

# HUMANITARIAN INNOVATION FORUM 2025

11-13 February 2025 | Nairobi, Kenya



## FORUM INSIGHTS

### The right problems: Reclaiming purpose in humanitarian innovation

There is something quietly radical about asking a simple question such as: are we solving the right problems? In a sector that often defines itself by urgency, where speed is valorised and complexity is collapsed into programming cycles, such a question can feel subversive. And yet, it may be the most important question facing humanitarian innovation today.

At the Humanitarian Innovation Forum 2025, this question was not an abstract inquiry, but a practical and political challenge. Because innovation, for all its rhetoric, is not neutral. It reflects priorities, mirrors power and encodes assumptions about what matters and who decides.

### The fragmented landscape of problem-solving

One of the Forum's key provocations was this: innovation has become both everywhere and nowhere. Everything is innovative, yet the most entrenched challenges remain. Participants spoke of a humanitarian innovation landscape that is overcrowded with projects but underwhelming in collective impact. Without a clear sense of purpose, the risk is not just duplication but dilution. Are we tweaking the edges of a broken system, or reimagining it entirely? Are we investing in what is visible and fundable, or what is necessary and just? There were different views amongst participants.

A central theme was the need to locate problems within a multilevel framework—local, national, regional, and global—while also recognising that each level has its own logic and legitimacy. Too often, problem definitions are generated from the top down, shaped by donor priorities or international agendas. The result is a mismatch between what gets resourced and what matters most to those affected.

### The politics of problem definition

Participants were candid about the political nature of problem-framing. Who gets to define a problem? Who is included in deciding whether it has been solved? These are not administrative questions. They are questions of power. The Forum's discussions revealed a shared frustration with extractive consultation processes that gesture toward inclusion but ultimately leave decision-making untouched.

Instead, participants advocated for transparency in how problems are identified and how funding decisions are made. They called for systems that acknowledge and articulate bias, that map existing

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efforts to avoid redundancy, and that allow for consultation without paralysis. Innovation, they argued, must become a space where problem-holders lead, not just participate.

## Seeing the whole person

Another powerful theme was the call to see problems as people experience them. Not through technical silos but in the messy, intersecting realities of crisis. A logistics issue may also be a protection risk. A health challenge may also be an information gap. Innovation needs to start from these entangled realities, not from thematic checklists.

In this light, participants called for stronger support to the problem-solving capacity of affected populations. This includes unrestricted funding, research partnerships, and the development of innovation skills among those closest to the challenge. It is not about "empowering" others; it is about stepping back so their power can be exercised.

## Navigating the space between projects and systems

A recurring tension ran through the dialogue: should innovation focus on small-scale improvements or systemic transformation? The answer, for most, was both. But this dual focus requires a new mindset—one that sees innovation not as a series of disconnected pilots but as a strategic portfolio. Participants proposed developing collective action portfolios across geographies and themes, enabling collaboration rather than competition.

This also means clarifying the scope of innovation itself. One of the most constructive provocations at the Forum was to resist using "innovation" as a catch-all term. Not every improvement is an innovation. Not every system reform is best approached through an innovation lens. By being more precise about language and intent, the sector can avoid the trap of inflated claims and shallow engagement.

## Summary of recommended actions

1. **Define problems transparently, constructively, and at multiple levels**  
Develop inclusive processes for problem identification that acknowledge the different layers of the humanitarian system (local, national, regional, and global). Make problem-framing and funding decisions transparent and justified, openly articulating any inherent biases and mapping what others are already working on to reduce duplication and fragmentation.

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2. Clarify the role and scope of innovation  
Differentiate clearly between innovation as a mechanism for programmatic improvement, for solving shared systemic challenges, and for driving structural reform. Avoid using innovation as a catch-all term and be intentional about its purpose and scope in any given context.
3. Support and invest in the problem-solving agency of crisis-affected populations  
Provide flexible and unrestricted funding to strengthen the innovation and research capacity of affected communities. Recognise that problems exist within the intersecting realities of lived experience, and support solutions that reflect these complexities rather than isolating technical fixes.
4. Bridge local and global problem identification processes  
Develop mechanisms that enable local and national actors to contribute meaningfully to regional and global problem-setting, and vice versa, without creating burdensome participation requirements. Experiment with inclusive models that balance diverse input with timely decision-making.
5. Track evolving problems and anticipate future challenges  
Ensure innovation systems are designed to monitor how problems shift over time. Adopt an adaptive orientation so that emerging challenges can be addressed proactively, not retroactively.
6. Build a networked innovation ecosystem with coordinated support  
Map major innovation actors to identify gaps, synergies, and areas of uniqueness. Develop a cadre of neutral innovation facilitators who can connect problem-holders with existing tools, research, and potential collaborators.
7. Use purposeful language that reinforces intent  
Avoid jargon and instead use language that communicates clearly about the function and goals of innovation. Reframe innovation as a problem-solving discipline that serves affected communities, not as an end in itself.

In the end, solving the right problems means investing in clarify to: see people as agents, not beneficiaries; see complexity as a starting point, not a barrier; see innovation not as a shiny label, but as a

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discipline of curiosity, integrity, and courage. It requires asking better questions, even when those questions unsettle the systems we know.