



Humanitarian
innovation fund

| **elrha**

PARTNERSHIPS REVIEW: HUMANITARIAN INNOVATION FUND



ABOUT ELRHA

We are a global charity that finds solutions to complex humanitarian problems through research and innovation. We are an established actor in the humanitarian community, working in partnership with humanitarian organisations, researchers, innovators, and the private sector.

We have supported more than 200 world-class research studies and innovation projects, championing new ideas and different approaches to evidence what works in humanitarian response. But it's not just about pinpointing what works. We transform that evidence-based knowledge into practical tools and guidance for humanitarian responders to apply in some of the most difficult situations affecting people and communities, so that those affected by crises get the right help when they need it most.

ABOUT OUR HUMANITARIAN INNOVATION FUND (THE HIF)

The HIF aims to improve outcomes for people affected by humanitarian crises by identifying, nurturing and sharing more effective and scalable solutions. The HIF is our globally-recognised programme leading on the development and testing of innovation in the humanitarian system. Established in 2011, it was the first of its kind: an independent, grant-making programme open to the entire humanitarian community.

Through HIF, we fund, support and manage innovation at every stage of the innovation process. Our portfolio of funded projects informs a more detailed understanding of what successful innovation looks like, and what it can achieve for the humanitarian community. This work is leading the global conversation on innovation in humanitarian response.

RESEARCH FOR HEALTH IN HUMANITARIAN CRISES (R2HC)

R2HC aims to improve health outcomes for people affected by humanitarian crises by strengthening the evidence base for public health interventions. Our globally recognised research programme focuses on maximising the potential for public health research to bring about positive change and transform the effectiveness of humanitarian response. The work we do through the R2HC helps inform decision making.

Since 2013, we have funded more than 60 research studies across a range of public health fields.

OUR DONORS

Our work would not be possible without the support from our donors:

Our Humanitarian Innovation Fund (HIF) programme is specifically funded by the UK Department for International Development (DFID), the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida), and the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Our Research for Health in Humanitarian Crises programme is specifically funded by the UK Department for International Development (DFID), Wellcome, and the UK National Institute for Health Research (NIHR).



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank Kate Newman, Co-Head of the Centre for Excellence in Research, Evidence and Learning at Christian Aid, for conducting the research and authoring this Partnerships Review for Elrha's Humanitarian Innovation Fund. We would also like to thank the HIF grantees and stakeholders who gave their time to be interviewed as part of this review.



SUGGESTED CITATION:

Newman, K. (2019). 'Partnerships Review: Humanitarian Innovation Fund'. Elrha: London

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Designed by Just So Graphic Design

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FOREWORD

COLLABORATION AND PARTNERSHIP, INCLUDING WITH PEOPLE AFFECTED BY CRISIS, IMPROVES THE QUALITY, IMPACT AND UPTAKE OF RESEARCH AND INNOVATION¹

We strive to improve humanitarian outcomes through partnership, research and innovation. From our very beginnings we have worked to facilitate, champion and support partnerships between humanitarian actors, academia and the private sector. During the last decade, we have learnt a lot about what works from our own practice, from the experience of our partners and those we fund and from the work of others seeking to improve partnership approaches more broadly in humanitarian research and innovation.

Now in our tenth year, the time is right to review our progress on partnerships, to listen to the experiences of our stakeholder community and learn more about the actions and approaches that enable partnerships to thrive.

Through external reviews carried out for both the Humanitarian Innovation Fund (the HIF) and Research for Health in Humanitarian Crises (R2HC), the experiences of teams funded through our two programmes are examined and positioned within the wider discourse on research and innovation partnerships. Because the approaches of research and innovation are often quite distinct, we have presented the specific findings from each of our programmes in individual reports which are intended to provide guidance to our research and innovation communities. The collective findings and the feedback from those we fund are also helping us to deepen our understanding across all our work, and are improving our ability to respond to the challenges and opportunities for building effective and equitable partnerships in humanitarian settings.

As a funder, supporting and investing in partnerships for humanitarian research and innovation is a logical approach. Firstly, enabling research and innovation partnerships with actors directly involved in the delivery of humanitarian assistance dramatically increases the likelihood that their work will be relevant to, and taken up by policy makers and practitioners. Secondly, when managed carefully, these partnerships allow the humanitarian community to benefit from the skills and expertise of a wider, global community and enable non-humanitarian actors to work in humanitarian settings in a responsible and ethical way. We are pleased that the feedback from our stakeholders and the broader research undertaken through our reviews endorses this approach.

However, despite a clear rationale on the value of equitable partnerships, there are many challenges that make this difficult to achieve in the humanitarian sector. The practical and logistical challenges of working in insecure environments, with short-time frames, high-turnover of personnel and limited resources pose significant barriers. But beyond these, we must also recognise the particular dynamics of culture and power at play in the humanitarian system, which can present perhaps the most critical obstacles to equity within a partnership.

The reviews highlight that many of the local partners to large INGOs and northern-based academic institutions both feel and experience a lack of respect in the role they can play within humanitarian research and innovation partnerships. This needs to change. Focusing on the health of the partnerships behind research studies and innovation projects, can contribute to more effective and efficient implementation. Partnership strengthening activities are frequently overlooked in the enthusiasm to just 'get on with the work', with few donors attaching significant importance to these aspects.

Strong and equitable partnerships do not materialise without consciousness and intent. Time and resources are needed to build, manage, maintain and nurture partnerships, and funders, including ourselves need to recognise this in their grant-making strategies. Drawing together our learning from the last ten years, we have set out our updated principles of partnership which we strongly believe enable healthy and equitable research and innovation partnerships to be achieved, and are committed to upholding

Across all our work, we will continue to assess how we support the work we fund to achieve these principles by providing the time, space and, critically, the resources within our grant-making and management processes, to allow partners to engage on an equitable basis from the very start of a partnership. We will continuously review our grant-making and reporting processes to identify further actions we can take to support a better balance of power within the work that we fund.

¹See our Elrha Guiding Principles, visit <https://www.elrha.org/about-us/>

We will also continue to seek strategic partnerships, such as our flagship partnership with the Asian Disaster Reduction and Response Network (ADRRN) that supports local actors to have greater access to our funding opportunities and guide us in our approaches to ensure equity within the projects we fund.

We believe that collaboration and partnership improves the quality, impact and uptake of research and innovation. The partnerships we enter into, or support through the work we fund, may be one small part of the collective effort to improve the way humanitarian response is designed, developed and delivered, but is an essential ingredient. That's why we champion, evidence, and advocate for the power of partnerships to deliver better outcomes for people and communities caught up in humanitarian crises. But we can't pursue this alone. If we all focused our efforts on four simple rules of engagement as outlined here, our principles of partnership, imagine the transformation that could happen; the new collaborations that could flourish and thrive; the previously unheard voices that could surface, and the knowledge and skills that could be shared on a global scale.

This HIF Partnerships Review focuses specifically on the opportunities and challenges related to humanitarian innovation partnerships. It is based on a literature review and small sample of semi-structured interviews with HIF stakeholders and grantees. From this, the review draws out findings on the nature of partnerships specific to humanitarian innovation, what contributes to their effectiveness and how fairness and equity within such partnerships could be best achieved. This provides insight into a context where little research has been done, and little is known in answer to the question 'what makes humanitarian innovation partnerships effective?'

Based on its findings, the review considers the challenges from both the wider ecosystem and project perspectives, concluding with a range of recommendations for different groups of actors, including donors, global humanitarian organisations, innovators external to the sector, and local NGOs working most directly with and people affected by crises.

Jess Camburn, CEO, Elrha

Frances Hill, Effective Partnerships Manager, Elrha

ELRHA'S PRINCIPLES OF PARTNERSHIP

- **Equity** – Every partnership should embed a culture of mutual respect and achieve a balance of power and decision-making. Partners should take proactive steps to overcome barriers to equity between parties.
- **Transparency** – Partnerships should be formed on a basis of openness and trust. Transparency between partners helps build trust and enables partners to work effectively when things go well, and importantly, when things go less well.
- **Mutual benefit** – For partnerships to thrive, all partners must feel the value of working together. Agreeing benefits for partners from the start means partnerships are more likely to stay on track and last longer.
- **Responsibility** – Focusing on the roles and responsibilities of partners towards each other as well as towards their shared work and stakeholders, helps build a culture of ethical behaviour and accountability that supports equity in a partnership.

INTRODUCTION

Humanitarian crises have continued unabated in recent years. In 2016, the number of people in need of international humanitarian assistance reached over 164 million (Elrha 2017). There has been increased interest in research and innovation to better mitigate the impact of humanitarian crises by generating evidence of what works in humanitarian settings and identifying innovative solutions to humanitarian challenges. The relationship between research and innovation can be conceived in different ways, but they are often seen as overlapping because research informs innovation and overall humanitarian response; but also because much of what is done in innovation must be supported by research. Elrha works in partnership with humanitarian organisations, researchers, innovators and the private sector to tackle humanitarian challenges through research and innovation with two major programmes: Research for Health in Humanitarian Crisis (R2HC) and the Humanitarian Innovation Fund (HIF).

‘Localisation’ has become one of the most widely discussed topics in the humanitarian sector since the World Humanitarian Summit (WHS) in 2016 when humanitarian actors led a call for the international humanitarian system to commit to including ‘local’ actors in the planning, delivery and accountability of humanitarian action (ICVA 2018). The process of localisation has been variously understood as including provision of more direct funding to existing national and local actors, empowerment of people affected by crises as humanitarian actors, increased decision-making power at operational levels, better connection of international action to national and local realities and investment in strengthening and sustaining the institutional capacities of local and national responders (ICVA 2018). The positioning of communities and people affected by crisis at the centre of humanitarian action is reinforced by the Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS), which describes the essential elements of principled, accountable and high-quality humanitarian aid.

Humanitarian studies scholars also came together at the 2016 WHS to discuss how ethical humanitarian studies can contribute to humanitarian response, resulting in the articulation of six commitments (IHSA 2016). These outline an ambition to make humanitarian research more inclusive and relevant, by involving communities affected by crises and practitioners in the design and implementation of research, collaborating with research institutions in crisis-affected areas, and making research knowledge accessible beyond traditional conferences and publications. These ideas are picked up in the Australian Red Cross’s 2017 publication ‘Localising the Research Process’

(ARC 2017) in which decentralised research is positioned as critical for contextually appropriate processes and outcomes.

Betts and Bloom (2013) describe two worlds of humanitarian innovation, one dominated by those at the top developing humanitarian solutions, the other focused on fostering local innovation; and they argue that these two worlds struggle to meet. They also observe how the humanitarian market operates differently from other markets because the sector is relatively closed and dominated by preferred suppliers (large humanitarian actors) with innovation users having little or no purchasing power or choice about the innovations they receive (Betts and Bloom 2014). Since the commitments made at the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016, many actors are pushing for change. The speed of change is slow, but there is increased attention on how to involve communities affected by crises in humanitarian innovation processes, as co-creators rather than just as end-users.

