

HIF EVALUATION 2019–2022: MANAGEMENT RESPONSE

INTRODUCTION

Elrha is a global organisation that finds solutions to complex humanitarian programmes through research and innovation. It was established in 2009 with a mandate to bridge the gap between academic research and humanitarian response. Elrha delivers three core programmes: the Humanitarian Innovation Fund (HIF), launched in 2011, Research for Health in Humanitarian Crises (R2HC), launched in 2013, and the Global Prioritisation Exercise (GPE), launched in 2017. Elrha also hosts the UK Humanitarian Innovation Hub (UKHIH).

The HIF is a grant-making programme that was established to improve outcomes for people affected by humanitarian crises by identifying, nurturing and sharing more effective, scalable solutions. It funds, manages and supports grantees at different stages of innovation, from problem recognition to scale. Since 2011 the HIF has invested over £20m in over 200 grants and has contributed to building an enabling innovation ecosystem through its funding, research, convening, policy engagement and resource development.

Background

In 2019, Elrha commissioned an independent evaluation of its HIF programme. The evaluation, led by The Research People, covered the period 2019-2022 and reviewed HIF's 'core' work (Scale, Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH), Disability and Older Age Inclusion (DOAI), Gender-Based Violence (GBV) and Building Skills and Capabilities), but excluded our Community Led Innovation Programme (CLIP) as this was set up after the inception of the evaluation. CLIP is currently being separately and independently evaluated. The HIF evaluation was overseen by an independent Steering Committee consisting of 6 members¹ and chaired by Nancy McPherson, Director of Evaluation at the Rockefeller Foundation. We are grateful for the Steering Committee members' time and guidance throughout the evaluation process, and for the valuable feedback and programme steer from HIF's Advisory Group, and the wide range of stakeholders who informed the evaluation.

¹ Andrew Shaw, UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO); Nicholas Leader, FCDO; Kippy Joseph, Global Innovation Fund; Bonaventure Gbétoho Sokpoh, CHS Alliance; Howard Rush, University of Brighton; Fiona Burger, Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Evaluation focus

During the evaluation period, the HIF was governed by [Elrha's 2019-23 Strategy](#), which outlined the need for humanitarian research and evidence to improve humanitarian response. Elrha aims to catalyse change across the humanitarian sector, including by influencing funding decisions, building knowledge and skills, and creating a supportive environment for research and innovation.

The strategy defined four interconnected areas of work (the 4Ds) to achieve these aims:

- **Define:** Identify and prioritise the most pressing problems within humanitarian response and plan the research and innovation approaches needed to tackle them.
- **Develop:** Invest in the right people to research, explore, develop and test the solutions to these problems. This 'D' includes all of the HIF's grant-making activities.
- **Distil:** Create and share practical tools and guidance based on evidence of what works.
- **Drive:** Empower the humanitarian community to adopt what works.

These areas of work are designed to maximise the impact of the initiatives that Elrha supports. They require its programmes to "engage early and regularly" with key influencers and decision makers at global and national levels to ensure their involvement and commitment.

The HIF implements this strategy across six focus areas of work:

- Disability and Older Age Inclusion (DOAI)
- Gender Based Violence (GBV)
- Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH)
- Scale
- Locally-led Innovation
- Skills Building

In addition to Elrha's strategy, the HIF also had a programme strategy for 2018-2020 that guided its investments and work. The strategy, '[A Responsible Ambition](#),' emphasised the importance of evidence-based and ethical innovation, collaboration with others, and accountability. Six main elements of work were identified and although the strategy has expired, it was important in decisions that were

made over the evaluation period. The areas of work were: end-to-end solutions, new partnerships, local engagement, bigger problems, ecosystem change and creating tools.

The HIF evaluation assessed the programme's performance against Elrha's 2019-23 strategy, organising areas of activities and results around the 4 Ds.²

Findings

The evaluation report found a range of areas in which HIF's work has **delivered impact for the humanitarian sector**. For example, a number of projects have achieved significant scale (annex 11), with past Scale grantee Field Ready having indirectly assisted at least 1m people, GBV intervention Make Music Matter now supporting survivors of sexual violence in 11 countries, and the SWOT machine learning tool having been used to ensure safe water for over 300,000 people.

