

HUMANITARIAN INNOVATION FORUM 2025

11-13 February 2025 | Nairobi, Kenya



Provocation Paper for Structured Discussions

The Boring Revolution

Theme Overview

It is a widely known truth that while bold ideas generate excitement, they frequently falter against the rigid operational processes meant to uphold organisational integrity. "The Boring Revolution" challenges us to confront the overlooked but critical role of operational systems in enabling or stifling innovation. Procurement policies, compliance frameworks, and data management—though rarely celebrated—are the bedrock on which successful innovations are built and scaled.

How can we reimagine these operational processes to accelerate, rather than hinder, the pace of change? Can we design systems that balance accountability with agility? Moreover, how can we foster a culture of adoption that recognizes and scales proven solutions, reducing duplication and inefficiency?

This theme explores these questions through three focused tracks: reducing operational friction, leveraging data for learning, and creating frameworks for widespread innovation adoption.

Framing the Challenge

Problem Statement: The humanitarian sector's operational systems—from procurement and compliance to data sharing and adoption—are not designed to support the pace and complexity of today's global challenges. Without reimagining these "boring" processes, the sector will continue to face barriers to scaling and sustaining transformative innovations.

Why It Matters: Addressing the operational bottlenecks within the sector can unlock exponential transformation. By rethinking how systems are designed and used, humanitarian actors can reduce inefficiencies, foster a culture of innovation, and ensure that successful solutions are scaled and adopted more effectively.

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Tracks

(A) Streamlining Operational Systems. Simplifying and modernising procurement, compliance, and legal frameworks is essential for fostering innovation. This perspective focuses on reducing friction and creating flexible systems that uphold accountability while enabling experimentation.

Advantages:

- **Efficiency Gains:** Streamlined processes can save time and resources, allowing innovators to focus on problem-solving rather than bureaucracy.
- **Improved Agility:** Flexible systems enable organisations to adapt quickly to emerging challenges.

Challenges:

- **Resistance to Change:** Long-standing systems are often deeply ingrained and difficult to modify.
- **Balancing Accountability:** Simplifying processes must not compromise transparency and integrity.

(B) Data as a Driver for Learning based innovation. Replication and scaling of successful models requires a stronger evidence base on what works. It is key to improve the way we develop success indicators, collect data against it and share it amongst implementors and funders. Data should be used to identify best practices, prevent repeated failures, and inform decision-making.

Advantages:

- **Enhanced Learning:** Data-driven insights can guide innovation and improve outcomes.
- **Collaboration:** Shared data fosters coordination across organisations, reducing inefficiencies.

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Challenges:

- **Data Silos:** Organisations often guard data, limiting its utility for sector-wide learning.
- **Operationalizing Insights:** Translating data into actionable changes remains a significant hurdle.

(C) Fostering a Culture of Adoption: Adoption of innovations produced by other not for profit agencies as well as commercial actors could be the key to scale. It is time we created frameworks that incentivise the adoption of proven innovations. This includes developing mechanisms such as open-source platforms or creative commons ecosystems to scale validated solutions.

Advantages:

- **Efficiency:** Scaling existing innovations reduces the need to "reinvent the wheel."
- **Impact:** Proven solutions can achieve broader reach and effectiveness.

Challenges:

- **Fragmented Ecosystem:** Lack of coordination among stakeholders can hinder adoption efforts.
- **Valuation Challenges:** Establishing the value of innovations for investment and adoption can be complex.

Discussion Prompts

1. **Reinventing Procurement and Compliance:** What operational bottlenecks most hinder innovation, and how can they be addressed without compromising accountability?

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2. **Data for Coordination:** How can organisations share data more effectively to enhance learning and reduce inefficiencies? What policy changes are needed at the donor level to facilitate this?
3. **Adoption Frameworks:** What incentives or structures could be developed to encourage the adoption of proven innovations across the sector?
4. **Balancing Agility and Accountability:** How can systems be designed to support rapid innovation while maintaining transparency and integrity?
5. **Creative Commons for Innovation:** Could an open-source or shared license model for scaling innovations unlock sector-wide transformation? If so, what would it look like?
6. **Operationalising Learning:** How can organisations ensure that lessons from data collection and MEAL (Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability, and Learning) processes are applied to improve innovation outcomes?
7. **Building a Culture of Innovation:** What strategies can organisations use to embed an entrepreneurial mindset within their support teams?

The following were the main themes discussed during the online pre-Forum conversation:

One of the central conversations revolved around the need to streamline operational systems. Many pointed out that outdated procurement policies, legal frameworks, and compliance requirements often act as bottlenecks rather than enablers of innovation. With a significant portion of humanitarian budgets spent on procurement alone, reforming these processes could unlock enormous potential for efficiency and effectiveness. The challenge is finding a way to maintain accountability while introducing the flexibility needed for experimentation and rapid adaptation.

The discussion also touched on the role of data in shaping an evidence-based approach to innovation. Too often, the sector lacks strong feedback loops to track what works and what doesn't, leading to repeated mistakes and wasted resources. If organisations could improve how

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they collect and share data, they could accelerate the replication of proven models and prevent the reinvention of solutions that already exist. However, data protection concerns and institutional silos continue to create barriers to open knowledge-sharing, highlighting the need for more robust frameworks that encourage collaboration without compromising security.

A recurring theme was the challenge of adoption. While many organisations focus on developing their own branded solutions, there is little incentive to adopt existing innovations from others. This tendency toward internal ownership creates inefficiencies and slows down progress. Some questioned why humanitarian actors continue to prioritise invention over application when donors are more interested in seeing effective solutions implemented, regardless of their origin. There was a strong push for mechanisms that would encourage organisations to embrace external innovations—whether through open-source platforms, shared licensing models, or structured adoption grants designed to reward uptake rather than duplication.

Despite widespread recognition of these systemic barriers, only a handful of participants felt their organisations were truly ‘innovation friendly.’ The conversation shifted to what it actually means to create an environment where innovation can thrive. Some emphasised the importance of fostering a risk-positive culture, where organisations are willing to experiment and iterate without being paralysed by fear of failure. Others pointed to the need for leadership engagement—when senior decision-makers are directly exposed to frontline challenges and emerging solutions, they are far more likely to champion necessary changes at an institutional level.

The tension between incremental improvements and disruptive change also emerged as a key point of debate. Many within the sector, particularly those managing day-to-day operations, favour small, manageable improvements over radical shifts. This reflects a deeper question about vision: where should these incremental changes lead, and how can organisations ensure they are moving toward a shared, transformative goal rather than just optimising for short-term efficiency?

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Looking ahead, participants recognised the importance of moving beyond diagnosing problems toward actionable solutions. Several ideas emerged, including simulations to explore real-world barriers to scaling innovation, structured discussions on different models of innovation governance, and strategies for bridging the gap between headquarters and field-level realities. There was also a call to reframe discussions around incentives—how can funding structures, organisational policies, and leadership priorities be aligned to create an environment where innovation is not just possible, but actively encouraged?

Ultimately, the Boring Revolution is about redefining what success looks like in humanitarian innovation. It is not just about the next big idea, but about ensuring that the systems, processes, and mindsets within organisations are equipped to support and sustain meaningful change. If the sector can shift its focus toward fixing these foundational issues, the impact of innovation could be far greater than any single breakthrough—it could reshape the entire way humanitarian work is done.