

HUMANITARIAN INNOVATION FORUM 2025

11-13 February 2025 | Nairobi, Kenya



Session brief: From pilot to practice

Background

The humanitarian sector is brimming with promising pilot projects, yet many struggle to transition into long-term, scalable solutions. This session, "From pilot to practice," tackles one of the sector's most persistent challenges: **how to move beyond the proof-of-concept stage and embed innovations into organisational and system-wide practices.** Despite the abundance of successful pilots, few manage to escape the so-called "Valley of Death"— where ideas fail to take root due to fragmented innovation management, misaligned incentives, and inadequate financing mechanisms.

Scaling humanitarian innovation is not simply about increasing reach; it requires careful adaptation, long-term financial strategies, and a commitment to embedding solutions within the broader ecosystem.

This dialogue will explore two critical pathways for achieving this:

- 1) **Improving innovation management models**
- 2) **Rethinking financing structures to support sustainable scale**

A major obstacle is the tendency to treat innovation as a one-time project rather than a continuous process that requires structured management. The absence of clear pathways for scaling leads to fragmentation, where promising ideas are tested in isolation but fail to gain institutional traction. Participants in this dialogue will explore real life examples that have bridged this gap, including how organisations can better design for scale from the outset and create adoption pathways that integrate innovations into long-term strategies. Drawing from recent studies, we will also discuss the importance of business model considerations in ensuring that innovations transition beyond donor-dependent models.

Financing remains one of the most significant challenges to scaling. While there is no shortage of funding for new pilots, there is a clear gap in financial mechanisms that support long-term sustainability. This session will explore how new models of humanitarian financing—such as pooled funds, impact investing, and outcome-based funding—can help organisations navigate the complexities of scaling. The discussion will also address how funders and implementers can collaborate to create a pipeline of investable projects, ensuring that innovations ready for scale receive the necessary backing to transition into broader practice.

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Ultimately, this session challenges the conventional wisdom that scale is the ultimate measure of success. Instead, we will explore the idea of "optimum scale"—where impact is defined not just by reach but by depth, sustainability, and local ownership. Rather than prioritising large-scale replication at all costs, we will consider how to embed innovations into existing systems in ways that are contextually relevant and enduring.

By shifting the conversation from short-term experimentation to long-term integration, "From pilot to practice" seeks to discuss the insights, frameworks, and collaborative strategies needed to navigate the complexities of scaling innovation. Whether through reimagining innovation management, creating sustainable financing mechanisms, or fostering a more adaptive approach to scale, this session aims to move the sector beyond proof-of-concept and toward lasting, systemic change.

Discussion

This topic will be explored through two fireside chats and one dialogue.

Day 1: Fireside chat 2	Day 2: Fireside chat 3
What do we collectively know about innovation management - and how does it need to evolve? What models are effective?	What do we know about the problem of scale?
Esther Shaylor, UNICEF Utsav Kharel, Response Innovation Lab Faith Kathoka, World Food Programme	Shirin Maani, Elrha Monicah Nthiga, Independent, formerly of Humanitarian Street Map Justin Labeille, International Rescue Committee Emily Au-Young, Reemi Sarah Kilani, Independent, formerly of Talk to Loop
Moderated by Sian White, Elrha	Moderated by Aru Gurung, Impact 447

The dialogue will be divided into three moments of discussion: **framing**, **ideation** and **action**.

Framing: the facilitator will host a panel where we expect the speakers below to set the scene on the topic. This will be followed by an open discussion, where the audience can contribute insights and questions.

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Day 2: Dialogue 4
<i>How can we frame the problem of financing for scale in relation to available business models, the innovation life cycle of innovation and de-risking options?</i>
<i>Ian Gray, Gray Dot Catalyst Charlotte Badenoch, KOIS Invest James Carey, European Commission Humanitarian Aid Office</i>
<i>Co-facilitated by Accenture Development Partners (Sebastian Rodriguez) and ELRHA (Spencer Huchulak)</i>

Ideation: participants will be divided into different discussion groups to explore potential ways to solve this problem.

Action: participants will be divided into different discussion groups to develop potential pathways for action to design, test and implement some of the solutions ideated during the dialogue.