The report also highlighted the **academic rigour of the HIF's approach to learning**, with several grantees having published peer-reviewed articles in an academic journal for the first time as a result of encouragement from the HIF. The HIF's own research, publications and funding have influenced innovation support and practice in the wider sector, including through its gap analyses and publications such as the [Humanitarian Innovation Guide](#) and '[Too Tough to Scale: Challenges to scaling innovation in the humanitarian sector](#)': for example, 87% of 30 surveyed grantees and 60% of 27 stakeholders agreed or strongly agreed that the HIF had raised awareness of key gaps that would benefit from innovation.

Additionally, HIF's **flexible grant management and non-financial support** was seen as a crucial success factor by grantees. HIF was seen as a hands-on funder, with programme staff taking an active interest in the innovation teams' day-to-day challenges and decisions and applying a can-do attitude to helping grantees overcome hurdles. In a survey of 30 grantees, 12 (40%) said the HIF's non-financial support helped their innovation thrive to a great extent, and a further 10 (33%) said it helped to some extent. The support was particularly important to smaller organisations and those innovating from outside the sector (such as start-ups and small NGOs). Finally, the HIF's support in partnership brokering and forming connections also made important contributions to grantee outcomes (see below). Interviewees highlighted how the HIF had facilitated relationships between humanitarian actors, academics, and the private sector.

² From HIF Endline Report: final report (The Research People)

The evaluation also highlighted seven main areas for attention, with recommendations for improvements or changes HIF might make to strengthen its impact. Elrha welcomes these insights and learnings, and in this management response we set out how we plan to address them.

Management response

In 2022, Elrha embarked on a journey to review and update our strategy. With the HIF evaluation report ready in January 2023, Elrha has been able to review all findings and recommendations to ensure that these directly inform our new Long Term strategy 2023-2040, which will be published by June 2023. This management response sets out how each of the main report recommendations is being addressed in Elrha's new strategy and in HIF's operational plans. Each section also includes a set of key questions Elrha will continue to explore further as we build on the learning from the evaluation.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS AND ELRHA RESPONSE

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| 1. Focus more deliberately on end-to-end funding but balance with funding novel and unproven ideas | <p>There is a tension between the challenge fund approach and the HIF’s historical role in (and previous strategy on) providing end-to-end funding. The challenge fund approach allowed the HIF to identify a range of solutions to priority problems, but data indicates that the HIF’s greatest contributions in terms of learning and scaling occurred when it engaged in longer-term commitments with grantees. Additionally, stakeholders felt that the HIF tends to make cautious decisions and misses out on more novel and unproven ideas, and that this may be a consequence of the challenge fund approach, that sees the problem focus and potential solution field very clearly defined.</p> <p>Recommendation 3: Focus more deliberately on end-to-end funding, even where that means moving away from a challenge fund approach for later-stage innovations.</p> <p>Recommendation 15: Continue to work with technical communities of practice and governance groups to identify more novel solutions for funding. Document how the ethics work allows the HIF to responsibly take more risk and tolerate more failure and share this learning with other funders.</p> |
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We recognise the value of sustained support throughout the long scaling journey many innovations face, and ensuring end-to-end support is a core pillar in Elrha’s new strategy. The HIF will take two approaches to this:

- We will design all new funding calls from 2024 with a clear, long-term pathway for the best innovations to be supported from inception to integration in humanitarian policy and practice. This support may be financial or non-financial, and it may consist of HIF-awarded grants only or focus on the transition of HIF-awarded grants to other sources of funding.
- We will provide opportunities for projects previously funded by the HIF to progress further with our support.