Three years on, despite the stated commitments of donors to provide more direct funding to national and local actors, a considerable majority of humanitarian research and innovation funding from the UK, the US and Australia still goes to universities in those same countries. In practice, this bias towards organisations and institutions in the Global North is mirrored in both Elrha’s R2HC and HIF programmes. For R2HC, the majority of grants to date have been awarded to northern universities and INGOs – and this is an area which Elrha is keen to address. Whilst the R2HC annual call is framed in a broad enough way that it can accommodate good research ideas, there is recognition that those based in the Global South have a significant contribution to make in terms of setting the research agenda but have yet to be fully included:

“Ensuring that there is participation from institutions in the Global South is really important ... I think very often the more interesting and more important scientific questions come from the field, and come from groups in the south.”

(UK academic respondent)

For the HIF, the majority of grants to date have also been awarded to actors from the Global North, often large INGOs or academic institutions, with only a small number of grants having a local or national actor as project lead. Both programmes are making strategic and deliberate efforts to address this imbalance.

The language of fairness and equity in partnerships has evolved differently for humanitarian research and innovation. For development research, this language came to the fore with the launch of the Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) and its explicit focus on fair and equitable research partnerships. The literature on humanitarian research partnerships, however, is scant. The wider literature on development research partnerships, and the practical guidance available to support those entering into research partnerships, are relevant for humanitarian research partnerships given commonalities around the research process and the main actors involved – whether academics or practitioners. Partnerships are recognised as important within the literature on humanitarian innovation, but the literature has not to date explored the internal dynamics of partnership.

Given the maturity of the R2HC and HIF portfolios, and of the cumulative experience of grantees in partnering for research or innovation, Elrha commissioned a review of partnerships in each of the programmes. The purpose of these reviews was to gain a nuanced understanding of opportunities for and challenges to fair, equitable and effective partnership working in academic–humanitarian research and innovation collaborations². The basic methodology and approach to the reviews was the same, comprising a review of the literature (as well as core documentation from Elrha), and key informant interviews with grantees and a small number of respondents with a strategic relationship to Elrha. However, the two programmes are very different – both in their approach to partnership, and the types of partners whose work they fund – and the review findings reflect this.

Partnering between humanitarian researchers and humanitarian practitioners has been an explicit requirement of R2HC, and R2HC staff have supported and invested in partnership strengthening in various ways. By contrast, partnership has not been so systemically supported within the HIF and partnership support has been more limited, focused on hosting networking events and brokering partnerships with greater attention to partnership within specific funding calls, such as those delivered with the HIF's strategic partner, the Asian Disaster Reduction and Response Network (ADRRN).

Whilst R2HC grants have been awarded to research teams comprising academics and practitioners generally in universities, NGOs and UN agencies, HIF grants have been awarded to a more diverse set of organisations, because innovation has tended to require involvement of the private sector alongside humanitarian actors. As a result, different types of grantee respondent were consulted during the reviews.

There is already considerable literature on the nuts and bolts of managing research partnerships and consortia. Given the 2016 Grand Bargain commitments to localisation made by donors and humanitarian organisations,³ the reviewers have put particular emphasis in both reviews on issues of power, participation and voice as key considerations within fair, equitable and effective partnerships. Whilst the role of populations affected by crises in relation to research and innovation partnerships was beyond the scope of the reviews, it emerged as an important and interesting issue for discussion, and is therefore included in the findings.

²The review of R2HC was carried out by Kate Bingley and the review of HIF by Kate Newman. They are co-heads of the Centre for Excellence in Research, Evidence and Learning at Christian Aid: <https://www.christianaid.org.uk/about-us/programme-policy-practice/research-evidence-and-learning-rel>

³The Grand Bargain commitments are summarised on the Agenda for Humanity website: <https://www.agendaforhumanity.org/initiatives/3861>



GLOSSARY

ADRRN	Asian Disaster Reduction and Response Network
ALNAP	Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action
CHS	Core Humanitarian Standard
DIP	Development and Implementation (formerly a type of HIF grant)
ESI	Early Stage Innovation (formerly a type of HIF grant)
GBV	Gender-Based Violence
GCRF	Grand Challenges Research Fund
HIF	Humanitarian Innovation Fund
ICVA	International Council of Voluntary Agencies
IHSA	International Humanitarian Studies Association
(I)NGO	(International) Non-Governmental Organisation
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
UK	United Kingdom
WASH	Water, Sanitation and Hygiene
WHS	World Humanitarian Summit (Istanbul 2016)



REVIEW OF INNOVATION PARTNERSHIPS IN ELRHA'S HUMANITARIAN INNOVATION FUND

1. SUMMARY

The Humanitarian Innovation Fund (HIF) was set up in 2011. It is one of Elrha's two grant-making programmes open to the entire humanitarian community – funding and supporting innovation at every stage of the innovation process.

In February 2019 Elrha commissioned a short review to deepen understanding of the opportunities and challenges to effective humanitarian innovation partnerships. This involved a literature review and semi-structured interviews with 17 key informants involved with the HIF in different ways, 14 as grantees of the programme. This report shares the findings of the review; briefly summarised as follows:

1.1 VARIETY OF PARTNERSHIP RELATIONSHIPS

The term 'humanitarian innovation partnerships' includes a range of different relationships, for example it includes: close collaboration across the whole innovation journey (from problem identification to invention to scale-up); deep involvement in one part of that journey; and sub-contractual relationships that bring a particular skill, knowledge or relationship into the innovation process. Effectiveness looks different in each of these different types of relationship.

1.2 KEY ELEMENTS OF EFFECTIVE PARTNERSHIPS

Effective innovation partnerships include partners who are different from each other. Difference gives rise to the diversity of skills, knowledge and experiences needed for effective partnership, and contributes the necessary conditions to enable innovative thinking.

Within the humanitarian innovation partnerships examined in this review – in contrast with humanitarian partnerships more broadly – it appears that power may be more equally shared, and that there is a greater willingness to invest time in understanding and working with people rooted in different organisational cultures. This could be due to the way that difference is valued and recognised within innovation ecosystems and worldviews.

Humanitarian innovation actors have a particular mindset – they are adaptable, flexible, and understand that an innovation might fail – but also focused on the prize, driven by a passion and commitment for the innovation they are creating. This shapes how they engage in partnership, and thus how the partnership can be managed.

Innovation is a long, complex and iterative process. It is difficult to plan. Opportunities open and close along the way. This has an impact on the partnership in two ways: first, the pace and rhythm of the innovation process is dynamic, and partners need to be able to respond to this within their own organisational context, including its constraints; second, who the partners are may need to change, as new or different skills become important at different stages of the process.

1.3 FAIRNESS AND EQUITY IN INNOVATION PARTNERSHIPS

Innovation partnerships may be short-term and transactional, but they can still be fair and equitable. Respondents identified examples of their own transformation, and that of their organisations.

While the qualities of fairness and equity were present in the partnerships reviewed, the humanitarian innovation ecosystem makes such partnerships difficult. Barriers to entry are high, especially for local actors and certain types of innovation are prioritised and invested in. There is also a preference for funding early stage innovation over scale up, and therefore impact. Few initiatives exist to bring local organisations, populations affected by crises and governments into the humanitarian innovation ecosystem, and much more could be done to strengthen the environment for fair, equitable and ultimately effective innovation partnerships.

Despite the challenges to humanitarian innovation partnerships, all respondents asserted that their innovation would not have been possible without the partnership, and that partnerships are the cornerstone of humanitarian innovation.

2. BACKGROUND, PURPOSE AND APPROACH

Innovation has always been an important aspect of humanitarian response, as different people and agencies respond in new ways to emergency contexts, but it was only systematically explored as a discrete area of work in 2009, when ALNAP researched the role of innovation across the sector (Ramalingam et al., 2009). This initial interest increased the focus on innovation, and various funding streams and programmes emerged to catalyse humanitarian innovation and consolidate learning about it. The HIF was established in 2011 through a grant from DFID. By 2019, it had disbursed nearly £13m through 160 grants to a range of initiatives at different stages of the innovation cycle (Elrha 2019).

BOX 1: DESCRIPTION OF HIF GRANT TYPES

Core Grant Funding (2011–18): The HIF's Core Grants funding mechanism, which ran from 2011 to 2018 supported innovation ideas across the humanitarian sector, at different stages in the innovation process. There were three types of grant available:

- **Early Stage Innovation (ESI):** focused on the recognition and/or invention stages of the innovation process – seeking to improve understanding of a specific problem, challenge or opportunity, and looking to build on that understanding in order to invent a novel idea or adapt an existing idea that addresses a recognised issue.
- **Development and Implementation Phase (DIP):** this was funding to develop an innovation by creating practical, actionable plans and guidelines, implement an innovation to produce real examples of change, and/or test the innovation to see how it compares with existing solutions.
- **Diffusion:** projects that encouraged uptake and wider adoption of successful innovations, diffusing ideas and starting their journey to scale.

Grant funding was also targeted at innovation in WASH, GBV and to support scaling. The HIF continues to fund projects in these areas, as well as new areas which focus on Disability and Older Age Inclusion, and local innovation.

Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH): focused on combining creative problem-solving with rigorous testing and evidence-building to improve WASH interventions.

Gender-Based Violence (GBV): this initiative aimed to create and stimulate innovative approaches to tackling GBV.

Journey to Scale: aimed to better understand and support the process of scaling innovations which have the potential to bring about transformational change in the humanitarian system.

In 2018 the HIF launched a new three-year strategy to maximise the impact of innovation in the humanitarian sector, committing to: supporting a diverse funding portfolio (including projects across the innovation life-cycle) focusing on partnership and collaboration and enhancing work on local engagement in innovation. It also identified a need to strengthen its focus on systemic issues to enable innovation and change at an ecosystem level, including through the development of tools and frameworks to support humanitarian innovation.

Although the humanitarian innovation agenda has grown over the past ten years, there has to date been little research on the question of what makes humanitarian innovation partnerships effective. While literature and guidance on humanitarian innovation notes the importance of partnership,⁴ there is little shared insight on the form these partnerships take, the common challenges and opportunities they face, or on how they evolve over the lifecycle of an innovation process. Moreover, it is not clear to what extent broader insights on humanitarian partnership working can be applied to innovation: are humanitarian innovation partnerships ‘more of the same’, or qualitatively different from other partnerships in the humanitarian sector?

In February 2019, to address these questions and deepen understanding on the nature of humanitarian innovation partnerships, Elrha commissioned a learning review focused on a selection of HIF grantees’ experiences of partnership. While most of the HIF’s projects had involved some form of partnership this aspect had not been the core focus of their funding calls, and the offer to grantees for support for partnerships has been limited.

Through this review, Elrha wanted to:

- document a nuanced understanding of the opportunities and challenges to effective (humanitarian innovation) partnerships; including identification of factors that contribute to and inhibit these;
- consider how they might better support such partnerships in the future, to encourage fair and equitable participation throughout the innovation lifecycle;
- contribute to their work on global learning around the value of (research and) innovation partnerships in humanitarian contexts.

