

HUMANITARIAN INNOVATION FORUM 2025

11-13 February 2025 | Nairobi, Kenya



Session brief: The right problems

Background

Over the past year, we have witnessed both the resilience and the fragility of the humanitarian system. In some places, grassroots organisations have led powerful responses to crises, while in others, systemic failures have resulted in humanitarian collapse. Given the developments of the last weeks in relation to USAID funding, it is difficult to imagine the sector ever going back to the way it was in 2024. This session asks a fundamental question: **What role should innovation play in this systemic reconfiguration?** Are we solving the right problems through innovation, or are we merely applying temporary fixes to deeper structural challenges?

At the heart of this discussion is the need for a unified vision of humanitarian innovation. The sector faces competing perspectives—some advocate for incremental improvements that enhance efficiency and effectiveness, while others argue for bold, systemic reimagination that prepares for future uncertainties. A third approach calls for balancing both, ensuring that immediate needs are met while laying the groundwork for transformative change. Without a shared purpose, humanitarian innovation risks fragmentation, inefficiencies, and reinforcing the very power imbalances it seeks to disrupt.

A key theme emerging from our pre-forum online discussions is the importance of **starting with the right questions. Who defines what constitutes innovation?** Are the problems being addressed truly **aligned with the needs of affected communities**, or are they shaped by **external funding cycles and institutional priorities?** Many participants stressed that some of the most impactful solutions emerge outside formalised innovation spaces, led by those closest to the challenges. Without a shift in perspective, humanitarian innovation risks becoming an exercise in top-down problem-solving rather than a mechanism for genuine, community-driven change.

Tensions surfaced around whether innovation should focus on fixing operational inefficiencies or reimaging the system altogether. Some argued for a visionary approach—imagining the humanitarian system we need and working backward to build it. Others emphasised the urgency of addressing immediate crises while keeping long-term transformation in sight. The consensus? Both approaches are essential. Effective innovation must respond to urgent needs while also fostering the conditions for systemic change over time. How do we do that? Is it this option even feasible?

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The discussion also delved into the political nature of innovation. Far from being neutral, innovation can challenge entrenched power structures and disrupt existing hierarchies. Concerns were raised about whether innovation efforts are genuinely designed for impact or simply serve as public relations exercises. For innovation to drive meaningful change, it must be honest about these power dynamics and work toward solutions that put affected communities at the centre.

As the sector moves forward into an uncertain direction, humanitarian innovation must also evolve. Innovation could be the place where those future uncertainties are solved through responsible and principled testing of new ideas. The future of humanitarian action depends on our ability to ask the right questions, define a clear purpose, and ensure that innovation is a tool for transformation, not a means to perpetuate outdated models.

Dialogue

This topic will be explored in one dialogue, divided into three moments of discussion: **framing**, **ideation** and **action**.

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

Day 1 : Dialogue 1
<i>What are the problems that innovation should be solving in the humanitarian sector?</i>
<i>Nick Leader, UK Foreign Commonwealth & Development Office Anastasia (Linda) Maylinda, Yakkum Emergency Unit Peter Hailey, Centre for Humanitarian Change</i>
<i>Co-facilitated by OECD Innovation for Development Facility (Ben Kumpf) and Elrha (Sian White)</i>

Ideation: participants will be divided into different discussion groups around the following theme: Towards a shared vision for humanitarian innovation in the sector - what type of changes are we after with our innovations? How do we realistically balance having a simultaneous focus on project innovation and system transformation?

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Action: participants will be divided into different discussion groups around the following theme: Towards collective portfolios of action – how might we set the foundations to innovate in a networked way across geographies and themes, so we can tackle grand, systemic, and complex challenges?