

BACKGROUND PAPER

Accidental and intentional innovation: valuing what's there

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Innovation is a growing area in the humanitarian sector, opening up new and unexpected spaces for different forms of collaboration, and producing accidental and intentional risks and gains. Donors' interest in this field is evidenced by a rise in funds, programmes, projects and dedicated units tasked with driving innovation organisationally and in services.

But, is innovation advancing the participation and leadership of people affected by disaster or are the same actors making the decisions?

From 'needs' to 'solutions'

The World Humanitarian Summit 'Grand Bargain' highlighted a dilemma, which has long been a focus of reflection and reform for humanitarian organisations: the geographic, institutional and intellectual location where decisions are made and solutions devised.¹ Traditionally humanitarian actors have measured impact in terms of coverage and, to a degree, quality. Assistance is largely brought in from outside and humanitarians operate from separate, designated spaces. However, a rise in innovation labs, 'fab labs', 'maker spaces' and co-working spaces has played a role in creating new communities of practice, bringing different actors together to tackle common challenges.

There are rare circumstances where innovation labs, fab labs or maker spaces are viewed by government as a public good and funded as a public service. Then there are innovation spaces resulting from organisational drive, activism, solidarity and a moral imperative to create more egalitarian, open spaces for people to pool resources, forge new alliances and have a hand in shaping services. An example of this approach is Nepal Communitere, an organisation working in Nepal and other countries that offers space for people affected by disaster to co-create solutions. It

¹ Kate Crawford and Gemma Drake, Co-risk Labs, 2018

describes its approach as having “a focus on providing the resources, processes and tools required to empower local communities to take an active role in the renewal of their own community”.²

Enabling a local culture of innovation

The [Disasters and Emergencies Preparedness Programme](#) (DEPP) innovation window, CDAC Network is co-leading with Start Network, is not about achieving “coverage” of an affected population but seeks to meaningfully engage with a handful of people working on innovations that potentially increase resilience and preparedness for everyone. If the innovations fail to impact on a bigger group, at least those involved have experienced a process and culture of innovation that can be absorbed into future activities.

Lab communities’ comprise staff employed on “national” and “international” contracts, including diasporas or people returning from work or education abroad; people who are available to take part in interviews and surveys, people who self-select to submit ideas or sit on a committee or panel and a variety of employees, technical advisors and mentors. The assumption is not that vulnerable or affected people have unlimited free time to participate in surveys, give feedback or be part of an organisation’s project process.

Instead, the DEPP teams have devised a number of mechanisms to remunerate those involved, build in feedback loops, share back stories and develop ethics and safeguarding training for those associated with the labs or tasked with meeting the public – in the labs or in their homes. The spaces range from deliberately fixed and stable to improvising in existing premises including libraries, schools, universities and galleries. People are invited to participate in public meetings, home visits, radio broadcasts or online via Facebook and other social media, as well as via the open invitation to a walk-in lab space.³

Preventing hierarchical systems from taking root

Ethical dilemmas arise and have long been debated in approaches that favour experimentation and expect failure in situations where needs and vulnerabilities are high. If innovation is substituting for basic support services, a failure to scale means no transforming innovation and no basic services. This risk is no longer centred on institutions but on those affected by crises. Furthermore, if the knowledge of innovation remains firmly in the hands of the same decision makers, there is very little ability for people at the local level to iterate and adapt solutions over longer periods of time beyond short funding cycles. Very little effort is made to translate innovation models, theories and concepts into different languages, including visually, for people to build innovation capabilities and apply useful aspects to local disaster mitigation and management strategies.

Frequently, we hear “services for” and not “services with” communities. Innovation could play a greater role in changing the language of humanitarianism if the sector is able to bring practice alongside local structures and systems in place, and can capture and value the accidental and intentional in both process and product longer term.

² Communitere International - <https://communitere.org/>

³ Kate Crawford and Gemma Drake, Co-Risk Labs, 2018

What is refreshing about the story of humanitarian innovation is that it makes space for conversations that are not only about aid policy but also about public policy, not only about “them” but also about “us” and not only about humanitarian organisations but about a wider set of institutions, people, places and precedents for similar interventions.⁴

Communities in the lead

Innovation, as a field, historically has been confined to urban, developed environments supported by organisations offering seed funding, incubation and accelerator services. Innovation was not commonly applied in fragile environments or community contexts. This is changing. A rise in activism to tackle social injustice and support citizen-led action has led to the proliferation of community-based ‘labs’ or ‘hubs’ that offer space for collaboration and recognise everyone who walks through the door as an expert.