A literature review quickly identified the lack of material dealing specifically with humanitarian innovation partnerships. However, it found that there is relevant insight in each of the literatures on partnerships in international development, humanitarian innovation, and the nature of the humanitarian sector; aspects of these are briefly discussed below.

Reviewing the HIF’s own materials, specifically the data gathered for their forthcoming retrospective study of 60 (now closed) projects, indicated an incredible diversity of projects supported by the HIF – involving different actors, types of innovation and discrete phases/stages of the innovation process. It was agreed that for the review, a purposeful sampling approach would be most appropriate to capture reflections and experiences across a range of types of innovation and partnerships. A set of criteria from which to select projects was developed in collaboration with the HIF team.

In addition to looking for a diverse sample of innovation partnerships, a focus was made on projects that were currently receiving funding, or whose grants had recently closed, with the belief that this would mean that the partnership dynamics would be fresh in their mind, and the respondents would be able to share richer reflections. The scale of the learning review meant that there was only time for a limited number of interviews, thus there were eight projects identified. These are described in Box 2. The findings from the interviews conducted with partners in these projects form the basis of the discussion and analysis contained in this document.

⁴See, for example, Elrha’s Humanitarian Innovation Guide: <https://higuide.elrha.org/>

BOX 2: EIGHT HIF PROJECTS REVIEWED

Partnership A: a national NGO based in the Global South and a consortium of actors with programmes/connection to the specific area, including INGOs, local government, academics and the private sector. Process innovation for protracted emergency and recovery settings (grant type: Gender-Based Violence).

Partnership B: an INGO and a private sector organisation. Product innovation for use in refugee camp settings (grant type: WASH grant: Handwashing Innovation Sprint).

Partnership C: an INGO and a university based in the Global North with an innovation in the design/testing phase, and then a manufacturing agency and a second university in the implementation and scale-up phases. Product innovation for urban settings (grant type: multiple, including Development and Implementation; and Diffusion).

Partnership D: a research consultancy and refugee support group both based in the Global South. Process innovation, technology aimed at a process shift for refugee settings (grant type: Early Stage Innovation).

Partnership E: global not-for-profit organisation and a range of different partners (NGO and private sector) in different countries. Paradigm innovation in post-emergency settings (grant type: multiple, including Journey to Scale).

Partnership F: involved a university in the Global North and a research institute in the Global South. Process innovation for a research methodology to measure GBV in humanitarian settings (grant type: Gender-Based Violence).

Partnership G: the national office of an INGO based in the Global South, and their local NGO partner. Local context-driven innovation in disaster risk reduction (grant type: seed funding; part of the ADRRN locally driven innovation initiative).

Partnership H: designer/inventor and an INGO based in the Global North. Product innovation for response and recovery (grant type: multiple including Development and Implementation; and Diffusion).

The first semi-structured interviews were with grant-holders for these partnerships i.e. those with the grantee agreement with Elrha and the Lead Partner for the project. These interviews focused on the nature of the partnership, and what had worked well or had been challenging. Discussions focused on how partnerships evolved through the innovation cycle and the extent to which the partnership had been important for project success and broader learning.

After these interviews, the grant-holders each selected and introduced one of their innovation partners. This led to six more semi-structured interviews with partners from across the eight projects. Rather than analysing different perspectives to deepen understanding on specific partnerships, the analysis used insights from the conversations to identify the broader issues which were considered to influence the nature and practice of humanitarian innovation partnerships. Three further interviews were carried out with respondents whose support and advisory roles in the broader humanitarian sector meant that they could provide a strategic overview of humanitarian innovation partnerships.

Limitations in the research arise from the small sample size relative to the HIF's portfolio, but also because of the diversity of projects included; such diversity is not representative of the sector or even the HIF's allocation of funds. Both the wider literature and HIF's own analysis suggest that the majority of (what are recognised by the sector as) innovation initiatives come from the Global North⁵, and funding has tended to be allocated to international organisations headquartered in the Global North. So, although this review captures reflections from a range of different actors, it should not be assumed that their perspectives and experiences hold equal weight in shaping the evolution of the innovation agenda in the humanitarian sector. This needs to be considered by any future intervention which draws from the findings of this review.

This report shares the findings of the review in four sections. First, a review of the literature frames understandings of what is meant by 'humanitarian', 'innovation' and 'partnership'. The next three sections draw on the reviews of key HIF material (including funding calls, grantee reports, and a series of other learning reviews and publications) and the interviews to discuss what shapes effective humanitarian partnerships, the challenges to establishing them, and the nature of fair and equitable partnerships in the humanitarian innovation ecosystem as a whole. A concluding section offers recommendations for the sector based on the findings.

⁵HIF have responded to this finding by entering into a strategic partnership with ADRRN and developing a new funding stream specifically targeted at innovation processes identified and led by local organisations from the Global South.

3. INSIGHTS FROM THE LITERATURE

As noted above, although there is significant research on the nature of the humanitarian sector, and further literature on both partnerships and innovation, there has been little analysis that brings these three dimensions together. This brief review introduces key concepts on humanitarian innovation, identifies aspects of the humanitarian ecosystem that impact on innovation partnerships, and summarises the few sources that directly discuss humanitarian innovation partnerships which were used to shape the interview questions.

3.1 UNDERSTANDING HUMANITARIAN INNOVATION

There is an extensive body of literature on humanitarian innovation; the focus here is on the key frameworks that guide how this term is used and understood by the HIF.

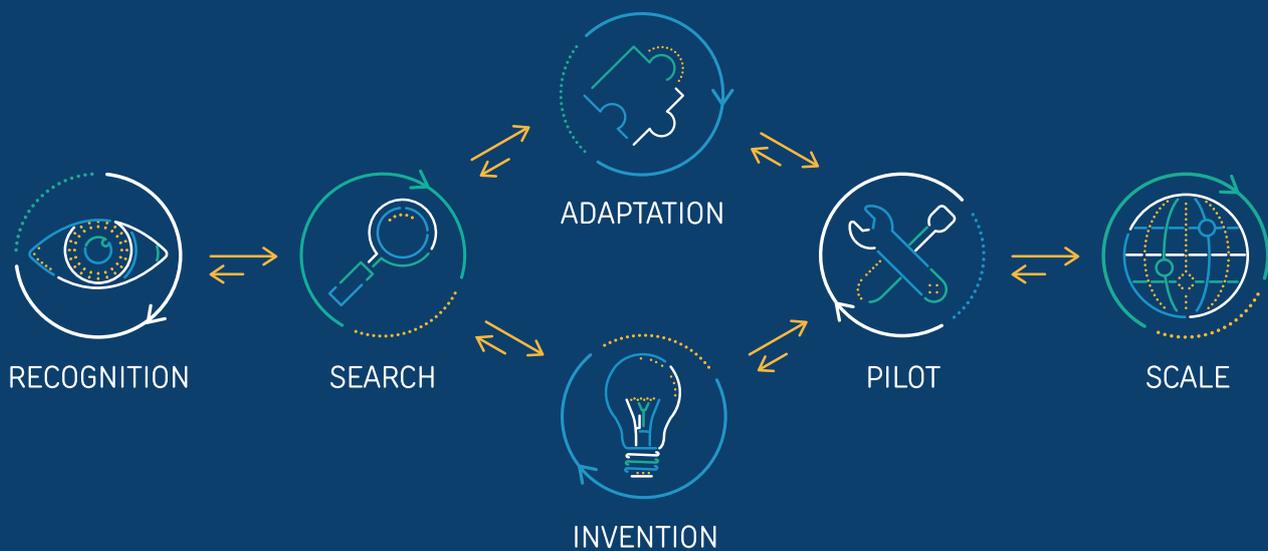
The HIF takes a very broad approach to innovation, defining it as “An iterative process that identifies, adjusts and diffuses ideas for improving humanitarian action⁶.” Funding applications are eligible if they have identified a challenge that needs addressing or an opportunity for innovation, if they are creating a specific novel solution or idea which addresses the opportunity or need and if they have the potential to improve the long-term performance of humanitarian aid. The fund puts emphasis on innovation being problem-led: even where a grant is focused on developing a specific solution, funding is only considered if there is clear evidence of need for this solution.

The HIF draws on Francis and Bessant (2005) to distinguish between four types of innovation: product (changes in things offered), process (changes in the way things are done), position (bringing something from one place to work in a different context) or paradigm (shifting the underlying model which shapes what is done). These different types of innovation can be radical (breaking with current practice) or incremental (building on current practice) (Altay 2018: 14); and frugal innovation (based on the assumption that minimal resources are available) is also recognised. However, it is important to acknowledge that many innovations fall into multiple categories and are not easily classified.

In addition to the type of innovation, also important is the innovation cycle, recognised as an iterative process of identifying, adjusting and diffusing, as shown in Figure 1.

⁶<https://higuide.elrha.org/glossary/>

Figure 1. Stages of the innovation cycle



Source: Humanitarian Innovation Guide (Elrha 2018a)

Each stage of humanitarian innovation looks different according to innovation type, and the levels of engagement with actors beyond the humanitarian sector. Moreover, the HIF note that innovation can be non-linear and emergent, with different parts of the process becoming cyclic, and different pathways emerging. It is also clear from the literature (see for example the Humanitarian Innovation Guide) that different stages of innovation require different types of partner and partnership; a finding that also emerged through the interviews.

3.2 HUMANITARIAN ECOSYSTEM: INNOVATION PRACTICE AND PARTNERSHIP

Ramalingam et al. (2015) set out common features of effective innovation ecosystems (overall strategic vision, financial and human resources and openness to knowledge with well-articulated end-user needs); and argue that the humanitarian system falls short on various aspects. Three key areas are important: the overall nature of the system, the actors involved and their relationships and the breadth of interventions which are now considered humanitarian.

The nature of the system

The humanitarian system is characterised as top-down and aid driven, which shapes where innovation happens – often driven by actors operating outside the system, but wanting to engage in the humanitarian sector, and in the Global North. This has implications for the political economy of the system. Betts and Bloom (2013) describe two worlds of humanitarian innovation, one dominated by those at the top developing humanitarian solutions, the other focused on fostering local innovation; and they argue that these two worlds struggle to meet. They also observe how the humanitarian market operates differently from other markets, because the sector is relatively closed and dominated by preferred suppliers (large humanitarian actors) with innovation users having little or no purchasing power or choice about the innovations they receive (Betts and Bloom 2014).

However, this has not prevented many new actors from entering the market under the banner of innovation. For example, Sandvik et al. (2014: 4) note that “both the military industry and surveillance industry are looking for new markets – and the type of legitimacy that partnership with a humanitarian actor can provide,” and that this drives their entry into the sector. This can mean for example, that technology is developed and introduced without an understanding of the key challenges in humanitarian effectiveness: such innovation may be technology-driven rather than problem-driven, and this has an impact on adoption and use.

