Innovation – what, why and how for a UN organisation

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The purpose of innovation is to make humanitarian work more effective and more reflective. We do innovation to improve human lives by doing things better. Innovation, for UNHCR, is a humanitarian imperative to be carried out with partners.

As practised at UNHCR, innovation is a strategy for change and for problem solving that relies on new modalities and products and that seeks to benefit from the 'minds of many' (with the 'many' drawn from both inside and outside the organisation). So let me offer a definition of innovation as 'dynamic problem solving with friends'.

In a world of tens of millions of persons displaced by violence, we need to constantly challenge ourselves to think in new ways to maximise the impact of our life-saving and life-sustaining efforts. Innovation can also help us mobilise resources for our work to the extent it produces better delivery and introduces efficiencies. Lastly – and this value should not be underestimated – innovation within an organisation can improve *esprit de corps*; staff take pride in belonging to an innovating organisation and, if encouraged, will contribute their creativity in ways that advance the organisation's mission.

How does an organisation think differently with friends? From our experience at UNHCR, there are several crucial elements. First, innovation requires executive-level support; staff need to know that they will be rewarded, not punished, for thinking about new ways to do our work. Second, organisational innovation will need, at least at the start, dedicated additional funding. One cannot expect the development and deployment of new ways of working if we ask our organisational units to do it while they are doing everything else we are asking them to do. At UNHCR, our Innovation Team has been effective at raising funds from the private sector and individual donors – and I would suggest that other UN organisations

can do the same: outside funders are eager to support efforts by the UN that foster innovation. Third, an organisation needs to create safe spaces and reserved time for innovation to take root. We have done this at UNHCR by establishing a cadre of staff in the field – we call them iFellows – who are given time by their supervisors to pursue defined innovation projects, overseen by the headquarters-based Innovation Team. Fourth, successful innovation requires partners (the 'many minds') – academic, UN organisations, private sector and foundations – who can provide an outsider perspective, new ideas and, perhaps, funding.

Inside the organisation

Large bureaucratic organisations are by nature hostile to innovation. They have established ways of doing things, set forms of funding and budgets that are committed to on-going projects, and well-understood avenues for career advancement for staff that tend to reward those who support the existing culture and corporate practices. And yet in saying this, I am glad to report that I have found in every operation at UNHCR that I have visited staff who are experimenting with new ways of working – they just don't tell headquarters about it! As stated above, there needs to be a clear message from the top that field-based innovation will be fostered and supported, not squashed.

Let me give one example. For several years, headquarters units at UNHCR have been devising a plan for introducing an organisation-wide strategy for capturing biometrics of refugees. Faced with emergency needs and concerned about the time the project was taking at headquarters, UNHCR's

Jordan operation came up with its own biometric strategy, one that it could implement in a short time for the hundreds of thousands of recently arrived Syrian refugees. The initial response from headquarters was negative, as there was concern that a Jordan-specific solution might not be compatible with the eventual global approach that would be adopted. After lengthy discussions, the Jordan operation was given the go-ahead, and its technological solution has now spread to other operations dealing with the Syrian refugee emergency; all told, more than 750,000 refugees have been registered with the locally developed biometric solution. The headquarters project is currently still in its development and testing phase.

An organisation must also create incentives for staff to take risks. I have mentioned the iFellows project at UNHCR. Another innovation has been the introduction of a social media platform that allows us to put out to our field colleagues specific 'challenges' (such as how to better teach languages to refugees). Staff are invited to contribute proposed solutions and to comment on solutions provided by others; the winning idea is given funding for implementation.[1] We have also established a designated award for innovation as part of our general staff award programme. And in the future, we will feature staff innovation efforts on a new Innovation website.

Another important internal element of successful innovation is the organisation's willingness to accept failure. This is crucial to the project of incentivising risk-taking. Our Innovation Team has failed in a couple of interesting ways. The failures led us to re-think the projects and then re-launch them for additional testing.

Finally, innovation benefits, I believe, from processes that are more horizontal and networked than vertical and hierarchical. I am rather startled by the hierarchy in UN organisations, where it is seen as unusual for high-ranking directors to speak with and treat low-grade staff as peers and colleagues.

