



Accidental and intentional innovation: valuing what's there

A global forum organised by the CDAC Network, May 7, 2019

Humanitarian Innovation. Some look to it as the future of an overburdened sector. Some, more sceptical, might claim the very term is an oxymoron. Others see it as a distraction, or a further division between the powerful and powerless in emergency contexts. Undoubtedly, many are still struggling to know what exactly it means.

All of this and more was thrown open for discussion on May 7, 2019, when humanitarian practitioners gathered at the Thomson Reuters Foundation in London to discuss the role, rhetoric and risks of community and global innovation in the fields of Communication and Community Engagement (CCE) and Accountability to Affected Populations (AAP).

Reflecting on years of practice

The event came as a moment of reflection for the CDAC Network, as it reaches the end of a two-year programme to support local innovations that build resiliency in disaster contexts across Kenya, Jordan, Bangladesh and the Philippines, jointly managed with the Start Network. The project has enabled both networks to 'walk the talk' of community-level innovation, learning lessons along the way that will prove useful to practitioners and donors seeking to undertake similar projects in the future.

The CDAC Network is catalysing innovative community engagement, including via its localised accountability project in the Pacific, with a specific focus on the roles of technology and the private sector in national-level community engagement platforms.

Not to forget, of course, that the CDAC Network's very existence was an innovation. When established by a passionate coalition of willing partners around ten years ago, there was nothing of its kind in existence in the humanitarian sector. The idea of systematically communicating with communities for improved accountability wasn't universally accepted and enshrined in global policy as it is now. Innovative thinking can work.

In the interests of maintaining or indeed reviving this spirit of innovation, the network decided to take stock. It brought experts together to reflect on 'state of the art' of humanitarian innovation before thinking about how to harness new ways of working until community voices are much louder than international ones in a future, more localised humanitarian system.

OUR DAY OF DISCUSSIONS – A SNAPSHOT OF KEY THEMES

Is community-level innovation being overlooked?

In his keynote address, **Antonio Zappulla**, Chief Executive of **Thomson Reuters Foundation** challenged collective thinking on what constitutes humanitarian innovation, cautioning that community-level ingenuity might be missed or dismissed in current discussions.

Countless community-level preparedness and coping activities clearly demonstrate the key traits of innovation by various criteria, including those used by Harvard; things like: demonstrable relative advantage, the ability for a change to be measured and scalability. While people in global capitals put their heads together, scrambling to seed ideas that might fulfil these measures, Zappulla asks: 'Isn't this precisely what these communities are already doing, all the time?'

The Thomson Reuters Foundation is all too familiar with the criticality of community-level innovation, relying heavily on it for its work in advancing freedom of the press, social innovation, social impact and human rights. The foundation seeks to accelerate and scale social change in issues surrounding women's rights, LGBTQ, human trafficking and climate change and, as Zappulla explained, cannot possibly do this without a community-based approach.

A key takeaway? We don't need to work so hard to force innovation. It's happening right under our noses, in communities impacted by disaster, every single day. That's a recognition problem, not an innovation problem.

Why localisation matters

Pathways to scale in humanitarian response contexts are not often as simple as replicating good practice across contexts, especially when the 'innovation' has been supported primarily by international actors. Even when expat aid workers are based in a country relatively long-term, they do not have access to the same networks and are not bound by the same constraints and regulations as citizens of, or refugees or migrants being hosted by that country.

'What we talk about as 'the field' is actually a sovereign country that has agency in determining its own outcomes,' **Abhik Sen**, Head of Innovation at the **Commonwealth Secretariat**, rightly reminded forum participants.

This was a statement supported by the **World Food Programme's Bernhard Kowatsch**, who heads up the organisation's Innovation Accelerator. He said of multiple contexts: 'One of the reasons why start-ups haven't scaled is that they've simply not convinced local authorities.'

In the field of financial inclusion, often chosen as an area of focus for humanitarian innovation initiatives, international actors have needed to temper their own expectations of scale, recognising that they were slowed by an erroneous belief that international

individuals or organisations can control or significantly influence a cross-country scaling process.

‘In Jordan, authorities and banks need to know [an innovation] is important to what they want to get done,’ explained Kowatsch. And rightly so. Imposing ‘innovation’ on an existing, functioning and networked system is arrogant and clunky at best and could be an impossible waste of resources at worst.