Furthermore, others point to the market incentives for companies to enter the humanitarian sector, framing populations affected by crises as untapped markets (Dolan 2012) and laboratories for innovation (Prahalad 2011). These trends explain why Smith and Thompson (2019) note that while humanitarian innovation is growing, a gap persists in relation to the inclusion of populations affected by crises in innovation processes, and that this exclusion limits the success and adoption of innovations. This context shapes which actors can be involved in innovation partnerships, and the types of roles that they play.

Actors and relationships

This top-down system is also relatively closed. Actors external to the humanitarian system may be invited in to play specific roles, but overall the system is “narrowly focused on the usual suspects; dominated by key actors, with weak connections to academia, science, private sector, national counterparts and disaster-affected communities” (Ramalingam et al., 2015: 40). The authors suggest that the system is overtly contractual and insufficiently collaborative, with complex power relations at play that repeatedly marginalise national actors (government and civil society) and communities affected by crises. Since the World Humanitarian Summit of 2016 greater attention has been placed on local actors, and global funders have committed to various principles, such as the Charter for Change and the Grand Bargain. These initiatives, and greater focus on localisation and movements such as Participation Revolution, suggest that there is an awareness of the current dynamics in the sector, and many actors are pushing for change. However the speed of this change is currently very slow.

Such a focus on local responses is also reflected in recent shifts in the humanitarian innovation sector, with increased attention on how to involve communities affected by crises in the innovation processes, as co-creators rather than just as end-users. For example, Smith and Thompson (2019) have developed a participation index/scorecard to measure and understand the value of different types of local participation in innovation and the START Network has invested in local humanitarian labs. HIF’s own commitment to including local actors also speaks to this agenda. For example, the HIF has recently entered into a strategic partnership with ADRRN precisely to invest in supporting locally led problem identification and innovation. Ramalingam et al. (2015) reflect how ‘end-users’ have been effectively shut out of innovation, until the testing stage, running “counter to the growing realisation that local involvement is not just a values-based ideal, but also ... adds practical value and acceptance and can greatly enhance product development” (ibid: 27). This growing interest in ‘localisation’ in the humanitarian sector, and recognition that not involving the ‘people at the right time’ has often been a factor in humanitarian innovation failure⁷, imply that some aspects of the humanitarian innovation narrative and ecosystem are changing, shifting the possibilities for who participates in humanitarian innovation partnerships, and how they are supported to do so.

⁷This was one of the main findings of Elrha’s unpublished retrospective analysis of 60 closed HIF projects

Breadth of sector

The third relevant attribute of the humanitarian ecosystem is its breadth – referring both to the nature of emergency contexts, the range of humanitarian actors (including local first responders, government, national and local civil society organisations, INGOs, private sector and in some cases the military) and the different types of intervention which are implemented under the banner of humanitarian action. These include disaster risk reduction, emergency response, and recovery and reconstruction; with settings as diverse as refugee camps and urban slum development. Each context involves different actors, different time frames for response, different legal frameworks that guide interventions, and different long-term development visions.

These three dimensions interact to shape the options and opportunities for partnership and guide who is seen as a potential innovator, and the types of innovation that are supported and actively encouraged.

3.3 HUMANITARIAN INNOVATION PARTNERSHIPS

Three sources on humanitarian innovation go beyond the simple recognition that humanitarian innovation involves partnership and provide commentary on those partnerships. These are the ‘Humanitarian Innovation Ecosystem Research Project Final Report’ (Ramalingam et al. 2015); Elrha’s Humanitarian Innovation Guide (2018a) and Henceroth and Thompson’s (2018) Building partners for innovation (and resilience).

Ramalingam et al. (2015) argue that “innovation is not a solo act, but rather a dynamic and emergent process that is the product of multiple actors and their interrelationships” (Ramalingam et al., 2015:10), suggesting that different roles and relationships exist at different stages of innovation, from search and discovery through to scale-up. For example, they note that although there is often a good network of relationships supporting the Pilot stage, it is often difficult to sustain or shift these when it comes to scaling up, which can be characterised as a “clumsy attempt to involve other actors, who often are less interested because they have not been fully engaged through the process” (ibid: 37). Despite characterising partnership at different points in the innovation process, they do not explore the internal dynamics of partnerships.

Elrha’s Humanitarian Innovation Guide adds to this analysis, drawing on the work of the Partnership Brokers Association who identify 10 key attributes for effective partnering, covering shared vision and agreement on partnership model, roles, resource contribution, relationships and accountability within partnership; in addition to investment of time to ensure the health of the partnership alongside the focus on the project work.

The Guide complements these general attributes with insights that are specific for humanitarian innovation partnerships: the need for clarity on the aims of the partnership (is it transactional or about co-creation?), having the right partners at the right time, developing MoUs and agreements on intellectual property; investing time in ensuring good communication and translation of technical language; and reflecting on potential assumptions and bias which may impact on expectations and behaviours in the partnership. These are all clearly important attributes, but although they identify certain issues which are important within a humanitarian innovation partnership, they do not deal with the shifting dynamics of partnership throughout the innovation process – for example, how to cope as individual partners move in and out of the innovation process, and how to develop a partnership around an emergent innovation process.

Henceroth and Thompson (2018) note that a successful innovation partnership not only delivers an innovation but also builds the capacity of the partners involved. They identify four roles that local partners can play – innovators (active in the innovation process as co-creators); implementers (to test innovations); multipliers (to support scale up and spread); or communicators (to encourage others to adopt the innovation). In this analysis, the identity of the ‘local partner’ is not limited to humanitarian actors, but can also include actors from the private sector, academia and government. However, while the analysis highlights the range of roles and types of humanitarian innovation partnerships and suggest good thinking about how to develop a successful innovation they say less about the specific nature and function of partnerships. Moreover, aside from an emphasis on involvement of local populations in partnerships, they do not go further to shed light on how the humanitarian innovation ecosystem could itself evolve to become a more enabling environment to support inclusive partnership.

Reflection on these three bodies of literature suggests that gaps exist in understanding how the context and humanitarian system shape the potential for and nature of humanitarian innovation partnerships; how the inherent dynamics of an innovation process interact with and influence the partnership process; and what makes for an effective humanitarian innovation partnership. This review now turns to these questions.

The following section is based mainly on the findings from interviews and illustrated extensively through quotes from respondents. However, in some places available literature is also referred to, to further explain, situate and reinforce points made by the interview respondents.

4. REVIEW FINDINGS: EFFECTIVE HUMANITARIAN INNOVATION PARTNERSHIPS

“Partnership is like the best chocolate that you are able to taste, it is bitter at first because not everyone can visualise the vision of the project – we get remarks like ‘it won’t work’. But then when you really get to test, it is the best, it is continually evolving.”

(National NGO respondent)

This section starts by suggesting three common types of collaboration arrangements which are considered as humanitarian innovation partnerships before looking at the different elements which respondents identified as contributing to effective humanitarian innovation partnerships.

4.1 THE IMPORTANCE OF INNOVATION AND PARTNERSHIP

“Big things are not possible without good partnership and collaboration. We need funding, we need community, we need implementation partners, humanitarian responders, technical expertise. I have learnt this through my work on humanitarian innovation.”

(Technology entrepreneur, Global South)

“We have recurrent and slow onset emergencies, you can’t be deploying the same solution every year as we know it is not working. People are dying, so we need to change course; how do we do course correction? We look outside the box for ideas and concepts.”

(Strategic respondent)

Across all the interviews respondents emphasised the importance of both innovation and partnership in the humanitarian system. However, they described different types of relationships as ‘partnership’. These can be broadly categorised in three types: sub-contractual, co-creative and transactional⁸.

⁸In addition to these partnership relationships, the word partnership was also used in some HIF grantee reports to describe a much looser relationship – such as when an actor ensures that local government is aware of the intended project. Such action is often described in other literature as stakeholder engagement, these relationships have not been analysed within this study.

One grantee described a sub-contractual relationship: they developed an idea to test, got funding from the HIF to test it, then identified a local organisation with the right skills and engaged them to do the testing.

Another grantee described co-creation in a partnership, using Arkanoid (a computer game) as a metaphor. Here, the relationship was iterative and evolved with the work; and the relationship existed beyond the specific project.

“In the old computer tennis game a ball gets bounced back and forward, demolishing walls. This was the feeling in our partnership – there has been a lot of back and forth, a lot of trial and error, feedback and adaptation, we have been pushing to make it meaningful with our eye on the prize. It has taken time, but we keep moving forward.” (INGO respondent)

A transactional approach was described by a third respondent:

“As the project unfolds you might need different partners with different expertise – we shouldn’t limit ourselves to those partners we have started with... A good partner will be someone that we can engage easily and have history with... They would be willing to input into the project even if they don’t benefit financially because they want to benefit the aim.” (National NGO respondent)

This typology of relationships impacted on how different actors conceived of an effective humanitarian partnership, and what they identified as limitations and opportunities.

4.2 DIVERSITY OF PARTNERS

“The partnership was crucial for the innovation outcome, we needed the diversity of knowledge.” (INGO respondent)

All respondents started by acknowledging the need for different expertise in any innovation initiative. Difference has value, bringing productive and creative tensions:

“It is important to bring together partners who are very different – it wouldn’t be good to get together with a bunch of other NGOs and cook our own soup – variety is key to success, having people from different backgrounds helps us understand the need and the opportunity better.” (INGO respondent)

Many emphasised how their initiative would not have been possible without partnership. At one level, described by a national NGO, partnerships allowed them to gain access to specific expertise and networks not present locally. For another, a research organisation in the Global South, partnership enabled access to populations affected by crises:

“Without a partnership you can’t get access to the things you need – a private research organisation cannot get into a refugee camp, you need to get all the permissions. All the logistical support is through partnership. But more than this, research is only important if people are using it, so you need to think about partnership at this stage too.” (Research organisation, Global South)

But respondents also recognised that the range of knowledge needed to progress through the innovation process was too great to be held within one type of organisation:

“Effective partnership is having the right people for the right projects, ineffective is having people who are not willing to work with others to develop something.” (Private sector organisation, Global North)

“It has been so important to get the perspectives of people outside the industry, the whole dynamics of the projects feel different because of outside voices. It wasn’t just industry people talking to ourselves with our own jargon, we recognised that we don’t have all the answers, and we invited others in, welcoming different perspectives.” (INGO respondent)

However, those involved also recognised that although diversity was valued and looked for, this did not mean that such partnerships were straightforward. Cultural differences and the need to understand the other’s organisational needs were seen as important, and the role of the trans-boundary broker (an individual able to ‘translate’ between organisations) was valued. But, perhaps given the value placed on difference, it appeared that there was healthy appetite among respondents to invest time in understanding, celebrating and working with this difference as a foundation for the innovation process. This contrasts with attitudes to difference in some other types of cross-sector partnerships, particularly development research partnerships (cf. Fransman and Newman 2019).