A Syrian refugee in Mafraq, Jordan, takes cash from an ATM after using iris scan technology to identify herself.

A 'minds of many' approach recognises that creativity is a human characteristic, not one linked to a particular grade of staff.

The role of outsiders

It should be obvious that persons and institutions outside UN organisations can be sources of good ideas and new approaches. But it is an interesting puzzle as to how to benefit from outside innovation in the most efficient ways. I can testify that a great many good ideas come to UNHCR on a regular basis. I am presented with new products and new processes that – I am told – will transform the way we do our work and dramatically improve the lives of refugees. Unfortunately, we do not have adequate time to analyse them, test them and compare them with other suggested solutions. I would suggest that it would be better for organisations like UNHCR to identify and publicise problems we are seeking to solve and then engage others to work with us in developing and implementing solutions. And perhaps an outside institution could take on the role of collecting and screening innovative suggestions for UN organisations.

Two types of innovation: sustaining and disruptive

Literature on innovation distinguishes between **sustaining innovation** and **disruptive innovation**. Sustaining innovation works within established institutional paradigms to carry out existing tasks and functions faster, cheaper and better. Disruptive innovation is more radical; if

successful, it supplants the previous paradigm. It is, for example, the challenge that email poses to the postal service. Disruptive innovation relies on new technologies and succeeds when it can supply services similar to or better than existing services for less.

Insiders, if we practice innovation at all, are generally of the sustaining innovation variety. For example, we will seek product innovation (e.g. a more efficient cook-stove) or programme innovation (such as better monitoring of health needs and delivery) that does not substantially challenge existing institutional structures or processes. Innovators inside an organisation rarely seek to be seen as an 'insurgency'; they generally want to work within the system in order to preserve their chances at career advancement. And for every internal innovation effort that seeks to be disruptive, there are insiders with a stake in the status quo who are expert at killing, stalling or domesticating the disruptive proposal.

Disruptive innovation is therefore likely to require the help of outsiders – those who can help insiders see the box we are in so that we can think outside it. Surprisingly, however, I find that many outsiders who support innovation in the UN – academics, policymakers, activists and NGO staff – generally recommend forms of sustaining, not disruptive, innovation. This tendency may arise from their recognition of what is possible as well as their desire to be relevant. And while much of this outside work is both excellent and helpful, I would nonetheless urge that those on the outside be more bold: we depend on them to challenge our premises, to tell us that we are asking the wrong question and what the right question is, to contend that we cannot solve the problems that confront us unless we are willing to undertake fundamental institutional and programmatic change.

Let me close by underscoring that last point. UN organisations could well benefit from a disruptive innovation approach to programmatic change. Disruptive innovators might ask: instead of building health clinics, why not provide refugees with medical insurance? Instead of giving people food and non-food items, perhaps their autonomy would be enhanced if we gave them cash assistance? Instead of talking about the three sustainable solutions of return, resettlement and local integration, should we talk about a fourth, destabilising solution of labour migration, giving people work visas? These are potentially paradigm-shifting kinds of interventions.

We have created and we maintain a regime, an industry, a culture, of dependency through which humanitarian relief becomes long-term assistance. We know that we do not move quickly enough from relief to development and reconstruction, and that we do not have adequate strategies to foster self-reliance among displaced populations. This needs to change. We need new approaches that merge humanitarian and development programmes into a new paradigm for improving the lives of the millions of displaced persons in today's world. This is a disruptive thought that has both deep programmatic and product implications, and it will surely face the usual obstacles to innovation – entrenched interests, and entrenched ways of thinking and acting.

I have suggested that innovation requires leadership, resources, incentives and partners. But ultimately success must begin with an organisation's desire to change. This desire arises for humanitarian organisations, I hope and believe, not from motivations to preserve our own relevancy, or our 'market share', but from a deep and shared commitment to the work of relieving suffering, restoring hope and building robust human communities.

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1. See article by Alice Bosley on pages 15-16.