

HUMANITARIAN INNOVATION FORUM 2025

11-13 February 2025 | Nairobi, Kenya



FORUM INSIGHTS

The boring revolution: Redesigning the machinery of humanitarian innovation

Not all revolutions come with high visibility. Some begin in spreadsheets, procurement policies, and forgotten parts of the compliance manual. What if the real transformation and the true frontier of humanitarian innovation is not invention, but adoption of systems that allows groundbreaking ideas to take root, spread, and endure?

At the Humanitarian Innovation Forum 2025, The boring revolution dared to ask this uncomfortable but essential question. It pulled innovation out of the spotlight and into the back offices—into operations, finance, legal, compliance, and HR. These are the places where good ideas go to die or, with the right care, where they are brought to life.

The hidden frictions that hold us back

Participants in this dialogue described a humanitarian ecosystem that remains structurally hostile to innovation—especially when it comes to adoption. Legal frameworks are rigid. Procurement is designed for predictability, not experimentation. Compliance mechanisms often punish risk rather than guide it. Despite years of innovation talk, the systems themselves have not caught up.

This disconnect generates a culture of reinvention. Organisations tend to build their own tools rather than adopt existing ones. Good ideas are piloted endlessly without reaching scale. Knowledge remains trapped in programme reports, never integrated into institutional memory.

The Forum's provocation was clear: unless we rethink the operational machinery that governs how decisions are made, money is spent, and success is judged, innovation will remain performative. We don't just need better ideas—we need better systems.

Rewiring for adoption

At the heart of The boring revolution is a simple principle: systems should enable change, not resist it. This means redesigning internal processes to reward ethical risk-taking, to support iteration, and to incentivise uptake—not just of one's own ideas, but of others' as well.

Participants called for innovation-friendly compliance systems with flexible budgeting and transparent assumptions. They explored how procurement processes could include pre-commitments to adopt

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certain innovations if they meet specified thresholds. This kind of infrastructure doesn't just make adoption possible; it makes it expected.

They also advocated for shared infrastructure—open data platforms, global marketplaces for innovations, and matchmaking systems that connect those seeking solutions with those who have already built them. In short, the sector needs to shift from competition to connection.

Innovation is everyone's job

Another key insight was the need to expand what is traditionally understood as the innovation team. Too often, innovation is the remit of a small silo. But transformative change requires buy-in from finance officers, logisticians, compliance leads, and middle managers. If they are included from the start these actors can become powerful enablers.

Organisations must find ways to embed innovation into policies, job descriptions, and annual plans. Leadership matters here. Senior managers need to sponsor innovation pathways and create a culture that celebrates learning not only through success stories but also including intelligent failures.

Participants also stressed the importance of involving crisis-affected people throughout the innovation process, not just at the beginning or end. Adoption isn't just technical; it's relational. The more inclusive the process, the more likely it is that innovations will be grounded, relevant, and adopted.

Changing the culture of change

Ultimately, the Boring Revolution is a cultural one. It's about making innovation normal—not something you do on the side, but something embedded in how the system works. This includes giving people permission to disrupt, to question, to adapt. It also includes making space for reflection, iteration, and the open sharing of what doesn't work.

Participants acknowledged the political dimensions of this work. Innovation can shift power, threaten hierarchies, and make people uncomfortable. That's exactly why it must be done collectively. Organisations need shared reference points for what good innovation management looks like, and collaborative mechanisms to navigate risk together.

Recommended actions

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- 1. Redesign compliance, budgeting, and procurement systems for innovation**
Create more flexible, co-created compliance systems that enable experimentation without compromising integrity. Introduce fit-for-purpose assumption mapping and milestone-based budgeting, and reform procurement frameworks to support ethical risk-taking and incentivise the adoption of external solutions.
- 2. Build shared infrastructure to support cross-sector learning and adoption**
Advocate for dedicated funding to develop shared innovation platforms, knowledge management systems, global marketplaces, and person-to-person matchmaking services that link innovators and adopters. Ensure these systems include transparent reporting of results, including failures.
- 3. Make adoption a strategic default across the sector**
Set aside time and resources for scanning and reviewing existing innovations before initiating new projects. Treat adoption as an organisational strength and strategic advantage, supported by pre-commitment mechanisms and shared licensing models.
- 4. Expand and integrate the innovation team**
Involve finance, operations, compliance, and donor representatives from the outset of innovation processes. Embed innovation thinking in organisational policies, job descriptions, KPIs, and planning systems to mainstream adaptive approaches and eliminate siloed efforts.
- 5. Engage communities and co-create with adopters**
Ensure people affected by crisis are engaged throughout the innovation lifecycle, not only at inception or validation stages. Co-create solutions with intended adopters to increase buy-in, contextual relevance, and sustained impact.
- 6. Mobilise diverse and sustainable financing**
Pitch innovation challenges to a broader mix of funders—including corporates, philanthropies, and individual donors—to support blended finance models that shift power dynamics and enable more flexible, long-term investment in innovation.
- 7. Champion a culture of disruption, agility, and shared learning**
Promote innovation as a cultural norm by creating organisational space for iterative learning, agile ways of working, and the open sharing of both success and failure. Map where different types of organisations can lead, support, or step back from innovation efforts to reduce gatekeeping and foster ecosystem-level collaboration.

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The boring revolution may not grab headlines. But it is, perhaps, the most important revolution of all. Because it's not about inventing the future, it is about preparing the system to receive it. It's about making change stick, and that is anything but boring.