The Migration Lab⁵ in The Hague and Vienna facilitates “opportunities for refugees, migrants and locals to meet and collaborate in cities across Europe”. Equally, humanitarian organisations are opening up innovation more widely to incorporate the perspectives and leadership of people for whom the solution is intended. UNHCR’s innovation team goes a step further proposing innovation that is not inclusive and diverse is not effective.

The team prioritises communication to support innovation in all contexts and offers the following advice: “Use and be open to a diverse array of communication media, methods, and styles. Not everybody wants to communicate face-to-face, or in that meeting...We’re not all good at public speaking, and those with complicated thoughts, or ideas, sometimes need several ways to communicate these to you, or to the team, or to others.”⁶

The Qatar Red Crescent Society has been piloting rapid exploration tools for determining WASH needs. The initiative recognises lack of ownership for the affected community in the area of sanitation provision is a perennial issue that contributes largely to low usage and maintenance of services. In place of only using quantitative data and indicators, the team is creating a system for “offering user centred data as functional input data in the decision making process...through rapid ethnographic questions and co-creation sessions to design the immediate sanitation provision.”⁷

Whose definition of scale matters?

Community activist groups supporting innovation have achieved high levels of participation and inclusion. They value local expertise, and make knowledge, training and funding available to boost people’s coping mechanisms, ingenuity, creativity and entrepreneurship. They offer a structured space with resources to bring different groups of people together to collaborate. The humanitarian sector is making progress on this front, but all too often, local initiatives and resources are overlooked in global efforts to find the next big solution. In fact, the quest for “scalable” solutions has become somewhat of a preoccupation for the sector. If we apply this to the [Maarifa Kona Lab](#)

⁴ Kate Crawford and Gemma Drake, Co-Risk Labs, 2018

⁵ <http://www.migrationlab.org/about-1>

⁶ <https://www.unhcr.org/innovation/innovation-diversity-inclusion-stop-gimmicks-catch/>

⁷ <https://www.elrha.org/project/user-centred-sanitation-design-through-rapid-community-engagement/>

working with rural communities in Marsabit and Garissa, what constitutes scale? The accumulative impact of many small-scale, local initiatives, sometimes referred to as “frugal innovations”, also drives resiliency and leads to sustainable outcomes, as proven for decades by the development sector.

With significant levels of investment in innovation, are people affected by disaster really benefitting? In an article written in 2017, Executive Director of [Ground Truth Solutions](#), Nick Van Praag points to the unclear definition of innovation as a major problem. He notes the sector’s failure to assess whether projects really “tip the balance” without adequate evaluative frameworks to determine this.⁸ Prioritising “process over product”, according to Robin Borrud and Stephanie Gliege of Communitere International, “empowers disaster-hit communities, leads to cross-sector communication, collaboration and innovation, and fills gaps in the humanitarian response”.⁹

Invitations to participate in humanitarian innovation are commonly made through competitions, hackathons, prizes and calls for ideas, many of which present criteria that can be confusing and exclusionary and put undue pressure on people experiencing high levels of trauma. The invitation to participate is communicated through channels only available to people with access to technology. According to co-founders of [mWater](#), John and Annie Feighery, approaches to innovate in aid “do not work very well and often make it even harder for successful small enterprises to grow and reach scale”. They challenge practices lifted from Silicon Valley, popular in humanitarian and development circles, that fail to support products and services that will attract further investment and really take root.¹⁰

Technology as an enabler

Artificial intelligence, satellite technology, multilingual machine translation, Blockchain, biometrics, digital identity and payment services have been innovatively adapted to humanitarian challenges in the sector bringing about widespread relief. The flip side is new threats and risks, the creation of different exclusionary spaces and more power in the hands of traditionally dominant actors.

*“So far, no system has been designed to allow end users to trace their own transactions or verify that they received the correct funding from donors – a feature particularly relevant for P2P systems”.*¹¹

Technology plays a fundamental role in delivering assistance to those affected by disaster with increasing precision and speed, facilitating greater efforts from humanitarian actors to harness and leverage the agency of the people they serve. In theory, technology should be opening up pathways for people to have a greater say in managing their lives, and it is, but often such tools remain out of reach of those most in need.