For **Lars-Andrè Skari** of the **Norwegian Humanitarian Innovation Platform** (and Head of International Strategy and Results, **Norwegian Red Cross**) an effective innovation process can be about simply facilitating or enabling conversations within these local structures. This is the kind of tangible local action that can benefit from an international broker. ‘Just give communities a chance to speak directly to those who make decisions on their resources,’ he said, and opportunities for innovation may be unlocked.

Ground Truth Solutions, Executive Director **Nick van Praag** spoke of the need to tailor a localisation approach to different local needs, reminding the room that ‘some local organisations want capacity support, or something else – they don’t want funding, always. That’s an assumption.’

A key takeaway? We won’t ensure that ‘end users’ can be agents of change in their own lives if we ignore the many local networks and ecosystems they operate within. We must find a better way to support these networks from the wings. This requires both an adaptable approach to localising innovation and an element of ‘letting go’, which still makes many international actors and funding bodies uncomfortable. Abhik Sen summarised it neatly: ‘Look at the landscape. See what’s working. Support that.’

International funders must support and not control innovation

According to **Christina Bennett**, Head of Programmes at the **Overseas Development Institute’s Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG)**, so much of what we consider to be humanitarian innovation ‘is still being designed by those who hold the purse strings.’ This raises a moral issue, of course. But it’s more than that. There isn’t much evidence that globalised approaches to humanitarian innovation have actually worked. The decision to close GAHI, for example, and the exponential shift across the sector from seeking solution-based innovation in global capitals to trying to find community level innovation in disaster-affected contexts indicates a recognition of the need to adapt our approaches.

UN OCHA’s Marina Skuric-Prodanovic questioned the role of global networks and funds, leading to a discussion from the floor about donor roles not necessarily being limited to supporting initiatives or projects with an ‘innovation’ heading. Simply being more adaptable to changing plans in line with community feedback and shifting operational realities could be a significant enabler for agencies to iterate and innovate. Donor power when it comes to innovation extends well beyond simply the projects they choose to fund.

A key takeaway? We must grow our thinking on humanitarian innovation, learning from the successes and failures of globally-led approaches. Where are such structures

appropriate? Where should they be scaled back in favour of seeking more organic outcomes at the community level? We should constantly apply innovation principles to our innovations approaches themselves and advocate to donors to make that easier.

Expanding on the ‘human’ in Human-Centred Design

Human-centred design in the business innovation world entails a process of engaging its customers --- the users of its products -- in the design and testing of new goods or systems. This helps to ensure the new product is relevant and desirable to them and thus increases the probability of mass-usage and as a result, sales.

Meg Sattler, an AAP specialist and advisor to the **Humanitarian Innovation Fund**, has long noted that championing this approach in humanitarian innovation misses the mark, as while we don’t often get it right, this base level of community consultation is supposed to be standard practice in the humanitarian sector.

A similar view was put forward by Abhik Sen. ‘I find it hard to understand and get excited about terms like Human-Centred Design,’ he said. ‘If a design process is good, it has to be human-centred. Otherwise why would humans take it up?’

Rather than belabouring the term and its meanings, some fruitful ideas were shared from the floor on the value of human connections to the innovations process. The World Food Programme has iterated its thinking on successful innovations, noting that it has proven useful in almost every case for a successful idea to be supported by a team and not an individual.

For Lars and the IFRC, whose ‘greatest assets are our 30 million volunteers,’ building on existing human relationships and community structures is critical to best understanding community capacity for innovation.

A key takeaway? Innovation that takes place at the community level is supported by long established connections and the freedom to share ideas. The latter is not always inherent. Supporting activities that build community and enable people to meet, share and work together can in turn support innovation. This can be harder to ‘sell’, so building in effective monitoring and evaluation of unintended outcomes is important.

Data for data’s sake isn’t really innovation

Data has become a key feature of many humanitarian innovation and reform discussions; and rightly so. But data for data’s sake is not innovative, nor is it particularly useful.

There was a general caution from most corners of the room that simply extracting more data should not be an end goal in itself, despite it having become something of an obsession within the humanitarian sector. Bernhard Kowatsch put it well: ‘We need data – fine – but what is the benefit for the people actually using it?’

There was agreement that data protection for communities and closing the feedback loop were critical data problems ripe for innovation – at both global and local level – to improve humanitarian action.