In 2023, we will develop detailed plans for how we may structure such a long-term ‘funnelling’ approach and decide which projects to fund for the long term, the ‘user journey’ of different types / stages of projects through our funding facilities, and how we may ensure ‘end-to-end’ funding for the highest-potential projects where we are not able to provide all the funding needed. As part of this, we will develop our ‘portfolio approach’ (drawing on [models](#) developed by OECD’s Observatory of Public Sector Innovation (OPSI), amongst others) to risk to ensure that we deliberately include in our portfolio a certain amount of highly novel, high-potential ideas that still have little evidence behind them and may fail. Portfolio approaches help to systematically manage and prioritise innovation activities according to concurrent and diverse purposes and priorities, such as risk appetite, as described by OPSI in this [blog](#) (March 2023).

We will continue to use our various funding mechanisms (such as Advancing Innovation and Scale) to support previously funded innovations with high potential for impact, but we will review and align these funding opportunities across our portfolios to ensure that all innovations know how, and can, access, timely opportunities for follow-on funding.

Key questions:

- How may we balance HIF’s investments to ensure an optimal mix of high and low risk innovations?
- How may we adapt our grant management, including expectations for success and failure levels across the entire portfolio, to account for these different types of projects?

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| 2. Articulate how problem recognition grants will feed into future opportunities | The value and role of early-stage research (problem recognition) grants has not been well defined, nor has the full potential impact of HIF’s funded problem recognition grants been realised. Recommendation 4: Articulate how recognition grants are intended to feed into future opportunities (for example, through informing the HIF’s work, others’ work, or leading to innovations themselves), and to use this definition to assess whether Recognition grants were worth the investment. Begin capturing data on the impact of these grants. |
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Problem recognition is a key step of the innovation process, and we remain the only funder with dedicated support for this stage. Fully understanding problem spaces we work in and ensuring that they are the right ones is key to ensuring a good return on investment – a view reflected by the HIF’s Advisory Group who, when reviewing this recommendation, indicated a strong preference for HIF to continue funding problem recognition where relevant. Elrha’s new strategy, aligned with this direction, sets out the importance of sector-wide coordination on problem identification and prioritisation, and the HIF programme will play an active role in advocating for this.

However, we recognise that problem recognition projects need further support and funding to ensure they can progress to adaptation or invention stages of the process. In 2023, we will develop a plan to ensure that previously funded problem recognition grants, and any we may fund in the future, can be directly or indirectly supported to progress on the innovation journey. We will support recently ended problem recognition project teams to share and broadly disseminate their learnings, including opportunities for innovation identified. This



will link to the 'end-to-end' plans referenced above: where appropriate, problem recognition research should be the first step on a long-term innovation journey, supported by the HIF where relevant and possible.

Finally, we will integrate into our MEAL planning a more nuanced way of assessing the impact of problem recognition grants: not all of them can or should progress to next stage (for instance, if there are no innovation opportunities identified), but all should effectively share evidence with the relevant communities of practice.

Key questions:

- How may the HIF identify where and when problem recognition is most relevant, and how may we ensure that we support both the skills/team needed for problem recognition research and the skills/team needed to react to the innovation opportunities identified?
- How may the HIF play a more active role in disseminating findings from problem recognition grants and supporting these to evolve into the next stages of innovation?

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| 3. Develop a proactive strategy for driving the adoption of innovations | There was limited investment in driving adoption and while some of the activities have been very influential, they have also been relatively ad-hoc. There is a need to invest in driving adoption, including staff/grantee capability. Recommendation 8: Develop a proactive strategy for Drive that would support innovations to be adopted within the sector, clarifying the roles of the HIF and its grantees. Recommendation 9: Review the resource allocation across the 4Ds to enable more significant value to be generated in Distil and Drive. |
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In recent years, it has become increasingly clear to the humanitarian innovation sector that focusing on 'supply' only – i.e., identifying and supporting innovation projects – is only part of the ecosystem needed for innovation to deliver large-scale change. With our research into demand creation (such as on WASH procurement) and experimental funding mechanisms to support adoption of innovation, the HIF was the first innovation funder to actively advocate for changes to, and fund incentives on, the 'demand' side – i.e., the humanitarian organisations who would be the users or purchasers of innovations.