4.3 MINDSET AND BEHAVIOURS

Throughout all the interviews it was clear that many of the general characteristics and behaviours which underpin other types of partnership work are important in humanitarian innovation partnerships. This included having a clear vision, building trust, being clear about motivation and interests, and agreeing a workplan. However, there were also a series of other characteristics that were identified as important for these specific partnerships.

Commitment and passion

Because the humanitarian innovation journey can be so unknown when the innovation process is started and is rarely linear, it is difficult to plan sequentially. A common theme that emerged through the partnership discussions was the importance of those involved being committed to the end goal, at both individual and organisational levels:

“We were excited to make the product, to make something work, to make something useful. There was a lot of positivity, we were contracted as consultants, but lot of hours were spent because we wanted to invest them. We put as much effort in as we could, having that passion was really important.” (Private sector respondent, Global North)

“Personalities are important – (X) is really easy, available, practical. His objective isn't completing the research because he has been funded, he is looking for a solution to the needs we have.” (INGO respondent)

The need to be able to both respect and challenge each other emerged frequently as important, especially in the early stages of an innovation's development.

Personality of the innovator

Beyond commitment however there was a specific innovation mindset and behaviour that was noted as important to enable the creative process and to deal with the uncertainty:

“Innovators bounce around the place like Tigger and need to pull in other people as they bounce in different directions. On the one hand innovators are impatient, but they are also adaptable. You start off with an idea, but your innovation might completely change when you get to the nub of the question.” (Strategic respondent)

“Some people just don't get it, they are not able to cope with uncertainty. They might say the words of innovation, but they don't have the behaviours. You have to default to open (about what is going well, where your money is coming from, what your ideas are) and share these freely, rather than be protective... We need to be able to say what we think, to be frank and honest, as we're trying to get to same place.” (Global not-for-profit respondent)

Another key attribute was that those involved in the partnership needed to be comfortable with the idea that the innovation might fail.

Flexibility and adaptability

A key challenge for innovation partnerships is the lack of clarity of where the partnership (or the innovation) might end up, what direction it will take and how long it will take to get there:

“It is so hard when you are writing the application and putting together the budget, you don't know where it is going to take you, and you think it will go a certain way and plan it that way, but once you start the project it goes somewhere different. You have to embrace the adaptation as part of the process, and be able to learn and change.” (INGO respondent)

“The idea has been working: design, implementation, design, implementation. It is circular but the partnership has been steady, the relationship was very fluid, sharing models and giving feedback, this has meant we can fine tune the design. Flexibility is really important in partnership – the original idea might look good on paper but when you start digging it doesn't work well in contexts; you need commitment from both sides to get something on the ground.” (INGO respondent)

This influences how the partnership is established and sustained.

4.4 THE PARTNERSHIP JOURNEY

“A research partnership is like a waltz, you spend the whole dance with one partner; whereas an innovation partnership is like a ceilidh⁹– you have a hall of people and you keep changing your partners but you are still part of a fluid whole, you do an engagement with a particular partner and then you move back to the edge, and then the next group comes along and you join them. You have a good time with all of them.” (Strategic respondent)

Many of the projects reviewed – even those underpinned by a long-term collaboration – had experienced a series of short-term partnerships, working with different sets of people at different points in their innovation journey (an important dynamic recognised in the Humanitarian Innovation Guide¹⁰). This meant that an innovation might see the establishment of multiple partnerships at different points, with relationships with different actors intensifying or reducing or moving at different speeds. Given that each stage may include different actors, this suggests that the internal dynamics of the partnership also change, influenced by who is involved at any given moment, and their different organisational expectations and culture. This impacts on the overall shape of the innovation process, with different issues arising at different moments, including:

When to establish partnership?

Previous studies, for example Elrha’s forthcoming retrospective of 60 early HIF projects, have identified the importance of bringing in actors early in the process, even if you are not relying on them for skills, access or relationships until further down the line. However, it can be challenging for those driving the innovation to know how and when to include others – especially if it is not clear where the innovation is going to go, or when there are several stages to go through before their skill will be needed. Options for managing this include establishing a consortium to ensure buy-in and ownership (and therefore investing time in managing this); or playing the ‘octopus’ role (see pg24), sub-contracting to different people when the need arises. Both models have their advantages and drawbacks.

For those interested in co-creation, establishing a consortium at the beginning of the process could be favoured. However, needs differ for different sorts of organisation.

For a big INGO with multiple funding sources and global operations, involvement in one innovation process in one location – even if the project itself is not yet clear and therefore what involvement means is uncertain – may not pose a big risk; but for a local actor who is responding to a disaster that has affected their own area, involvement in a new process could affect their survival as an organisation, as well as their relationships with the people affected by crises. It is perhaps unsurprising that most HIF grants are allocated to large humanitarian agencies and northern based academics. Although sub-contracting may appear ‘transactional’, in reality it could be more practical and more equitable.

Time and patience with the process

The importance of allowing space and time to work things out came up frequently in the interviews – based on an acknowledgement that innovation may evolve in many different ways. Respondents highlighted that the ability to talk within the partnership, and to recognise each other’s organisational needs and limitations, was key to making the wider collaboration work.

This was particularly important when the two actors involved in the partnership were working with different time-tables and work-loads; when larger events shifted organisational priorities; or at ‘transition moments’ (for example moving from design to getting permission to test).

Sustaining and being nimble in the partnership

Many respondents noted that innovation can be a long and slow process which involves both sustaining relationships with initial partners, and bringing on new ones. Moreover, existing partners might take on new roles, involving different people within their organisation:

“We got the final design, and now we need to go into production, so someone in our supply centre is leading now on the contracting side. We have moved into a different phase and the project team, as it was, is no longer required.” (INGO respondent)

⁹A ceilidh is a communal dance originating in Scotland, where each participant engages with a number of different dance partners throughout the dance, as opposed to dancing with one partner for the duration

¹⁰<https://higuide.elrha.org/toolkits/pilot/preparations-for-pilot/review-partnership>

Aside from the need to adapt and respond to shifting partnership dynamics as actors change, this also suggests the need for regular check-ins about the innovation itself; and to discuss motivations as the innovation journey evolves and possibilities change. It also suggests a need for individual reflection, with those involved asking themselves if this is still the right stage for their involvement, or whether they should be stepping back to make room for someone with different skills?

Respondents highlighted the need to be able to easily switch partner as part of the innovation process: as one respondent from a national NGO in the Global South noted, “you can’t carry organisations with you just to be nice, you have to focus on good enough, and change partners if needed.” It is natural to assume this process would be challenging, especially if the partnership was part of a deeper relationship, or if one organisation had invested extensively. However, the respondents were sanguine about the project moving on with different actors involved:

“The partnership was a nice interaction, we were like ants that collaborate well, we shared a certain task and supported each other, and everything ran smoothly. Now we have tested (the innovation) it has raised a lot of interest, and there are more people involved; the partnership has moved onto a different stage. I am less involved now, the output from the testing was the prize and knowing others see it as something valuable, we all played our roles well, and now we move on.” (Academic respondent, Global North)

“At different stages of the innovation the aim changes and you need to get the right people. Now if (we) don’t get the tender (for manufacture) it means that we have been going wrong somewhere, it is just how it is. We made it and we made it work, and now it is up to them, not up to us. We are not doing this to earn money, we are doing it as humanitarians, if we don’t sustain the partnership and (they) go with someone else it is great still because the product is out and it is a benefit for the system as a whole.” (Private sector respondent, Global North)

It would be interesting to explore whether local actors based in the Global South would share this perspective, or if short-term participation is more problematic for them. There was no opportunity for such a discussion during this piece of research as there was no comparable experience.

However, reflections on the literature review, relating to the position of these actors within the humanitarian innovation ecosystem suggests that such short-term participation might be more challenging, this is explored further in the section on fair and equitable partnerships below.

Moreover, while an innovation partnership might be transient, the wider relationship is also important:

“We never had a formal relationship, but we would pick up the phone to each other, they were a sounding board, we’d get their thoughts and feedback. We haven’t spoken to each other for a while as we’re really busy, but if we needed to we could.” (Private research institute, Global South)

This interaction between partnership at a particular moment within a project, and a broader collaborative relationship, was noted by many of the respondents spoken to, as one respondent (an academic from the Global North) commented, “we have an unwritten contract that binds us together, within the HIF project there is a formal agreement. But the HIF project is only a small part of our partnership.” Another partner emphasised how useful “the fact that we bumped into each other a lot” was in terms of sustaining good communication and relationships for the partnership. It could be that the broader relationship of collaboration is key to ensuring that the ‘partnership moment’ within a specific innovation is not as extractive or transactional as it first appears.

Power relations in partnerships

Given the diversity of partnerships involved and their different nature, scale and form it is challenging to say anything definitive about power relations in these partnerships. However, it was suggested by some that innovation partnerships are relatively more equal than some other types of partnership, for example:

“Our partnership is like a family, there are squabbles and tensions, but we are working towards the same goal. We have had to have lots of flexibility on both sides. In an innovation partnership you need room to think outside the box and try something different, you need two partners that are both competent and the partnership needs to be relatively equal. This is different in a research partnership where you might have a more junior partner and build their capacity through the process.” (Academic respondent, Global North)

One reason for this could be because of the value placed on diversity of knowledge to enable the creative innovative process.



RedR group exercise as part of personal security training in Kenya. Taken as part of HIF-funded project 'Innovative Impact Assessment in Humanitarian Training.'
Photo credit: Nathan Siegal.

4.5 PARTNERSHIP MANAGEMENT

The shifting nature of partnership and the need for flexibility and adaptability are clearly key characteristics of innovation partnership management; however, there were other roles, behaviours and processes which were also identified as important: in particular, the ‘octopus’, contracts and Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs).

“(The project leader) was like an octopus, she had all these relationships with multiple people, she held everything together, working with different people all with different experience, bringing lots of energy, and moving the process forward, turning the ideas into something real.” (INGO respondent)

All those spoken to acknowledged the complexity of innovation. Many identified the need for one person to be holding the big picture, and the absence of such an actor was often mentioned as a key challenge. This was particularly the case because partners within an innovation process are likely to be experts within their ‘bit’ (i.e. humanitarian response, or product design) but have limited exposure to other bits of the jigsaw. The ‘octopus’ is not only responsible for drawing together the different elements of the intervention, and ensuring relevant processes interact rather than run in parallel but can also play an important role as a broker, working across different types of organisation and translating between partners. For example, in the academic–NGO partnership reviewed above, the ‘octopus’ actor was both a member of the NGO and studying for her PhD at the university, both partners emphasised the importance of her role.

Although the role of personal relationships was clearly important, many respondents also acknowledged that often partnerships need to be institutionalised. But questions arose about when and how this should happen: institutionalising and formalising a partnership early on might interfere with the creative process; but waiting too long could mean an obstacle occurs down the line which could have been avoided.

