

HUMANITARIAN INNOVATION FORUM 2025

11-13 February 2025 | Nairobi, Kenya



Provocation Paper for Structured Discussions

The Right Problems – Building a Unified Vision for the Purpose of Humanitarian Innovation

Theme Overview

The last year has shown us the best and the worst of the humanitarian system – from grassroots organisations leading an effective response in the Horn of Africa to the virtual collapse of the system in Gaza, Sudan and Myanmar. The system is not adapting at the same pace as the needs of the people we aim to serve. What role should innovation play in the face of this? Are we using innovation to solve the right problems in humanitarian assistance? Should humanitarian innovation address the root causes of challenges or merely apply surface-level fixes? Some think humanitarian innovation must be grounded on operations and evolve to balance immediate needs with systemic change. Others believe innovation should be the place where we prepare for the uncertainties of the future by imagining and testing new ways of delivering humanitarian assistance. What role should innovation play in shaping an effective humanitarian ecosystem?

Framing the Challenge

Problem Statement: Humanitarian innovation often lacks a unified purpose, resulting in fragmented efforts that foster unhealthy competition and fail to address systemic issues and prepare for future challenges. Without a clear understanding of how change occurs in the sector and what role innovation should play, innovations risk perpetuating inefficiencies and power imbalances present in the system.

Why It Matters: Addressing today’s grand challenges—climate resilience, sustainability, and trust—requires a collective innovation agenda. The humanitarian sector must rethink its approach to ensure that innovation delivers meaningful, equitable, and sustainable solutions for those most in need.

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Divergent Perspectives

Perspective 1: Innovation as a Tool for Incremental Gains

Some experts argue that the primary role of humanitarian innovation is to generate incremental improvements in efficiency, effectiveness, and responsiveness. For instance, technological tools that streamline aid delivery or improve data collection have had tangible benefits in disaster response scenarios. This perspective emphasises that small, focused innovations can lead to significant cumulative change over time.

Advantages:

- **Feasibility:** Incremental innovations are often easier to fund, test, and scale.
- **Practical Impact:** They provide immediate solutions to pressing problems without requiring major structural overhauls.

Challenges:

- **Limited Scope:** Focusing on incremental gains may neglect systemic issues that require deeper change.
- **Reinforcing Inefficiencies:** Without systemic change, incremental solutions risk perpetuating existing inefficiencies and inequities.

Perspective 2: Innovation as a Space for Systemic Reimagination

Some experts advocate for using humanitarian innovation as a platform to rethink and test entirely new ways of delivering assistance. This approach prioritises transformative change over incremental fixes, viewing innovation as a means to envision and shape the future of humanitarian aid.

Advantages:

- **Visionary Impact:** Enables the sector to have a dedicated space to identify and address root causes and systemic barriers.

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- **Future-Readiness:** Prepares for emerging challenges by developing new capabilities and paradigms.

Challenges:

- **High Risk:** Transformative innovations often require significant resources and carry a greater risk of failure.
- **Resistance to Change:** Radical ideas may face opposition from stakeholders invested in (and benefiting from) the status quo.

Perspective 3: Balancing Incremental and Transformative Innovation

Other experts suggest that humanitarian innovation should not be an either/or choice between incremental and systemic change. Instead, the sector needs to integrate both approaches to address immediate needs while laying the groundwork for future transformation.

Advantages:

- **Comprehensive Impact:** Combines short-term gains with long-term vision.
- **Collaborative Potential:** Encourages agencies to specialize in different depths of innovation, creating a more coherent ecosystem.

Challenges:

- **Resource Allocation:** Balancing investment between incremental and transformative efforts can be complex specially if every agency is pursuing the same sources of funding.
- **Coordination:** Requires a shared vision and strong collaboration across diverse stakeholders.