⁸ <https://givingcompass.org/article/can-innovation-labs-deliver-better-humanitarian-aid/>

⁹ Robin Borrud and Stephanie Gliege, *Managing Humanitarian Innovation* (Practical Action Publishing 2018) p.157

¹⁰ <https://medium.com/mwater-technology-for-water-and-health/beyond-prizes-hackathons-and-contests-better-ways-to-support-innovation-in-international-db3ff3763581>

¹¹ HPG, GAHI, ODI, HPG Commissioned report, February 2019, “Blockchain and Distributed Ledger Technologies in the Humanitarian Sector” by Giulio Coppi and Larissa Fast, A HPG Commissioned Report

In the field of Communication and Community Engagement (CCE), technology is opening up more direct and meaningful opportunities to provide life-saving information, gather and share crucial data and include those at risk of or engulfed in disaster in the planning and delivery of aid. Technology should support the ‘offline’ methods that work best in each unique context, and can, if intentional effort is made to support context-specific technology access.

Overcoming the technology barrier

According to the [Humanitarian Technologies Project](#), an 18-month study of social and mobile media use in the Typhoon Haiyan response, “communication technologies do not give people a ‘voice’”. They only “facilitate voice” when other elements are in place, such as a strong civil society and social capital.¹² The study found that only wealthier participants in the Philippines were able to make use of digital technologies to make their voice heard and communicate their needs. The most vulnerable people and communities, those most in need, do not have access to these technologies and do not have the skills to use them.

DEPP Labs are trying to address exclusion of the most vulnerable disaster affected communities. The Philippines innovation lab, [TUKLAS](#) is currently supporting an initiative to provide a mobile-based disaster reporting app with communities in Northern Luzon. The project is led by the [Ilocos Center for Research, Empowerment and Development](#) (ICRED).¹³ Innovator Anna Leal saw first-hand how communities were cut off entirely after Typhoon Haiyan with no means to communicate, report damage and request assistance. She and her team worked alongside community groups to design and develop an app tailored to the communication preferences of the people who will ultimately use it. She describes the process:

We worked with the community. Every month we would spend a week in the community so they could get to know us and learn to trust us. We could only understand how people lived by going there and spending time with them. The most effective way to involve people in the app design was to communicate face-to-face. In terms of technology, if you are working hand-in-hand with communities, they will be able to understand it if you are learning with them and working with the technology.

Innovation to lift communication and community engagement

A less regarded middle ground exists between innovation generated by outside actors and innovation made by people living in the disaster. It is this junction that requires attention. For humanitarian initiatives, solutions and services to be effective and take root, all experts – those with experience, those with knowledge and those with resources – need to meet. The [CDAC Network](#) is well positioned to protect and carve out inclusive spaces for innovation as a means to equip disaster affected communities with the tools, skills and supportive structures to manage the challenges they face. It seeks to facilitate better interconnections and co-creativity around

¹² <http://humanitariantechnologies.net/>

¹³ <http://www.cdacnetwork.org/i/20181220143159-jpbsw/>

innovation processes that involve communities affected by disaster both as the end-user and innovator or co-innovator.

Innovation as a discipline or curriculum is valuable in drawing together diverse actors and providing a framework for a better quality of collaboration, co-creation and problem solving. However, it is a discipline usually at the disposal of decision makers and is not commonly made available to people who have very little say in services. It could be more widely incorporated into humanitarian programmes to provide a more nuanced and intentional form of community engagement and more workable feedback and accountability mechanisms. Co-design is a recognised practice in many sectors to allow for more equitable input into and ownership over services and the way societies are run.

In terms of future focus, CDAC will prioritise national CCE platforms as an innovation in its own right, with the aim of providing affected populations and local responders with the means and access to vital communication tools to reduce disaster risks, improve response and build resiliency at the local level. CDAC is currently supporting a growing number of collective platforms, known also as working groups or communities of practice operating at national or sub-national level, which entails strengthening cross-platform knowledge sharing, innovation capabilities, local leadership, and adaption of technologies, methodologies and systems that will enhance functionality and services.

For these platforms to take root and serve communities well, it is vital they embrace inclusive and diverse innovation, capture the intentional and accidental products of innovation and recognise and work with what is already in place.