However, we recognise that more work is needed to build the right enabling environment for innovations to scale. In Elrha's new strategy we have set out how we will focus our resources more explicitly on different avenues for building the demand side of the humanitarian market for innovations. We will do this through:

- Building relationships in relevant technical communities of practice that allow us to actively work to integrate well-evidenced innovations into standard setting and donor decision-making processes.
- Leveraging our position and credibility in the sector to give more exposure to the those of our funded innovations with the highest potential for impact, working actively with our communities of practice to build trust in the solutions and their evidence. This might take the form of showcases or networks of 'innovation champions.'
- As part of our end-to-end support approach, we will develop, and support grantees to develop strategies and tactics to advocate for the scaling and/or adoption of all mature, previously and currently funded innovations that are in a position to scale ethically and impactfully.
- Working in collaboration with a wide range of actors to identify market entry pathways for humanitarian innovation generally, and for individual projects specifically, and supporting our funded innovations to access these. For example, we will build our understanding of decision-making around procurement and programme design in emergencies within relevant technical sectors and actors and develop strategies for influencing these to open entry points for innovation.
- Experimenting with ways of supporting both the supply (innovator-led) and demand (adopter-led) side of scaling innovations through funding calls, research and non-financial support: through this, we aim to build incentives for humanitarian actors to routinely engage with new evidence and innovation.

Key questions:

- How may we expand our understanding of the dynamics of innovation adoption and scaling to enable us to invest in leverage points in the system?
- How may – and should – the potential routes to scaling inform which areas the HIF chooses for funding calls, and how might this influence the resources needed?

- The HIF’s Advisory Group have provided a strong steer that HIF should actively champion its best innovations. How may we balance and evolve Elrha’s role as a ‘neutral’ funder of innovation against our desire to support and incentivise the uptake of our funded innovations?
- How may we collaborate with other innovation funders and advocate for changes to the system that help to build a better enabling environment and allow for stronger mechanisms for uptake of innovation?

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| 4. Decide HIF’s role as a convener for the innovation sector | <p>The HIF played an important role as a convener for innovation actors until 2020, but this was paused during Covid-19 and following budget cuts. The HIF retained good relationships with individual innovation funders, but there was still a need for a convener for the sector.</p> <p>Recommendation 7: Decide whether the HIF will play a future role as a convener for the innovation sector and how this aligns with other strategic activities.</p> |
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It is encouraging to read the strong call from stakeholders for HIF to step back into convening. Elrha’s new strategy places convening and coordination at the heart of how we will realise the potential of humanitarian innovation and research and the HIF will play a key role in delivering this. As part of this, we will increase our innovation-specific convening to facilitate collective learning on what works in humanitarian innovation and embed this in practice.

We will contribute to the sector debate on innovation management and promote responsible, evidence-led and effective innovation approaches to help solve humanitarian problems. We will continue to scope sector-wide gaps in knowledge and skills and deliver research and guidance for effective and responsible innovation management: we remain committed to demonstrating the potential of ethical, participatory and inclusive humanitarian innovation.

Building on our own and external tools and guidance, we will convene grantees to support their skills and capacities on responsible innovation management through non-financial support delivered directly by the HIF team or sourced from external experts.

We will also convene relevant technical communities of practice to showcase the mature and well-evidenced innovations in our portfolio that are ready for adoption.



Key questions:

- How may we evolve our formats and aims of convening to support Elrha’s new strategy, including our commitments to shifting the power, anti-racism, and climate responsibility (see section 5)?
- How may we work with other innovation funders on to collectively strengthen the enabling environment for humanitarian innovation?
- How may we continue to learn from the wider innovation space – i.e., beyond just humanitarian innovation – to evolve our thinking, approaches and support?

