

HUMANITARIAN INNOVATION FORUM 2025

11-13 February 2025 | Nairobi, Kenya



FORUM INSIGHTS

Localisation and power dynamics: Rewriting the centre of gravity in humanitarian innovation

There is a paradox at the heart of humanitarian innovation. For all our rhetoric about community-driven change, and the ingenuity and solutions that rise from within them, the gravitational centre of power remains largely unmoved. Decisions are still made in global capitals. Funding flows are still tangled in conditionalities. "Local" continues to be a descriptor rather than a seat of authority. Innovation too often reproduces the very hierarchies it claims to disrupt.

At the Humanitarian Innovation Forum 2025, the theme of Localisation and power dynamics became more than a topic; it became a reckoning. Participants brought lived experiences, historical memory, and an urgent sense that the current system is not merely inefficient—it is structurally unjust. The goal was not only to highlight barriers, but to imagine, test, and begin building the mechanisms that will transfer power in meaningful, enduring ways.

The fracturelines

Three fractures emerged in the dialogues. The first is access to funding. Local innovators spoke candidly about exclusionary application processes, unclear timelines, and the absence of feedback when they are not selected. They described systems designed around the needs of large international actors, not the cash flow realities or institutional profiles of local entrepreneurs. The second fracture is linguistic and epistemic. The very word "innovation" has become contested, a term many feel is imposed, disconnected from the problem-solving traditions and practices already flourishing in local contexts. The third fracture is in the valuation of knowledge. Local insights remain under-recognized, under-documented, and under-funded.

And yet, there was consensus that there is momentum for change.

Flipping the lens: From tokenism to ownership

Across the dialogue, a new narrative emerged: one that framed local innovation not as a desirable add-on but as the foundation of legitimacy and impact. Participants called for an inversion of default roles. Local actors should lead; international actors should follow or support. Local innovators should not be consulted; they should be in charge of design and implementation. This shift demands more than goodwill. It requires structural rewiring.

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Innovators described ways to support creativity at the source: milestone-based payments that allow local actors to define their own cash flow needs; large initial disbursements that give breathing room instead of drip-fed instalments; fellowships that invest in people, not just projects. They also spoke of the need for horizontal support systems—spaces where innovators mentor each other, share contextualised tools, and convene across geographies without having to translate their experience into the language of donors.

Reimagining legitimacy

One of the most radical ideas to emerge was a call to stop using the term "innovation" altogether. In its place: problem solving, creativity, unsolved challenges. This semantic shift is not trivial. It is a direct challenge to the gatekeeping that occurs when terminology becomes a filter ideas to be taken seriously.

Reclaiming legitimacy also means broadening what counts as evidence. It means funding the testing of local knowledge, creating platforms to broadcast it, and designing internal learning spaces within organisations that are centred on it. Legitimacy is no longer something to be bestowed by external validation. It is rooted in lived experience, in proximity to the problem, and in a willingness to act with persistence, kindness, and courage.

The work ahead: Mechanisms for power transfer

The most resonant call to action was not a policy demand, but a posture: to be tireless, persistent, bold, kind, and human in shifting power to the problem-holders. That means pushing for contracting arrangements that centre equity and flexibility. It means advocating for feedback loops that treat local innovators as peers, not applicants. It means simplifying what has been made unnecessarily complex.

But it also means recognising that this is not merely about localising delivery. It is about redistributing power. That requires risk. It requires stepping back so others can step forward. It requires global actors to ask, constantly: "How do we get out of the way?"

Recommended actions

1. **Transform funding systems to reflect local realities**
Simplify application processes, communicate clear disbursement timelines, and ensure large

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initial payments at the point of contract signing. Allow local innovators to define milestone-based payment schedules based on their cash flow needs. Offer constructive feedback to unsuccessful applicants, and pilot financing pots that enable short-term borrowing to bridge disbursement delays.

2. **Support individual local entrepreneurs beyond project metrics**
Establish humanitarian innovation fellowships that focus on the long-term development of local entrepreneurs rather than short-term project outputs. Provide flexible funding that enables experimentation, reflection, and the building of pathways toward sustained change.
3. **Reframe language and legitimacy to elevate local knowledge**
Move away from using the term “innovation” and instead embrace language that centres on problem solving and local creativity. Fund the testing and documentation of local knowledge, and create platforms for broadcasting context-specific solutions. Host internal learning spaces to ensure local knowledge is recognised, applied, and scaled.
4. **Enable horizontal, peer-based support systems**
Facilitate local innovator-to-innovator learning by convening national and regional communities of practice. Invest in established in-country trainers to deliver contextually relevant mentoring and capacity-building efforts.
5. **Redesign contracting and due diligence to suit local actors**
Reform traditional grant structures to allow for more equitable, flexible contracting that responds to local innovators’ needs. Rethink due diligence and vetting processes to reduce barriers for local actors while maintaining accountability.
6. **Advocate relentlessly for equitable partnerships and power transfer**
Use collective social capital to push for partnership models that position local innovators in the lead—not just as implementing partners. Acknowledge power imbalances rooted in humanitarian history and commit to tireless, persistent, bold, and kind advocacy to shift authority to those closest to the problem.

The shift has already begun. The question is no longer whether localisation should happen, but whether those with the most power are willing to let go of enough control to allow it. The humanitarian innovation ecosystem must rise to this challenge—not with slogans, but with systems that make it real.