CASE STUDY - DEPP Innovation Labs: Communities at the centre of disaster management

Ask the experienced rather than the learned

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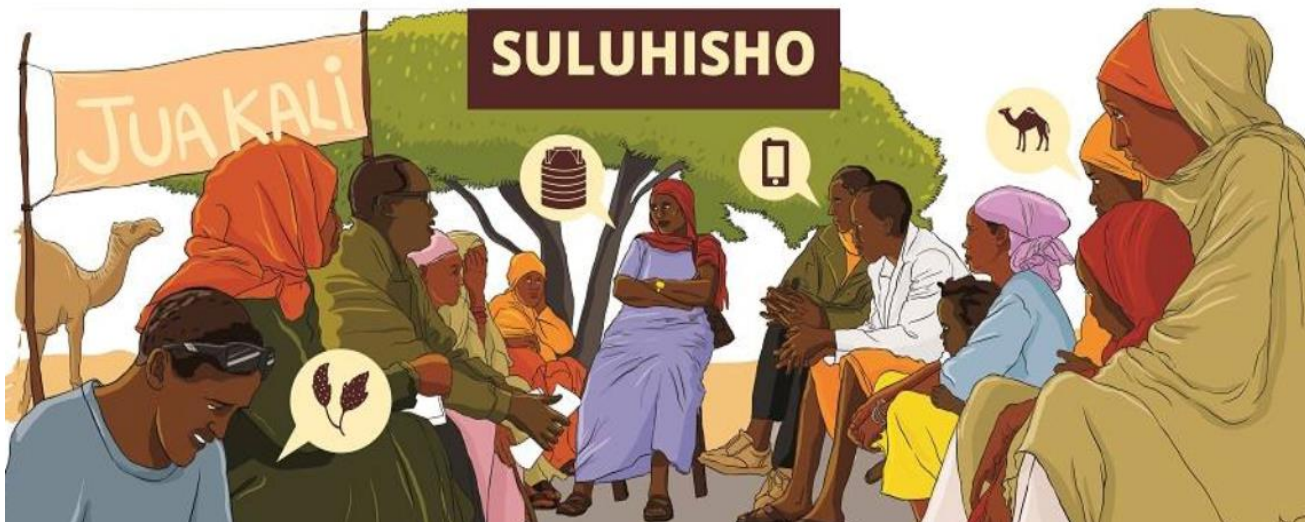
Kahlil Gibran

The aim: Foster innovation to support people affected by disaster to develop and drive initiatives that increase resiliency. The Disasters and Emergencies Prepared Programme funded by UK Aid and co-led by CDAC Network and Start Network embarked on a two-year journey to apply innovation at the local level with communities vulnerable to disaster by building on and working with what is already in place.

The reality: Four innovation labs established in Bangladesh, Jordan, Kenya and Philippines approached communities most vulnerable to disaster with the proposal. The response was largely one of puzzlement. Innovation is extremely difficult to translate. The first and perhaps the hardest task for the labs was to communicate the objectives of the programme. The second task was to open up and extend the invitation for people to come forward with ideas, businesses, products or initiatives to solve disaster challenges, or participate in a public space where they could come up with new solutions.



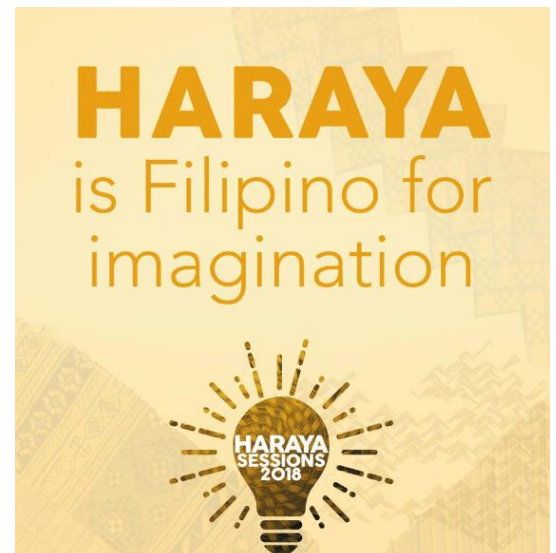
The teams applied creative tactics to win people over to a new way of working that was not offering immediate and tangible aid. They developed communication tools to explain the concept of innovation with cartoons, radio shows and door-to-door visits. They found language, visual, written and spoken, suited to each unique local context, and interacted with people in new spaces and on different grounds.