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| 5. Consolidate locally-led work and build clear approach to shifting power | <p>The HIF’s CLIP work is leading the way on how to support locally-led innovation. However, there is limited articulation of how this work relates to HIF’s other work, or how the outcomes and tactics used differ.</p> <p>Recommendation 5: Define the HIF’s role, investment approach, and <i>Drive</i> approach for locally-led innovation and clarify how the CLIP and the other focus areas fit within this. There are still major barriers to LMIC actors accessing HIF’s funding, and only a small part of the HIF’s technical portfolios is led by LMIC actors.</p> <p>Recommendation 6: Work with partners to explore barriers to inclusion for those in LMICs and explore how to seek out and/or pre-screen potential applicants to reduce the number of failed applications.</p> <p>Recommendation 11: Include frontline responders and members of crisis-affected populations in all governance bodies of the HIF.</p> <p>Recommendation 12: Explore the synergies between different work areas to ensure a cohesive approach to learning and decision making.</p> <p>Recommendation 13: Commission guidance on how to become an anti-racist organisation and decolonise the work of the HIF.</p> |
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Elrha is committed to contributing to building a more equitable and effective humanitarian research and innovation system that leads to better, locally informed, and culturally appropriate response for people affected by crises. As such, Elrha’s new strategy includes three long term commitments:

- **Shifting the power** to local actors. This will include making our grant making more inclusive. In 2023-24 we will explore how we can adapt HIF programme design and funding allocations to create greater equity in our own work and in the broader system of humanitarian research and innovation. We will develop and publicly share our learning, such as in our 2022 paper '[Meanings of humanitarian innovation](#),' which discussed decolonisation in relation to humanitarian innovation, and drew on our work in the CLIP. This was published in English, Spanish, Tagalog, Bahasa, and French.
- **Becoming an anti-racist organisation. This will** include diversifying Elrha's governance and technical review bodies. In 2023-24 we will review these bodies to ensure they are fit for purpose, right for delivering our new strategy and long term commitments, and have strong representation from people and communities affected by crisis. We will seek advice from external experts on anti-racism work where relevant.
- **Ensuring that Elrha is climate and environmentally responsible** to minimise our contribution to the impact of human-induced climate change on the world's most vulnerable people.

We believe that global, regional and local humanitarian actors, as well as private and public sector actors, have an important role to play in using innovation to improve humanitarian outcomes and we will continue to convene and fund diverse, creative groups of solvers.

We distinguish between two objectives in HIF's funding mechanisms:

1. Supporting the 'who' and focussing on innovation capabilities: In our Locally-led Innovation focus area, most notably our Community Led Innovation Partnership (CLIP), we support communities to build strong local ecosystems for humanitarian innovation and to use innovation to solve the humanitarian problems they see as most important. This is a different approach to the rest of HIF's work, in which we focus only on each individual idea and innovation project. Some locally-led solutions will have potential to scale beyond the local context, and we will support them to do so. Using learning from the CLIP, we will continue to build our understanding of what 'scale' means for locally led projects.

2. Supporting the 'what' and focussing on scale. In our technical and Scale areas of work we focus on finding the ideas with the greatest potential to address problems at large scale across humanitarian settings. We know that local actors are often best placed to deliver such high-potential solutions, but recognise that currently, only a small proportion of our technical and scale portfolios are locally led projects. Therefore, across all areas of work HIF's areas, we must experiment with new ways to increase the proportion of our portfolio led by local actors and track the success of each of these tactics.

These two ways of supporting innovation are not mutually exclusive and can and should inform each other.

Key questions:

- How may we change the way we design our funding calls and assessment of proposals to make funds more accessible for local actors?
- How may we ensure that we have the right skills, expertise, and resources to continue/expand our locally-led work? Are our grant-making systems and processes fit for purpose for supporting smaller, local organisations?
- How may we ensure that our governance bodies are more representative of the people we want to fund?
- How may we distinguish between 'local scale' and 'global scale'? What does 'good' scale mean in this context?

