

HUMANITARIAN INNOVATION FORUM 2025

11-13 February 2025 | Nairobi, Kenya



Provocation Paper for Structured Discussions

From Pilot to Practice

Theme Overview

Innovators in the humanitarian sector face a critical challenge: escaping the "Valley of Death" where promising pilot projects fail to scale and sustain impact. The journey from pilot to practice is fraught with obstacles, particularly in the low-resource and high-risk environments where we tend to operate where commercial business model blueprints tend to fail. Despite the abundance of pilot initiatives, few become embedded in organisational operations or achieve system-wide change.

How can we reimagine innovation management to address this gap? What principles and frameworks can guide organisations to effectively transition from proof-of-concept to scalable, lasting impact? Moreover, how do we overcome the financial barriers inherent in scaling innovation within a sector defined by volatile principal-agent dynamics?

This theme aims to explore these questions through two interrelated tracks: enhancing innovation management models and addressing the persistent challenge of financing for scale.

Framing the Challenge

Problem Statement: Despite an abundance of promising pilots, the humanitarian sector struggles to transition innovations into scalable, sustainable practices. This issue stems from fragmented innovation management approaches and a lack of effective financing models, leaving many transformative ideas stranded in the "Valley of Death."

Why It Matters: Moving beyond proof-of-concept is essential for addressing systemic challenges in humanitarian assistance. Scaling innovations is not merely about expanding reach, it is also about depth and embedding new practices into organisational frameworks to achieve equitable, lasting impact. Without solutions to the twin challenges of innovation management and financing, the sector risks stagnation.

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Discussion Prompts

Supporting effective piloting Reframing Innovation Management

Elrha's [recent study on scale](#) highlighted that many humanitarian innovations are not geared for scale due to insufficient consideration of scalability during early development stages. Implementing structured innovation management frameworks can facilitate the transition from pilot to practice. What models have proven effective in bridging the gap from pilot to practice, and how can they be adapted to diverse contexts? As a [recent study by Innovation Norway](#) notes, considering the right business model is another way of planning for scale. What is some best practice we can explore?

Supporting effective piloting

Funding for humanitarian innovation makes up less than one percent of total humanitarian funding, and many call for more significant investment to be made to enable the best solutions to reach scale. At the same time, the sector struggles to compellingly demonstrate the impact that existing funding has had. How can we support an agile approach to piloting and innovation management generally that uses scarce resources more effectively and focusses funding on those ideas with most potential? What strategies have proven effective in implementing iterative, efficient innovation within the humanitarian sector? How can we ensure that scarcity of resources can become a driver, not a hindrance, of creativity?

Financing the Future

Effective collaboration among innovators, funders and implementers is essential to unlock larger and more sustainable sources of finance that will enable scaling. As a recent [ODI brief on Humanitarian Innovative Financing in fragile settings](#) notes, collaboration is key to build a pipeline of investable projects. What are the elements needed in order to build a collaborative pipeline? How can the sector develop robust validation frameworks for 'ready to scale projects' that can attract investment and de-risk scale-up efforts?

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Online conversation highlights

The discussion on scaling innovation in the humanitarian sector began with a fundamental question: does every successful innovation need to scale? For years, scale has been treated as the ultimate marker of success, yet many challenged this assumption, arguing that impact should not always be measured by size or reach alone. Some pointed to the idea of “optimum scale,” where the value of an innovation is assessed based on equity, sustainability, and contextual relevance rather than sheer magnitude. The conversation called for a more nuanced understanding of scale—one that recognises that small, locally embedded solutions can be just as transformative as those that expand across regions.

A key tension emerged around power dynamics in scaling processes. Participants acknowledged that large-scale adoption often favours innovations developed in the Global North, creating barriers for locally driven solutions. If scaling is to be a tool for localisation, then it must shift away from centralised control and instead empower communities to lead and sustain their own innovations. For many, scaling is not just about reaching more people but ensuring that solutions remain viable within local contexts, rather than being imposed from external actors who may not fully understand their complexities.

Sustainability was at the heart of the debate. Scaling is not simply about increasing coverage but about ensuring long-term viability—financially, operationally, and socially. Many voiced concerns that the current funding structures do not support this, as humanitarian innovation is too often dependent on perpetual grants. Without alternative financial models, even the most promising innovations struggle to transition from pilot to lasting impact. Suggestions included government adoption, embedding innovations into existing markets, and exploring revenue models that go beyond traditional donor funding.

The challenges of scaling were not limited to financial constraints. Participants pointed to deeply ingrained systemic barriers, including weak adoption pathways, a lack of viable business models, and resistance to change. The dominant mindset of scaling in the technology sector—where rapid expansion is often prioritised—does not easily translate to the humanitarian field, where scaling requires careful adaptation to different contexts. Unlike commercial markets,

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humanitarian scaling is rarely about competition but about creating the conditions for effective solutions to spread. Yet, many organisations remain more focused on developing their own innovations than on adopting what already works.

Scaling was reframed not as a destination but as an ongoing journey—one that requires different skills and strategies at each stage. Piloting an innovation requires creativity and experimentation, but scaling demands resourcefulness, adaptability, and an understanding of broader systems. Too often, teams lack the support or expertise needed to make this transition. Leadership plays a crucial role in this process, as decision-makers must be willing to embrace scaling as a long-term commitment rather than a one-time push for expansion. Peer-to-peer learning and knowledge-sharing were highlighted as critical tools for navigating this journey, ensuring that organisations learn from each other’s successes and failures.

The conversation also turned to the need for a systemic approach to scaling. Instead of focusing solely on individual innovations, there was a call to address the structural barriers that prevent promising ideas from gaining traction. A more collective approach—leveraging networks of existing solutions rather than working in isolation—could help scale impact more effectively. Safe spaces for sharing failures were also seen as essential, as too much focus on success stories can obscure valuable lessons from innovations that do not reach scale.

Financing was recognised as a crucial enabler of scaling, yet current funding mechanisms often fail to support long-term growth. Participants discussed alternative financial models, such as impact investing, advanced market commitments, and leveraging core assets for sustained revenue generation. Financial sustainability, however, does not always mean profitability; in some cases, it simply requires finding ways to maintain operations with minimal resources while ensuring continued impact.

Measuring success in scaling required a shift in perspective. Rather than focusing on expansion for its own sake, success should be defined by the extent to which innovative approaches diffuse across systems and lead to meaningful change. Fidelity in scaling—ensuring that innovations retain their core value when adapted to new contexts—was seen as just as

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important as reach. Some argued that not all innovations should scale, and even those that do not achieve widespread adoption still contribute valuable learning to the sector.

Moving forward, participants emphasised the need for clearer, context-specific definitions of scale, stronger collaboration to overcome systemic barriers, and a renewed focus on sustainability and equity. By shifting the conversation from “how big can this get?” to “how can this create lasting impact?” the humanitarian sector can move beyond the traditional narrative of scale and toward a more adaptive, inclusive, and effective model of innovation.