

# HUMANITARIAN INNOVATION FORUM 2025

11-13 February 2025 | Nairobi, Kenya



## Session brief: The boring revolution

### Background

Innovation often conjures images of bold ideas and disruptive breakthroughs, but the reality is that even the most transformative solutions can be hindered by outdated operational systems. "The boring revolution" turns the spotlight onto the critical yet underappreciated structures that determine whether innovations succeed or stagnate. Procurement policies, compliance frameworks, and data management are rarely celebrated, yet they form the foundation upon which innovation can be scaled and sustained. Without rethinking these systems, the humanitarian sector will continue to struggle with inefficiencies that impede progress and limit impact.

In this session, we will explore how to transform these so-called "boring" processes into enablers of change rather than obstacles. We will examine the hidden frictions within **procurement, legal compliance, and accountability structures**, asking how these systems can be redesigned to promote agility without compromising integrity. Can we create procurement frameworks that prioritise effectiveness over rigid procedures? How can compliance structures be adapted to allow for iterative learning and experimentation? What mechanisms can be put in place to ensure successful innovations are adopted at scale rather than endlessly reinvented?

A key component of this discussion will focus on the power of **data** as a driver for learning-based innovation. Too often, humanitarian organisations operate in silos, limiting the ability to share valuable insights and lessons learned. If data were collected and shared more effectively, it could accelerate the adoption of proven models, reduce duplication of effort, and create a stronger evidence base for what truly works. Yet, barriers such as data protection concerns, institutional resistance, and a lack of standardised indicators continue to prevent this from happening at scale. What policies, incentives, or collaborative structures are needed to unlock data's potential for driving systemic change?

Another central theme will be fostering a culture of **adoption** within the sector. Despite the growing emphasis on innovation, there remains a tendency for organisations to prioritise developing their own solutions rather than adopting existing ones. This reluctance to integrate external innovations not only wastes resources but also slows progress toward effective, large-scale implementation. How can we create frameworks that incentivise adoption? Could open-source platforms or shared licensing models offer a pathway toward broader uptake of proven solutions? And how do we shift organisational mindsets to see adoption as a strategic advantage rather than a concession?

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Ultimately, the boring revolution is not about diminishing the capacity to invent by pursuing new ideas—it is about ensuring that those ideas have the structural support they need to achieve their potential. This session will bring together voices from across the humanitarian sector to identify tangible actions for reducing operational friction, leveraging data for impact, and building an innovation culture that prioritises scalability and sustainability. If we can get these fundamentals right, the potential for lasting transformation is far greater than any single breakthrough—it could reshape the very way humanitarian work is done.

## Dialogue

This topic will be explored in two different dialogues, each divided into three moments of discussion: **framing**, **ideation** and **action**.

**Framing: both dialogues** will follow the same format. 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 where the audience contributes insights and questions.

| Day 1 : Dialogue 3  | Day 2: Dialogue 5  |
|---|--|
| <i>How might we frame the problem of adoption to find practical and actional pathways for change?</i>       | <i>What are the main friction points for a culture of innovation, and what would it take to reduce friction from the perspectives of procurement, compliance and legal frameworks?</i> |
| <i>Zainah Alsamman, Grand Challenges Canada<br/>Safia Verjee, Kenya Red Cross<br/>Emily Au-Young, Reemi</i> | <i>Emilie Reeh, Save the Children<br/>Linn Tomasdotter, Tinkr<br/>Brian Wanene, World Food Programme</i>   |
| <i>Co-facilitated by Innovation Norway (Ragnhild Nauste) and Elrha (Cecilie Hestbaek)</i>                   |  |

**Ideation:** plenary discussion exploring potential ways to solve the problem.

**Action:** plenary discussion on pathways for action to design, test and implement some of the solutions generated during the dialogue.