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| 6. Build MEL capacity in team and improve long-term MEL | The HIF did not invest enough in strong Measurement, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) processes for collating grantee outcomes and (like other humanitarian funders) has no systematic approach to tracking grantees beyond the end of funding. Recommendation 10: Invest in MEL expertise within the HIF team and set up systems to systematically collect outcomes data. |
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We recognise that the challenges of collecting long-term data on our funded innovations' performance after HIF's support has ended poses a serious risk to our ability to demonstrate the value of investing in innovation. We believe – and this is supported by ALNAP's State of the Humanitarian Sector 2022 report's innovation section (forthcoming) – that this challenge is shared with other innovation funders. We will therefore take both individual and collective action to address it: this challenge:

- Elrha's newly expanded Measurement, Evaluation, Accountability and Learning (MEAL) team will lead on the development of a more comprehensive approach to MEAL across Elrha, including the HIF. The first individual component of this approach will be to develop systems for longitudinal tracking of the HIF's past portfolio.
- We will develop a standardised case study approach to routinely commission and publish case studies every year, using the longitudinal tracking to identify past projects that have subsequently progressed to have significant impact, or which have failed and have interesting learning to share.

- We will work with other innovation funders to explore a top line, collective impact framework, as well as systems through which we can incentivise and support good, longitudinal sharing of innovations’ progress and learning.

Key questions

- How may we – alongside other innovation funders – track the impact of our projects in a nuanced way that fairly compares product, process, paradigm and positioning innovations, recognises the time lag from investment to impact of innovations, and considers the inherent risk of investing in innovation in a realistic way?
- How may we develop our MEAL approach to increasing levels of sophistication so that we might explore questions such as what has changed in the sector because of the innovation HIF has funded; what new spaces or connections have been created as a result of the work we fund; and what complex problems have we contributed to solving?

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| <p>7. Decide whether HIF will have a standalone strategy/operational plan for Elrha’s innovation component</p> | <p>The last Elrha strategy did not go into enough detail on innovation to guide HIF’s work, and the last HIF strategy expired in 2020. Additionally, the HIF’s small number of donors makes it over-reliant on its donors in strategic decisions, and diversifying the programme’s income streams would give it greater strategic flexibility, including to experiment with more innovative financing.</p> <p>Recommendation 1: Decide whether the HIF will have a standalone strategy or if more detail on innovation can be added to Elrha’s strategy, including a strategy implementation plan that focuses on how the 4Ds apply to innovation.</p> <p>Recommendation 2: Consider diversifying programme types and advocate for more innovative financing for innovation in the future, including from non-traditional donors.</p> |
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Elrha recognises the extent to which all its programmes require detailed a strategy component to guide decision-making. Underpinning Elrha’s organisational strategy, we will develop a detailed strategy for Elrha’s innovation work that sets out HIF’s contributions and how they complement those of Elrha’s other programmes (R2HC and the GPE) and its hosted entity, the UKHIH. This will include a theory of change for the HIF programme, against which any future evaluations would assess the HIF.



CONCLUSION

In summary, the HIF will build on its strengths and make some adjustments to work more effectively. The programme will deliver four core activities as part of Elrha's new strategy:

1. **Identify high quality innovation projects.** Designing and evaluating widely accessible funding calls that are informed by deep technical expertise, focus on impact on priority problems, ensure a high degree of novelty in the portfolio, and are structured around HIF support for a long-term impact pathway for the most successful projects.
2. **Provide flexible and responsible grant management.** Delivering high quality funding and grant management processes that support all relevant actors, local and global, large and small, to access our funding and deliver successful innovation projects. Ensuring rigorous MEAL practices to build nuanced and credible evidence for each innovation and build the case for investing in innovation portfolios.
3. **Produce, deliver and drive broad uptake of new tools and guidance to build the skills of our grantees and promote responsible innovation in the humanitarian system.** Delivering and commissioning research and guidance for effective and responsible innovation management, building grantee skills and capacities on innovation management, convening innovation actors and contributing to the sector debate on innovation management to promote responsible and effective approaches.
4. **Explore and actively build pathways to scale for funded projects.** Identify pathways on a conceptual and practical level for humanitarian innovation generally and for any relevant, previously or currently funded project specifically. Developing strategies and tactics to support and advocate the scaling/uptake/adoption of all mature, previously/currently funded innovations that are in a position to scale ethically and impactfully.