“(Innovation partnerships need to be about) looking towards the future and what we are trying to achieve, not being watched by a bureaucratic committee asking are we meeting our targets, reaching our deliverables. We have to be accountable, but the traditional forms of accountability that have come through project management, that are linear and scientific, don’t work for us. We find them tiresome.” (Global not-for-profit respondent)

The partners interviewed had different perspectives on the role of MoUs and whether and how they were useful. For some they acted as a framework for discussion, to agree the different elements of the partnership, and support transition moments:

A supporting document or MoU is really helpful for partnerships to work, you can always refer back to it, it is important to have it so that you can hold each other accountable.” (National NGO respondent)

For others they were part of the contractual relationship, but not relevant for partnership working:

We may have signed something, but I can’t remember what. Our partnership was very informal, we had personal relationships and this was what was important, and allowed us to sort out problems in the financial relationship when this occurred (because of the decline in the value of the pound).” (Academic respondent, Global North)

But for some, formalising the partnership with a contract was troubling and potentially interfered with the process of innovating:

“We are working on a project where the response was defined in the contract – it specified what we would make. But the way we work is to put the capability in the field and respond to what is needed, this is hard to put a contract around. And now there is a fuss because we didn’t fulfil the contract, we made things and got positive feedback on what we did, but it is all a bit complicated in contract terms, especially when the contract specifies the solution, rather than the problem.” (Global not-for-profit respondent)

These experiences suggested that the extent to which a partnership is formalised, and when this happens, will be different in different contexts, and will depend on whether formal agreements are seen as a framework for discussion, or a legal document to protect against specific risk further down the line. However, whether or not legal documents are used, it was clear that specific issues do need to be discussed and agreed, including: the formality of the partnership, and when to begin it; organisational processes, policies (and actors) that the other partners need to be aware of to support smooth operation in partnership and sharing of intellectual property rights.

4.6 INNOVATION ACTORS

The role of large INGOs

The importance of INGOs as both gatekeepers and brokers in the innovation process was frequently referenced by respondents. This had positive aspects:

“At one point we needed a scientific partner, we were a small and new team and we needed a lab or research organisation to build up confidence in our product. (Organisation X – an INGO) brokered the relationship with the university; because of their involvement the university opened up its lab to me, I could film, document, take notes. This is usually a very private process, but they were more open because of the partnership.” (Designer/inventor, Global North)

“Partnering with big NGOs who have a long-term presence in an area is good. It allows us to reassure the local and national government; this is important.” (Global not-for-profit respondent)

And more challenging ones:

“We have a challenge in engaging new partners, especially international NGOs – as we are only national. We can work with them once the engagement has happened but it can be hard for us to approach them. We are seen as small, and if there is no monetary value, they don’t even look at you.” (National NGO respondent)

In either case, what was clear was that INGOs play a major role at different points of the innovation journey. Furthermore, both the HIF retrospective and the respondents emphasised the role these organisations played during the scaling of innovations. On one hand, INGOs can take an innovation to scale through their different branches of operation; but on the other internal processes which were inflexible, for example around procurement, could cause obstacles.

The role of government actors

None of the partnerships involved in this research directly involved government actors or official bodies. However, many respondents did refer to their importance, using the word partnership to describe a range of relationships from key stakeholders, and providers of an enabling (or constraining) environment for the work, to closer collaborations. Their role was particularly important in piloting and in going to scale.

“Once we have piloted and have good evidence for the concept, we can start the scale up. Then we need to do community engagement and get government and other partners involved – to push the innovation.” (National NGO respondent)

“We have the experience of getting good validated data now. We presented (our work) to the local government and many municipalities wanted us to conduct the same work, but for this to happen we should have legislation.” (Local NGO respondent)

It would be good to understand further when and how government actors have been more involved in problem identification and innovation design, and how this impacts on the wider innovation process. Previous research by Elrha has also identified the importance of investing in good monitoring and evaluation systems from the start of an innovation processes in order to be able to make the case for government /public sector involvement later down the line (Elrha 2018c: 28).

The role of the private sector

The position of the private sector differed across the partnerships reviewed. For example, for some the private sector organisation had initiated the innovation, in others they had been brought in for their skills, often technological or design-based knowledge. There is a need to be nuanced in characterising the private sector, and personal attributes can hold more sway than the sector in which that person is based. Although some actors in this sector may have interest in humanitarian innovation because of its potential as a new market (see Dolan 2012 and Prahalad 2011), the review respondents were all driven by a humanitarian commitment, and each spoke of their personal transformation through engagement in the HIF-funded work.

“Before my work on the HIF-funded project I wouldn’t have cared about humanitarian projects, but being involved has given me insights and although I am now doing commercial projects the ones I love are the humanitarian ones. I can’t say no to them now.” (Technology entrepreneur, Global South)

The role of local organisations and populations affected by crises

As noted in the literature review, inclusion of populations affected by crises within the innovation process has recently been given greater focus. However, how these populations affected by crises are included and for what reasons depended on a variety of factors. Where involvement has moved beyond the role of ‘user-testing’ this has tended to be in response to a deliberate initiative to incentivise ‘local innovation’. Interestingly, most of these initiatives have focused on community resilience and disaster risk reduction rather than emergency response.

Such initiatives focus on creating the space and process for innovation and building the confidence of populations affected by crises and local actors as innovators.

“People at the grassroots are already innovating, addressing challenges and finding their own ingenious means to address them, some of the strategies are scalable and replicable; they themselves don’t recognise that they are innovating, the language is not there and good cases of innovation remain isolated, the knowledge gets lost. So we look for something that is already happening, provide a business canvas to it and then it can be scaled.” (Strategic respondent)

As the literature noted, involvement of local actors and communities affected by crises in this way has clear benefits for the innovation and the partnership. But beyond this, it can have a wider development effect locally. A respondent from a community-based organisation reflected:

“The partnership is effective as it recognises that the local organisation has a role. We are a role model in the community, we can make sure that the data we are getting is accurate and reliable; but we can also make sure that the community is owning the data; and that they can use it. Because we have the data now we can share this with the local government and encourage them to use the information in project planning and development, so that the resources of their unit would be put to the right projects. This is part of promoting the innovation, promoting good governance, the participation of the people.”

Such experience – which enhances the confidence and capabilities at the local level could contribute to wider transformation in the system. The investment at the local level is initially to catalyse innovation action, but the longer term benefit to the system could be a more empowered set of local actors, who are able to use their skills, networks and confidence to build future relationships, access funding and enhance their participation in the system. However, this process is not straightforward and there are still considerable obstacles to deep local engagement, at a systemic level, and in relation to the capacity of individual organisations.

“The humanitarian system itself is very top heavy and innovation is the prerogative of a few enlightened individuals, so unless there is strong mentoring a local organisation cannot prosper. In some countries it is about funding, in some it is about how civil society voices are recognised, in others it is about the capacity of the local organisation.” (Strategic respondent)

“Their innovation maturity is not far enough along the path to join the dance, swapping partners is hard; the way we fund local organisations doesn’t enable them to have resilience, we fund them when a disaster strikes, and then we withdraw and take our funding with it, so they don’t have the ability to employ staff on longer term contracts.” (Strategic respondent)

So although initiatives such as the HIF’s strategic partnership with ADRRN have the potential to shift how the humanitarian innovation sector operates there are still many challenges to local organisations taking a leading role in humanitarian innovation and in these partnerships. Increased participation of these actors will inevitably impact on the partnership possibilities, bringing new opportunities as well as challenges.



Cognitive Processing Therapy (CPT) training taking place in Bukavu, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Taken from HIF-funded project 'Embedding Cognitive Processing Therapy in the DRC health system'. Photo credit: International Rescue Committee

5. REVIEW FINDINGS: CHALLENGES TO EFFECTIVE HUMANITARIAN INNOVATION PARTNERSHIPS

Challenges to effective partnering fall into two main categories: challenges due to the humanitarian (innovation) ecosystem and its impact on different actors, the roles they play and their ability to engage in innovation partnerships; and managing the challenges of innovation within partnerships.

5.1 THE NATURE OF THE ECOSYSTEM

As noted in the literature review, the humanitarian system itself is relatively closed, and dominated by actors from the Global North. Respondents identified key attributes of the system that constrain innovation and affect partnerships. These included sector's appetite for risk, and funding issues:

“The humanitarian system is a dysfunctional marketplace, there are a lot of dynamics against innovation. The system as a whole is risk averse, for good reason. We are working with vulnerable groups, there is not a lot money for experimentation; and people are not necessarily open to experiment.”

(Strategic respondent)

At a systemic level donor–INGO relationships were described as problematic, given the expectations that exist among many donors for results-based management¹¹, and how this has impacted on how INGOs design and deliver their interventions. For example, one respondent shared how these relationships affected who they partner with for certain parts of their innovation work:

“University funding is good for risky innovation. We were looking at a software app to measure the height of children with a photo; we had no idea if it would be taken up by the sector, it was high risk. But because universities are interested in putting their research into practice, and less concerned about whether the innovation is taken up, we can do speculative types of research with them; when we get programmatic (aid donor) funding we need to be able to make the link to impact.” (Global not-for-profit respondent)

Other funding challenges concerned the fact that it was often easier to get funding for piloting than for adaptation or scale, which could interrupt momentum and challenge the partnership at different moments of the innovation process. Another systemic issue, echoing the work of Ramalingam et al. (2015), concerned the nature of relationships in the system:

“Within the development sector we know that we compete in some fields and collaborate in others; what does this mean for innovation? If a big INGO has asked a smaller organisation ‘can we trial your innovation?’ the smaller organisation will need to think about issues of business model and quality control, but also think about how the impact is part of their *raison d’être*. We haven’t understood etiquette and how to work within the field of innovation; and this is a challenge to partnership.” (Strategic respondent)

Different actors faced different challenges with the system. For example, despite the recent focus on including local actors and communities affected by crises as innovators, there were barriers to this. These included asymmetries of knowledge caused by a lack of exposure to multiple humanitarian contexts which limited the ability of local actors and communities affected by crises to identify what common challenges are, or know what strategies have previously been used, whether these were successful or failed; one strategic respondent observed that the “body of knowledge around innovation is very remote to local organisations.”

Recognition of this challenge has been a key driver of the HIF’s strategic partnership with ADRRN.

Through this partnership the 50 national NGOs who are members of ADRRN are able access greater knowledge and shared learning than they would be able to do on their own, gain greater support to access innovation funding and strengthen understanding across the sector of how innovation management works from the local perspective (McClelland and Hill, 2019). However, initiatives such as these are few and far between, and lack of access to knowledge, together with locally-available expertise, not only influences the development of innovative ideas, but also the ability to engage with innovative technology.