A key takeaway? As the data discussion continues to evolve, it is important to focus on what data is already being gathered and how best to use it for transparency, better decision-making and to close the gap with communities. This must come before any effort to ask disaster affected communities for more of their information. As Lars-Andrè Skari put it: ‘See how data is being used. That is really crucial. Then seek to address real gaps.’

Innovation as a buzzword may be detrimental

‘People don’t want an *innovation* solution to a health problem, they want a health solution,’ commented Lars-Andrè Skari, from a panel discussion that challenged the audience to stop thinking about innovation as a goal in its own right and remember why we needed it in the first place.

For this reason, he sees the innovation label as sometimes problematic. This was a sentiment echoed by many in the room. ‘We need to ensure those with feet on the ground understand it and use it not only when we are doing innovation projects – it has to make sense for the day to day running of what they do out there,’ he said.

A recurrent theme of the afternoon was whether some effective activities are labelled ‘innovation’ but could equally be termed ‘just doing our jobs’.

Sen and Bennett discussed the Indian government’s response to recent flooding and the ways in which the authorities were able to learn from Mozambique and past experiences to act swiftly, preventing mass loss of life and property.

This led to a discussion about whether this was indeed ‘innovation’ or simply a good action plan. Several panellists throughout the afternoon commented that something can still be considered ‘innovative’ if it’s new or improved in a certain context, no matter how many times it’s been done elsewhere.

A key takeaway? As with so many aspects of humanitarian work, an obsession with terminology can hinder our efforts. Improvements in programming by doing things differently should not be judged on their ability to meet arbitrary definitions of innovation, but rather on their ability to improve lives, now and into the future. The need for what both Laura Walker McDonald (DIAL) and Meg Sattler at multiple points called ‘just doing things better’ has a significant place in humanitarian innovation and should always be used as a check and balance on innovations process.

Want to innovate locally? Get the right people in the room

‘We know what to do, we know communities have solutions, so what will make us more receptive? What will help our system to trust this knowledge from communities above or equal to our own processes?’ asked **Christina Bennett**.

The innovation discussion, try as the sector might to change it, is still largely international. This was evidenced even among our own participants.

‘You need local players to take ownership of these things,’ said Sen. And this is happening, especially in regions like Asia. ‘South-south knowledge sharing, technical cooperation, those are gathering steam a lot,’ he said, again referencing governments as significant catalysts for change in this regard. ‘The state is an open and willing partner in many things so long as what is being proposed makes sense. To make innovations long lasting the net needs to be cast wider and the state needs to be part of that.’

The challenge then is to make sure these examples are front and centre in global dialogue. And that isn’t limited to governments. When asked how local youth came on board so enthusiastically in the innovations project in Lebanon, Sandra simply answered: ‘We listened to them.’

A key takeaway? It is useful to stay abreast of innovations in government and other local ecosystems and where possible support them. Highlighting them in global dialogue can begin to shift the conversation. Likewise, simply ensuring a diversification of participation in any innovation, local or global, will not only be very likely to strengthen it, but may also start to ‘even out’ global dialogue. ‘Sharing ideas and working together is what sets us apart from the private sector, it is something wonderful about humanitarians,’ said Nick van Praag. **We can start early, work in a network, work with alliances, and keep checks and balances on our own biases.**

Innovation or not, advances in technology are vital and worth supporting

According to Bernhard, ‘there are definitely new technologies that can drive innovation,’ but the two should not be equated. This is widely recognised across the sector, but perhaps not as much as one might think.

‘Technology is the easy part, the difficult part is behaving differently, thinking differently, that is the complicated part, the process part,’ said Bernhard. This may be true, but the modern reliance on technology shouldn’t be understated either. **Daniel Cooper** from Inmarsat reminded the room: ‘People losing connectivity has devastating impacts in a crisis.’ It isn’t a shallow problem. Data misuse can also have horrific consequences, as can online rumours and other clearly definable tech-based problems.

For **Laura Walker McDonald**, there are quite obvious needs for innovation in technology. As it currently creates new vulnerabilities, digital literacy is key.

A key takeaway? **Abhik Sen** reminded us all: ‘As long as we keep seeing tech as one of many options and not as a panacea, I think we are okay.’

Systemic innovations need seed support

Nick van Praag recounted his Ground Truth Solutions establishment process, seeing a gap in the humanitarian system and the desire to test a new approach to support the accountability agenda.