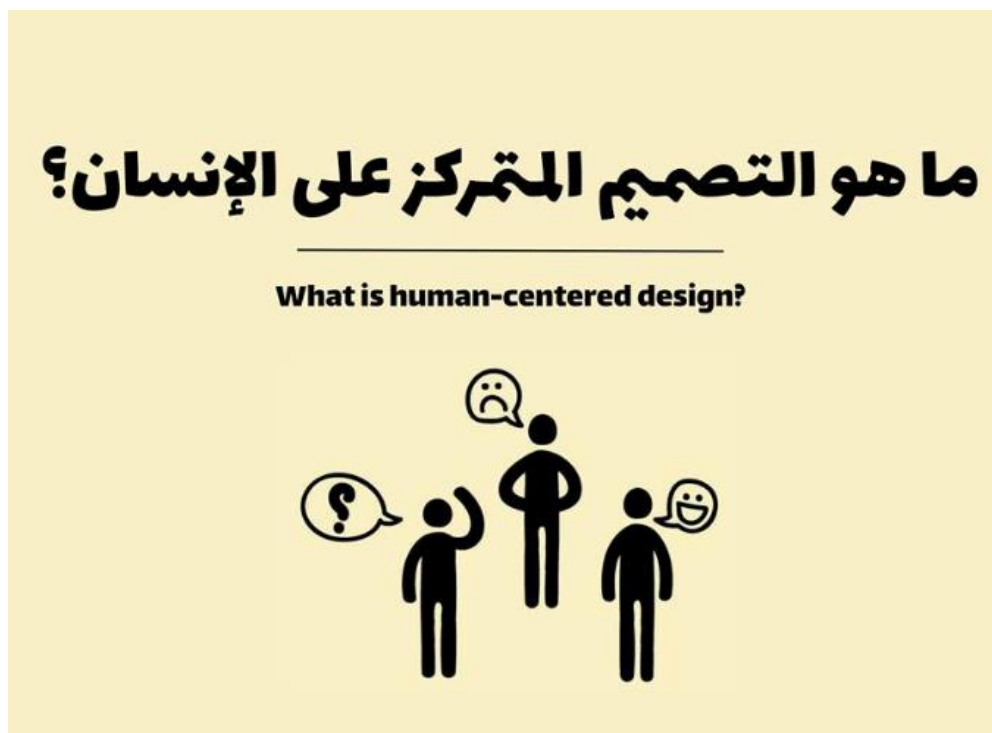
SOURCE: Maarifa Kona, Adeso, Kenya

The labs sought to brand themselves differently to their managing aid organisations to signal a new approach to shaping assistance. In Kenya, after extensive consultation in multiple languages with different communities living in drought-affected areas in the Northeast, the team settled on the

word 'maarifa', which means 'knowledge' in Swahili. The word resonated with a large number of people. The team named the lab 'Maarifa Kona' 'the knowledge corner' to convey a welcoming place where people could meet, converse and exchange ideas. In the Philippines, the team established four regional labs to reach communities in remote areas regularly cut off by disasters such as typhoons, flash flood, tsunamis and conflict in Mindanao - a large island in the South. For people in areas with low literacy levels, the lab offered 'writeshops' writing workshops so people could submit idea proposals with the support of a team member to transcribe the ideas.



The lab, 'Udhvabani', in Bangladesh built a community space in the densely populated informal settlement area of Korail in Dhaka to provide opportunity for people to meet and share ideas and identify priority challenges to collectively address. The Jordan lab, Mahali, channeled resources into supporting change-makers rather than solutions and worked with Syrian refugees and host communities to build teams able to identify and tackle recurring and urgent problems, including access to education, affordable housing, healthcare and job opportunities. All four labs channeled efforts into supporting inclusion. They give priority to local initiatives and sought to overcome barriers to people's participation.



SOURCE: Mahali Innovation Lab, International Rescue Committee

The language of innovation is predominantly in English but when translated and made workable for people living in disaster affected areas, as the labs demonstrated, can facilitate a better, more nuanced quality of communication and community engagement through methods such as user-

centred design, co-design and co-production, ideation, mentoring and training. For humanitarian organisations participating in the DEPP Labs programme, this has prompted a different way of working by placing emphasis on the knowledge, skills and initiatives of the people living in these environments.

For the final cohort of 12 innovators who have successfully moved through the DEPP Labs programme and those who have participated at earlier stages, the methodologies, structure, and resources provided have given rise to the formation of new community-based organisations, new businesses, peer-to-peer learning opportunities and more than 70 unique projects. Positive outcomes have resulted in the intentional and accidental innovation in process and product.

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