

HUMANITARIAN INNOVATION FORUM 2025

11-13 February 2025 | Nairobi, Kenya



FORUM INSIGHTS

Pilot to practice: Escaping the Valley of Death in humanitarian innovation

For all the ingenuity on display in humanitarian innovation, there remains an uncomfortable truth: most pilots don't scale. Ideas flourish briefly in microcosms, only to falter when confronted with the realities of institutional integration, long-term financing, or systemic inertia. The sector has no shortage of creativity; what it lacks is the infrastructure to carry that creativity into durable practice.

At the Humanitarian Innovation Forum 2025, the "From pilot to practice" dialogue addressed this challenge head-on. What emerged was not just a catalogue of obstacles, but a collective sense that the very way we think about scale and, most importantly, success needs to be reimaged.

The problem with pilots

Participants were forthright: the pilot model, as currently practiced, is broken. Innovations are often designed to demonstrate novelty rather than viability. Donor funding prioritises quick wins over deep adaptation. Implementation happens in isolation, with little regard for existing systems or long-term fit. And when pilots conclude, the burden of scale is left to those least equipped to bear it—often small teams or local actors without the backing of institutional champions.

The so-called "Valley of Death" is not a metaphor. It is a structural gap—between proof-of-concept and systemic uptake, between innovation teams and operational ownership, between initial grants and sustainable funding models. Unless we design with this gap in mind from the outset, even the most promising solutions will struggle to survive.

Designing for scale from the start

One of the most resonant ideas to emerge from the session was this: scaling is not an afterthought. It is a design principle. Innovations need to be developed with their future context in mind, including the operational environments, user behaviours, financing realities, and organisational cultures that will ultimately shape their fate.

This requires more than vision. It requires innovation management. Participants explored how structured approaches borrowed from systems thinking (holistic views, lifecycle focus), business modelling, and adaptive leadership (embracing complexity, learning from failure) can be adapted for the humanitarian context. They called for clear innovation pathways that define the lifecycle from ideation to integration.

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These pathways must be supported by mentors, metrics, and mechanisms that help innovators navigate complexity without losing direction.

Finance as an enabler—not a bottleneck

A central theme was the mismatch between the funding available for early-stage pilots and the lack of support for scale. The sector is flush with innovation seed funding, but it thins out dramatically when ideas need to move beyond experimentation. Participants stressed the need for blended finance models that combine philanthropic, public, and private capital to de-risk innovation while building long-term sustainability.

Innovators also need strategic support to position their work for investment. This includes help with articulating value propositions, understanding cost-per-outcome metrics, and crafting narratives that resonate with diverse funders. Importantly, financing for scale should be accompanied by risk appetite—an acknowledgment that not all innovations will succeed, but that failure is part of the path to transformation.

Beyond scale: The case for optimum impact

A critical provocation at the Forum challenged the assumption that scaling always means expanding reach. What if success was not about going bigger, but going deeper? Participants were introduced to the concept of “optimum scale”—where an innovation is embedded in systems in a way that is contextually appropriate, user-owned, and sustainable over time.

This reframe invites a shift from replication to integration. Rather than transplanting models across settings, it calls for a deeper understanding of what adoption means—how change happens within institutions, how frontline staff take up new tools, how incentives align or clash. Ultimately, the goal is not ubiquity, but relevance.

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Recommended actions

- 1. Design for responsible scaling from the outset**
Support innovators to plan for adoption, organisational integration, and user fit from the earliest stages. This includes embedding scale into the design process and ensuring that solutions are context-sensitive and adaptable rather than reliant on linear replication.
- 2. Build a strategic mentoring ecosystem**
Establish a comprehensive support system that guides innovators through every phase of their journey—from ideation to scale. This includes mentorship on funding access, partnership transitions, and responsible scaling practices.
- 3. Strengthen innovation management and organisational readiness**
Develop structured innovation lifecycle models that include coaching, milestone planning, and adaptive metrics. Equip both innovators and institutions with the capacity to navigate complexity and maintain strategic alignment through the scaling process.
- 4. Improve impact measurement and data transparency**
Standardise how success is measured, share findings openly (including cost-per-outcome data), and create sector-wide mechanisms for learning. Ensure data is used not just for accountability, but as a tool for adoption, adaptation, and trust-building.
- 5. Reform financing mechanisms for scale**
Donors should increase their risk appetite and provide financing models that go beyond pilot stages. This includes pooled funds, outcome-based funding, and blended capital. Financial flows should be timely, flexible, and ethically grounded in learning from both success and failure.
- 6. Support innovators to communicate value and attract investment**
Provide targeted support to help innovators articulate their financial models, value propositions, and impact potential. Donors and agencies should actively guide smaller innovators on how to access financing for growth.
- 7. Collaborate openly across the funding and adoption ecosystem**
Donors and implementers must coordinate more intentionally by pooling resources, sharing best practices and failures, and increasing transparency about what gets funded and why. This creates conditions for sector-wide scaling rather than piecemeal expansion.

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8. **Align procurement and policy environments with innovation goals**

Encourage coherence between donors, INGOs, and governments in procurement and regulatory policies. Build market-shaping frameworks and incentive structures that reward impact, user-centred design, and the solving of fundamental community needs.

9. **Build capacity through technical support and coaching**

Ensure innovators have access to technical advice and capacity-building opportunities. This includes tailored coaching that builds their ability to scale responsibly, communicate effectively, and sustain operations over time.

The road from pilot to practice is not linear. It is iterative, uncertain, and often longer than anyone expects. But if we can redesign our systems to anticipate that journey—to support it, finance it, and walk it collectively—we can finally realise the transformative potential of humanitarian innovation. Not in the abstract, but in practice.