Another challenge for local actors entering the system arose from the nature of informal networking, and their lack of ability to identify, and then form relationships with, appropriate innovation partners, exacerbated by challenges of innovation terminology and language. It was clear that the barriers to entry for local organisations are significantly higher than for global actors:

“Within humanitarian contexts there are no specific structures or professional standards, in other contexts factories partner with each other because they have certain certification, engineers and doctors are professionally qualified; but within the humanitarian sector there is no expert validation, it therefore comes down to who you know, reputation, networks, these things matter way more than they do in industry.” (Global not-for-profit respondent)

“If you are in a network you will know a lot of people, if you are part of the system it is quite easy to navigate, but it is hard to get into the system.” (INGO respondent)

Individual innovators also mentioned the challenges of knowing how to identify an appropriate partner. Recognition of the importance of informal networking and how actors build partnerships with those they already know inevitably reinforces a bias towards the role of large international agencies within these innovation partnerships.

5.2 THE CHALLENGES OF MANAGING INNOVATION

All respondents were positive about their partnership and felt that the strength of relationships meant that a partnership survived, adapted and even thrived through the challenges of managing an innovation process. For example, one respondent noted:

¹¹The HIF were repeatedly recognised as a different type of funder and all respondents identified how their flexible and open approach, which enabled grantees to take an adaptive approach to their work was really important and set the HIF apart from most humanitarian donors.

“There were practical challenges, we needed to get an extension from HIF because we had delays in prototypes and it took longer to get clearance to get into one of the camps, and then we changed the manufacturing process, so it took longer. We didn’t know at the beginning how it was going to pan out and we had to adapt along the way. But there were no challenges in the partnership involved, everyone got along nicely.” (INGO respondent)

The only explicit limitation to partnership was noted by two respondents in relation to their experience with a private sector organisation. One, for example, reflected:

“If we have a project and contract a private sector company to do the development it can be limited; partnerships with universities tend to have longer durability; students leave but new ones come in, so we can work together longer.” (INGO respondent)

More significant challenges concerned aspects of the innovation process itself. These included: how the intellectual property is owned, what standards or systems frame procurement processes within different organisations, and what an appropriate, sustainable business model consists of. The latter was particularly significant when working across different organisations with different business models and needs; and when the partnership had begun informally, with an idea, and resulted in a product which needed to be manufactured and sold; often discussion on business models occurred too late down the line.

Further challenges arose around the ethics of testing and the nature of evidence. For example, one respondent noted that the partners had different viewpoints on the ethics of testing an innovation designed to be used within an emergency response, at times of crisis response. For one partner the risk to lives through testing during crisis was too great; for the other the need to understand how the product worked at this moment was crucial to ensuring that the design was appropriate.

Humanitarian innovation ethics is currently an under-developed area and is of central importance – both at a systemic level (in terms of how innovation broadly is conceived of and invested in, and whose perspectives are prioritised) as well as at the operational level within any particular innovation. The HIF has emphasised the importance of innovation ethics for many years, for example in their 2015 Progress Report¹² and as part of the Humanitarian Innovation Guide¹³.

More recently, as part of their commitment to engage with the wider humanitarian innovation ecosystem to ensure that it is responsible and ethical the HIF has commissioned a piece of work to deepen thinking in this

area, working with university partners to generate a ‘Humanitarian Innovation Ethics Toolkit’ and support their grantees to strengthen ethical innovation in practice. Such toolkits will support and guide important conversations (and decisions) that are needed at different stages of the innovation process and will provide an important space for partners to develop shared understanding of these issues.

Discussion on ethics also linked to differences in understanding about the standards of evidence, where actors recognised that:

“The standard of evidence required for innovation is far more than for existing practice; and often we cannot produce evidence of that standard. We need to partner with others outside the sector for this evidence, but then there are tensions here, as we want to move things forward and they want to evidence it carefully.” (INGO respondent)

The other aspect of innovation challenges was how to blend different types of knowledge together – for example, engineering expertise on product development with humanitarian expertise regarding conditions in the field:

“Sometimes it was difficult, we had so many ideas and it was hard to decide which ideas to respond to that would make the product work, we had such different understandings – one person would say I would like to add metallic legs, then someone else would say if you put metallic legs on you can’t cut it.” (Private sector respondent, Global North)

This reinforced the need for these partnerships to be partnerships of equals, to ensure that the negotiation and trade-offs in these two types of knowledge could happen.

For example, while an engineer might have greater understanding of specific design features, a humanitarian would understand more about how to encourage to adopt a new piece of technology:

“We have used filters before, you need to explain to people how the filter works; and people need to trust it, to drink dirty water and be convinced that it will be safe. In the first stage response you don’t have time to explain this properly, so we needed to make something closer to what people are already using – for example attaching the filter to a jerrycan.” (INGO respondent)

Reflection among respondents suggested that incremental innovation might be easier to introduce.

¹²<https://www.elrha.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/HIF-Report-2015-F4-smaller-web.pdf>

¹³<https://higuide.elrha.org/toolkits/get-started/principles-and-ethics/>



Women discussing material on menstrual hygiene and how to stay healthy at Bwagiriza refugee camp in Burundi as part of HIF-funded project 'Improving action for Menstrual Hygiene Management in emergencies'. Photo credit: Corinne Ambler/New Zealand Red Cross

6. REVIEW FINDINGS: THE NATURE OF FAIR AND EQUITABLE INNOVATION PARTNERSHIPS

For many, the debate between transactional and transformational partnerships concerns a normative judgement: transactional partnerships characterised as less desirable, suggesting that one partner holds all the power, maybe defining a certain contribution from the second partner; whereas transformational partnership suggests co-creation and wider transformation. The language of fairness and equity in partnerships for development research came to the fore with the launch of the Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) and its explicit focus on fair and equitable research partnerships. The discourse on fairness and equity often centres on the potential for transformation with various research programmes suggesting a range of principles to support such partnerships (for example, those found in RRC 2017 and Christian Aid 2018). However, aside from this work the term is not well defined.

This section begins by reflecting on how and in what ways innovation partnerships are transactional and/or transformative; and then explores how the frameworks for fair and equitable partnerships are relevant in this context.

6.1 TRANSACTIONAL OR TRANSFORMATIVE PARTNERSHIP?

“Partnerships are transactional, but the people involved, and the way things get done, can be transformational.” (INGO respondent)

Understanding the concepts of ‘transactional’ and ‘transformative’ in relation to humanitarian innovation partnerships suggests a more nuanced approach is necessary. On the one hand, it was clear that a grant-funded innovation process, which can involve many partnerships at different points in the journey, leaves little space for standard understandings of transformation. Partnership was often short-term and focused on getting the right skills in the room. On the other hand, the very nature of innovation – of valuing space for creative out-of-the-box thinking and bringing unusual actors together – was clearly transformative, both in terms of the learning experience for those involved and the innovation output.

Respondents distinguished between the nature of the relationship within the formal partnership – which might be transactional, involve a contract and delivery of specific outputs – and the wider relationship, that exists outside the formal project framework:

“The transformational stuff can emerge through serendipity and opportunities that emerge, get talking in the pub on Friday night after work, brain wave, personal connections, this can lead to a break-through and it can’t be pre-defined. If you are looking together into the future, you are looking to a bigger idea, then you have the conditions for transformational things to occur.” (Global not-for profit respondent)

One respondent suggested that the type of innovation shaped the possibilities for transformation – with product-based innovation involving transactional partnership, as organisations came together to develop a specific product, but that process-based innovation might provide greater space for transformational partnership, as working through the process involves greater adaptation within the organisation involved, and in-roads into the humanitarian system.

The relationship between the partnership and the innovation is clearly important. The HIF-funded partnership often focused on one phase of innovation work; and respondents suggested that they participated because they were interested to be part of a specific innovation and its potential to transform the humanitarian sector, rather than because of interest for their own, or their organisational, transformation.

However, at the same time, these transactional relationships did give those inside the partnership opportunities to learn and develop personally. Several respondents identified the benefits of engaging with different actors, new ideas and new processes (for example, learning about a manufacturing process).

Transformation was therefore at the level of the innovation, rather than at the level of partnership; and included both individual and organisational transformation:

“My way of thinking has changed in terms of how I respond to the ideas of others, rather than just going with my ideas. You learn how to manage yourself, and move around different aspects of how others work, and you learn to work together, to understand different concepts and how different people think.” (Private sector organisation, Global North)

“It grew, and I grew within it, and then the organisation grows through this too. We now have (new) expertise, technical expertise. But it is not only the technical expertise but also the relationship and how we are learning and growing together, and how we are working with our partner and the communities affected by crises also.” (National NGO respondent)

For some, participation in the partnership had enhanced their own opportunities and career pathways:

“(The organisation) is like my guardian, constantly pushing me forward to achieve my goals, they supported me, provided me with opportunities to work with international engineers and supported me to set up my business, it is like they are watching over me.” (Technology entrepreneur, Global South)

Another respondent explained how involvement in the partnership had enhanced their own organisational standing and confidence, for example through recognising that they held relevant knowledge for the humanitarian sector, and how the experience contributed to their building a relationship with local government for future humanitarian action.

However, while these examples of transformation did exist, it is important to note that not all partnerships were empowering or transformative, and often the transformation was only experienced at the individual level, rather than more broadly. For example, one partner noted how they had completed the activities defined in the partnership contract, but this had not shifted their practice, or created opportunities for future work; the contract had ended and they remained in the same position as previously. They noted that this was because the innovation itself had not taken off, further reinforcing the idea that transformation in partnership is affected by the success of the innovation as well as the partnership relationships.

6.2 IMPLICATIONS FOR FAIR AND EQUITABLE HUMANITARIAN INNOVATION PARTNERSHIPS

At a basic level the respondents for this review felt that the partnerships that they had participated in were positive. Responses suggest that those involved felt empowered within the partnership, they were clear about their role and appreciated the opportunity to participate. Moreover, many respondents emphasised their personal learning and transformation through the partnership.

Fairness and equity mean different things to different people. Key attributes which emerged through the review concern how the partnership began, and what level of risk each actor took in entering it; how roles were distributed and the extent to which motivation aligned with level of ownership of the innovation (i.e. in some partnerships shared ownership and co-creation were important, while for others the appropriate terms of reference for sub-contracting were more relevant); and the extent to which there was shared vision about how the partnership was conceived: as a moment on a journey, or along the entire innovation cycle. Agreement on intellectual property rights and future business model are clearly also relevant for fairness and equity – although as discussed earlier, where partnership was not sustained through the development to scale phases, the partners involved seemed to be content that this was the natural process of innovation.

However, considering fairness and equity at the systemic level provides greater challenge. Partnerships exist in context. The context influences assumptions about the potential and possibilities for partnership, who participates and how, the roles that different actors play and the types of knowledge that are valued and prioritised. But this context is dynamic; and while it shapes partnerships, it can also be influenced by them.

As noted earlier, within the humanitarian innovation landscape previous studies have suggested that its top-down nature, and domination of actors from the Global North influence who is conceived of as an innovator and the types of innovation that occur. The political economy of the humanitarian system suggests that innovation in technology, driven by a profit motivation prevails. And yet, analysis by humanitarian actors suggests that such innovation may not be adopted, either by humanitarian agencies or communities affected by crises.

