. What are the areas of humanitarian action where innovative approaches could have significant positive impact?
2. How can donors, governments and humanitarian organizations be incentivized to engage more in responsible risk-taking and the testing of new and potentially beneficial approaches and products?
3. Beyond financial support, what other measures would systematically enhance innovation in humanitarian response?
4. Participants to the WHS regional consultations in Abidjan, Tokyo and Pretoria called for humanitarians to forge innovative partnerships with the private sector. How could this recommendation be taken from rhetoric to reality?
5. What are the principal barriers to innovation in humanitarian action (from generating ideas to scaling them up), in particular in bringing together different actors and sectors that could contribute to innovations, and how can these barriers be overcome?
6. How can the innovative potential in affected people, communities and countries be better harnessed in humanitarian preparedness and response? How can these actors with innovative ideas and practices better link up with the humanitarian system?

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