He noted the support the IKEA foundation provided for initial project phases enabled him to be where he is today. 'Seed funding tools are really important,' he said. 'Does innovation accidentally happen? Maybe. But there's a role for supporting those ideas that are on a path to changing the system.' Based on his own experience, he endorsed the idea that innovation indeed does need to be fostered and supported.

'You don't come out of the ground and stand in the sun and magically grow into a beautiful flower,' he said. 'You need to feed new thinking and new processes for a while before they blossom.'

'Predictable finance has allowed us to take greater risks,' said Skari.

A key takeaway? Not all innovation is accidental. There are proven success stories from innovation processes that had a plan for scale and financial backing. The challenge is to make these things more readily available to local and not just global actors.

We need to be better at 'knowing the problem'

For Thomson Reuters, the growth of TrustLaw -- the world's largest pro-bono legal programme, supported by a technology platform -- was possible because it met an obvious, critical need. This may seem obvious but it is not always front and centre of innovation programs, many of which suffer from what Bennett calls 'solutions looking for a problem.'

Sandra van Edig, Country Manager for the **Deutsche Welle Akademie** in Lebanon, shared lessons from a community media project in refugee camps. For van Edig, fostering local innovation is about letting go of pre-conceived project ideas and really working with the community -- in her case, youth -- to understand the ways in which they define their own problems and would like to duly address them. 'Their ideas of problems aren't necessarily going to be the same as yours,' she said. Community-identified needs expressed included education and employment, but also relationships, love, drugs and fashion. 'It wasn't our idea, but the solutions won't be community-driven unless the problems are too.'

A key takeaway? Lars-Andrè Skari encouraged anyone working in the innovation to space to 'Love your problem!' - that to say, to constantly regroup and check any solution against the issue it was meant to address. There may be additional or unintended applications of a solution, which is not a bad thing, but it's important to retain a focus on the degree to which an innovation solves a real problem and not to accidentally shift to an undue focus on the solution. This can often happen in tech-based innovation, especially in large agencies.

From clients to creators

According to **Laura Walker McDonald** in her closing remarks, ‘We haven’t entirely landed yet on what we understand about local innovation. It’s taken us a long time to even move from referring to ‘beneficiaries’ to ‘clients’. What will it now take to move from ‘client’ to ‘creator’?’

Our sector is far from perfect and there is room for everyone to be an innovator. Thinking on humanitarian innovation though needs to pinpoint actual problems. And, they can be big ones, like digital literacy, power, money and education imbalances. In the face of mounting challenges in the humanitarian sector, we’ve put a lot of weight on innovation. Perhaps too much. Maybe not enough.

But if we continue to work toward a more innovative sector, it must be matched by intentional efforts to even the playing field. ‘May you continue to innovate,’ **Marina Skuric-Prodanovic** said at the end of the day. It is hoped that many of these ideas will enable a continued culture of innovation, supported by ongoing conversations, a ‘widening of the net’, and continuous learning.

To read more on CDAC’s innovations approach, read our [background paper for this event](#) or contact **Hannah Murphy** at Hannah.Murphy@cdacnetwork.org or **Marian Casey-Maslen** at marian.casey-maslen@cdacnetwork.org.

Two **Podcasts** were done as part of the public event on the same day with Antonio Zappulla, CEO of Thomson Reuters Foundation and Abhik Sen, Head of Innovation at the Commonwealth Secretariat.

<https://soundcloud.com/listener1984/meeting-the-media-development-challenge-with-antonio-zappulla-of-thomson-reuters-foundation-10052019-1425>

<https://soundcloud.com/listener1984/abhik-sen-on-innovation-government-and-data-13052019-0838>

About the CDAC Network

Established in 2009, the [Communicating with Disaster Affected Communities \(CDAC\) Network](#) is a growing platform of more than 30 agencies from the UN, Red Cross/Crescent Movement, Media Development, N/INGO and private sector, dedicated to saving lives and making aid more effective through communication, information exchange and community engagement.

Members represent bodies which have considerable experience in communication activities such as engagement with and gathering feedback from communities, translation, messaging, connectivity, community based market research, media development, social innovation, technology, radio and telecommunications. As such they operate in an area beyond aid provision, and act to create understanding and information that can be used by all. One of our aims is to pre-position National Platforms on Communication and Community Engagement in disaster prone countries that are led by national authorities and convene both humanitarian and communications actors to enable better preparedness and response. See, for example. www.shongjog.org.bd/.