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Discussion Prompts:

1. **Defining the Purpose:** What is the type of change that humanitarian innovation aim for?
2. **Specialisation vs. Generalisation:** How can different agencies' unique capabilities contribute to a synergetic innovation ecosystem?
3. **Vision for the Future:** What role should humanitarian innovation play in imagining and preparing for future challenges?
4. **Problems of the Future:** What problems should humanitarian innovation focus on? What are some fringe initiatives that are building the future today?
5. **Balancing Efforts:** How do we allocate resources to ensure both immediate needs and long-term transformation are addressed?
6. **Avoiding Inefficiencies:** How can innovation initiatives avoid replicating existing power imbalances and inefficiencies?
7. **What works:** What unique innovation management structures and approaches have been tested and work for incremental and transformative innovation?

Themes covered during the online pre-forum meeting:

In the discussions, a recurring theme emerged—the need to start with the right questions. Before designing solutions, it is crucial to critically examine whether the problems being addressed truly reflect the priorities of those most affected. Many participants challenged the assumption that innovation always originates within structured teams or predefined themes, arguing that some of the most transformative ideas come from outside these formalized spaces. There was a call to scrutinise who gets to define what counts as innovation and whose interests

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are being prioritised in the process. Without this clarity, efforts risk being misaligned with real needs.

A central tension surfaced between addressing immediate operational challenges and pursuing long-term transformation. Some argued for a forward-looking, systemic approach, envisioning the future state of a better humanitarian system and then working backwards to bridge the gap. Others highlighted the urgency of tackling today's most pressing issues while keeping an eye on broader change. The consensus leaned toward a dual strategy—solving urgent problems while investing in innovations that could reshape the system over time.

Local context played a significant role in these conversations. Participants stressed that innovation is not a one-size-fits-all endeavour; what is considered groundbreaking in one region may be irrelevant in another. The needs of communities vary widely, and too often, imported solutions fail to take root because they are disconnected from local realities. There was a strong call to strengthen regional innovation ecosystems, ensuring that solutions emerge from within communities rather than being imposed from outside. This shift, many argued, is essential for fostering long-term sustainability.

Yet, even when the right problems are identified, systemic barriers frequently obstruct progress. Institutional silos, weak feedback loops, and fragmented partnerships were cited as persistent challenges. Innovation often struggles to translate into practice because of power dynamics and misaligned timelines between researchers, funders, and operational actors. Some questioned why, despite widespread agreement on certain needs, many promising solutions remain underutilised. The discussion pointed to the need for a deeper examination of these bottlenecks and the structural reasons behind them.

Another key challenge was aligning innovation efforts with genuine demand. Participants spoke of the disconnect between field-level realities and the priorities set by headquarters or donors. Too often, frontline teams face well-documented challenges that require practical solutions, yet these needs are overlooked in favour of more high-profile, externally driven initiatives. Ensuring that innovation is demand-driven, rather than dictated by external funding cycles or trends, was seen as essential for its long-term viability.

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The conversation also turned to the political dimensions of innovation. Far from being a neutral process, innovation can challenge existing power structures and expose inequities within the humanitarian system. Concerns were raised about the motivations behind many innovation efforts—whether they are genuinely designed for impact or merely serve as public relations tools for donors and organisations. If innovation is to drive meaningful change, it must be honest about these power dynamics and push for solutions that serve communities first.

But how does innovation become embedded in everyday humanitarian work? Participants wrestled with the practicalities of making innovation part of the sector’s DNA. The question arose: should humanitarian professionals, already stretched thin, be expected to lead innovation themselves, or should this work be driven by external experts? While opinions varied, there was broad agreement that innovation must be mission-driven, tied to a clear vision, and free from the competitive pressures that often hinder collaboration. Without shared innovation agendas, organisations risk working in silos, duplicating efforts rather than collectively pushing for meaningful change.

Underlying all these discussions was a recognition that humanitarian innovation must evolve—not as an isolated pursuit, but as an integrated approach that responds to real needs, empowers local actors, and challenges systemic barriers. The sector’s capacity to innovate will depend on its willingness to question existing power structures, rethink what problems it seeks to solve, and ensure that innovation is rooted in the lived experiences of the people it aims to serve.