Such an approach to innovation casts the innovator as the one with technical know-how and access to information, with the humanitarian actors and communities affected by crises positioned as the market, used to test and feedback on a potential product. This clearly limits fairness and equity in the system and runs the risk of reproducing the same types of innovation multiple times.

While this may be exciting from an innovation perspective, it does not add value from an impact perspective.

The adoption and use of the innovation may be limited because the innovation itself is not ‘owned’ by those it is meant for, it may not respond to key problems, or because it is not championed by humanitarian actors and therefore may get lost in the complex ecosystem, failing to reach those it is intended for.

One way to consider fair and equitable partnerships could be to explore this dynamic further – to ask how the nature of innovation and the power dynamics surrounding participation interact. What hierarchies of innovation exist, and how do these shape the partnerships roles and relationships – including who is able to participate in the first place. Deepening understanding on how these two dimensions interact could give meaning to fairness and equity, at a partnership and a systemic level. For example, detailing knowledge on who participates in what ways within the current innovation system and thinking through the potential levers for change if this participation is to be challenged and redistributed. Could this happen through investing resources at different levels, or is it also about challenging the nature of how innovation is understood?

Such considerations suggest it is important to look beyond individual partnerships when considering fairness and equity – to ask whose perspective and voice influences agenda setting, governance, resource allocation and uptake in relation to innovation; and how inclusion of local actors and populations affected by crises at this level might influence the system.

Another dimension within a systemic approach is to consider the role of non-humanitarian local actors. While the humanitarian sector is considering how to respond to the commitments of the Grand Bargain, and emphasising the role of local civil society, innovation projects involve a wide diversity of skills and perspectives. For fairness and equity to be translated into practice at a systemic level, funders and other global actors need to consider how they nurture local networks of actors that reflect the diversity of partners needed for innovation. This could include supporting wider private sector development and building the capacity of local private sector actors to participate in humanitarian innovation partnerships, partnering with academic experts, and potentially challenging and influencing legal frameworks which currently limit innovative practice. For local humanitarian actors this means strengthening their confidence and ability to engage with such diverse organisational partners.

Such reflections suggest a series of further interventions could be pursued to create more enabling conditions for fair and equitable humanitarian partnerships.

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As part of its community engagement activities, the Qatar Red Crescent Society team along with beneficiaries examine the “Smart Bucket”, a practical solution that ensures handwashing and making use of soap water for discharge. From the HIF-funded project ‘User-centred sanitation design through rapid community engagement’. Photo credit: Suleiman Al Sumairy

7. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As introduced in the literature review, much of the research and framing on humanitarian innovation distinguishes between where the initial idea is generated (problem-driven or solution-driven); who is it generated by (a humanitarian actor or an ‘innovator’), the type of innovation, and the moment of the innovation cycle. This review of a small number of HIF-funded innovation partnerships, suggests that the nature of and dynamics in partnerships are less dependent on these aspects and more influenced by the personality, mindset and behaviour of the actors involved. Key to successful partnership is the idea that those involved are “looking in the same direction” and have passion, commitment and belief.

Every respondent in this review was convinced that the innovation they had participated in would not have been successful had it not been for partnership, although meanings of partnership varied. Even at its most basic level, where the partnership referred to bringing in an organisation to test an innovation, the actor felt that they had learnt something through their involvement, and the innovator recognised that they would not have managed to move the development of their innovation forward without this active participation. The review did not study whether and how these innovations were improving humanitarian action, but in the words of one respondent “innovation needs to be loved and taken up by those that it is meant for” and if this does not happen, however successful the relationship is, in their view the partnership would have failed.

Looking forward and learning from these experiences suggests key recommendations for actors in the humanitarian innovation sector:

Firstly, it is important to recognise that there are a set of actors who currently have greater power within the humanitarian innovation ecosystem – these are global actors including: corporations, donors, INGOs and international agencies. These organisations need to actively consider the rights of populations affected by crises and the risks such individuals and groups face on a daily basis whether they have recently experienced a humanitarian emergency, or live in an area which is vulnerable to disaster. Such agencies must ensure that their participation in the sector is grounded in a commitment to reducing the impact of humanitarian emergencies on these diverse populations. This involves a commitment to put into place mechanisms to support safe, responsible and ethical innovation in the humanitarian sector.

Secondly, as the findings have shown, humanitarian innovation partnerships do differ from other humanitarian partnerships. One respondent commented:

“The materials from the Partnership Brokers Association stand up to humanitarian innovation partnership, that is 70–80% stands as is, 10–15% doesn’t work. But when starting most partnerships the negotiation is around established assets and this doesn’t translate into innovation partnerships, where you are creating new assets and capabilities, so it is not what you are bringing but what you are creating.” (Strategic Respondent)

This reality impacts on how those involved in developing innovations establish and maintain partnerships, balancing having the ‘right skills in the room’ with the desire for long term transformative relationships. As more relationships are developed between actors with different positions and structural power it is likely that there will be trade-offs involved between short-term practical relationships and laying the foundations for deeper change in the humanitarian innovation ecosystem. Addressing these dynamics is not straightforward and will involve an ability to respond to different priorities at different times.

However, humanitarian innovation actors can also act to strengthen the impact of humanitarian innovation, through strengthening the operation of innovation partnerships:

7.1 FOR DONORS

Ensure your approach to funding is fit for purpose

The HIF was recognised by all respondents as an excellent funder due to the support it gave in the proposal development phase, partnership brokering and for Early Stage Innovation (in addition to Diffusion and Scale); and its approachability and flexibility. Other donors could learn from this flexible approach, particularly the recognition that standard log-frame tools do not work well for managing innovation and therefore it is unhelpful to have to report against these; although good learning frameworks, with clarity on project aims, assumptions and criteria for success are all important.

Use funding tools (i.e. application and reporting processes) to incentivise good innovation partnership working

Donors can influence behaviour through grant application and reporting processes and through investing in capacity development for partnership. Integrating questions into these systems that ask how the partnership has been developed, and how it is envisaged that it will evolve – focusing attention on ethics, intellectual property, partnerships at moments of transition, and learning in partnership – would all be useful.

Invest in innovation (and partnership) across the whole innovation cycle

Donors should ensure that they are investing sufficient resources in Implementation and Diffusion; This includes financial inputs in addition to using their application forms processes to encourage applicants to consider the role of partners (especially local actors) at these stages of innovation. Focusing attention on partnership across the innovation cycle will contribute to strengthening the system.

Increase investment in local actors to enable greater participation in different types of innovation, and more grounded partnerships

Two further actions for donors would strengthen the ability for local actors (across the gamut of different local organisations, and including populations affected by crises) to participate as partners within innovation processes, and thus contribute to creating a more responsible humanitarian innovation ecosystem:

- Invest in local innovation networks: Innovation at the local level cannot be driven by local civil society alone and needs to be supported by stronger local innovation and technology ecosystems, paying attention to the role of other local actors including government, academia and the private sector. This involves collaboration beyond the humanitarian sector with other development actors.
- Invest in innovation for emergency response: Innovation in post-disaster settings involves exploring the role of innovation in survivor-led response, recognising that not only are such innovations likely to be locally appropriate, but that skills and confidence developed through the response will strengthen possibilities for recovery and reconstruction.

7.2 FOR 'INNOVATORS' EXTERNAL TO THE SECTOR

Many of these actors enter the humanitarian innovation sector with an idea, and then look for a problem to solve. The HIF is clear that it will not fund such initiatives; and any applications must respond to a clearly identified problem. However, for innovation actors who start with an idea partnership is key in their process of exploring and grounding their idea.

Take a lead from those involved in humanitarian action

Whether global agencies or communities affected by crises feedback on your ideas – if it is difficult to encourage them to participate with you in an innovation this probably means it is unlikely to have traction in the sector, conversely, listening to their priorities could enable you to put your skills and knowledge to the most impactful use.

Consider and plan for your innovation journey

Ensure attention is focused along its entirety; establishing the relationships, knowledge and skills needed at different points. This includes being mindful of the need to engage official humanitarian actors as gatekeepers and brokers; recognising that their legal frameworks and priorities will influence what you as an innovator are able to do. Equally important is to consider whose perspectives are important in informing the innovation pathway and whether and how an innovation moves to the next stage on the journey and whose agenda innovation plans respond to.

Ensure you are acting ethically

Deep engagement with ethical innovation frameworks (cf. HIF's forthcoming toolkit), and literature which catalogues different types of participation will be useful here and help to guide identification of key potential partners and appropriate investment in partnerships.

7.3 FOR GLOBAL HUMANITARIAN ACTORS

In many ways these organisations are best placed to be intermediaries for innovation. They have rich experience, wide access and exposure to multiple innovation contexts and are increasingly engaged with research and building their research capacity. This enables them to identify common challenges and possibilities across humanitarian settings. Moreover, they have the gravitas and connections to bring new partners on board.

Such actors have also signed up to the Grand Bargain, and as such have committed to supporting localisation, and are guided by the Core Humanitarian Standard in ensuring that appropriate accountability relationships frame partnerships.

Ensure that your commitments to localisation are translated into the area of innovation

Reflect on how your power, financial resources and access can be used to open up the innovation system to local partners, rather than taking their place in it. This involves clarity about how innovation fits with wider development ambitions, including participation and empowerment, and ensuring coherence across the innovation process, asking for example how those involved in testing the innovation are recognised and valued in innovation processes.

Support local actors to take the decisions about whether and how they should become involved in innovation

This could be done directly through funding, and also through capacity development initiatives, drawing on a range of participatory approaches to enable local actors to identify key questions, information needs, interest areas and clarify what they are not interested in participating in, to guide decision making around partnership. Strategic partnerships such as the HIF's partnership with ADRRN model this type of practice and should contribute to supporting wider systemic change in the humanitarian innovation ecosystem.

7.4 FOR LOCAL NGOS AND COMMUNITIES AFFECTED BY CRISES

A starting point for these actors is to remember that innovators need them to ensure the success of innovations, this should enable you to feel more empowered in your engagements:

Make sure you are only participating in innovation processes that align with your needs and interests

For local NGOs and populations affected by crises, entering into innovation can be risky, and it may be helpful to systematically work through the considerations needed to inform decisions about which partnerships to enter into and how, and what is needed to uphold local NGO and community rights within a partnership. It could be useful to think of this at three levels:

- the innovation output,
- the personal and organisation benefit,
- and how involvement can shift power.

For example, what type of legacy will the partnership leave? It might include stronger relationships with a range of actors, including government and policy makers; greater confidence in community knowledge and ability to articulate it; or specific technical skills.

Consider and actively engage in the multiple roles that you can play as a local partner at different stages of the innovation cycle

To date attention has focused on local innovation and included problem identification, design and testing. But further roles as collaborators and brokers, in scaling up innovations, or influencing future practice elsewhere are also important. For example, developing voice and influence in relation to external innovation could contribute to ensuring that appropriate innovations are supported from implementation to scale up, that ethics are properly considered across the innovation journey, including how the innovation is ethically tested, and how the intellectual property of innovations are owned.

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