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DEPP INNOVATION LABS

Support models for local humanitarian innovation

HOW TO PROVIDE IMPACTFUL SUPPORT FOR GRASSROOTS SOLUTIONS

BY NAGWA KONDA, KHOLOUD MANSOUR,
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START NETWORK

CDAC NETWORK
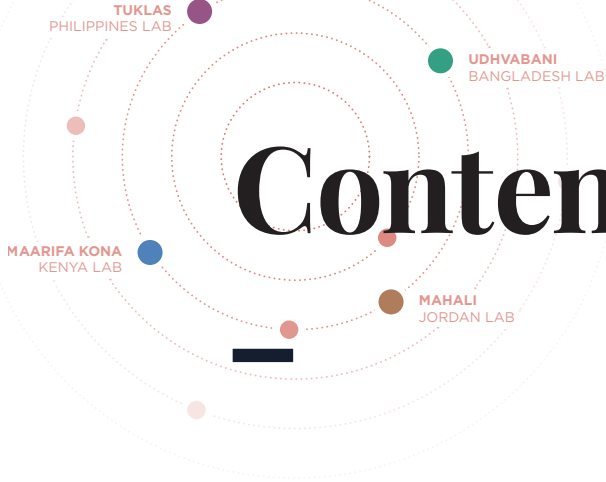
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START NETWORK

CDAC NETWORK

TUKLAS
PHILIPPINES LAB

UDHVABANI
BANGLADESH LAB

MAARIFA KONA
KENYA LAB

MAHALI
JORDAN LAB

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Lake Sebu, a municipality in Mindanao in Philippines, where the TUKLAS innovation team from Stiftung Solarenergie Foundation worked on disaster risk reduction and management. **TUKLAS LAB**

Introduction

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Innovation is not new to the humanitarian sector: it has been a response to the challenges and resource constraints of aid delivery since the beginning of humanitarianism. However, innovation as a goal in its own right is a relatively recent phenomenon that began with ad hoc initiatives, projects and programmes in the 2000s, many of which explored the potential for technology to improve the delivery of aid.[1]

In 2009, ALNAP published a report on humanitarian innovation[2] and then led an Innovation Fair. By the end of the same year, the UK Department for International Development (DFID) had invested £3 million into innovation in the humanitarian sector.[3]

Since then, humanitarian innovation has rapidly gained a central role within humanitarian policy and practice as a way of addressing intractable challenges. An increasing number of humanitarian organisations have established innovation initiatives (including labs, challenge funds and scholarships), set up separate innovation departments and hired innovation staff. Collaborations and partnerships have been established within and between organisations with an innovation agenda. New organisations have been launched with a dedicated humanitarian innovation mandate, such as the Start Network and Elrha.

> **HUMANITARIAN INNOVATION HAS RAPIDLY GAINED A CENTRAL ROLE WITHIN HUMANITARIAN POLICY AND PRACTICE AS A WAY OF ADDRESSING INTRACTABLE CHALLENGES.**

Humanitarian organisations have been seeking to enable participation of local people for years. However, this was formalised in 2016 at the World Humanitarian Summit (WHS) in Istanbul by the Grand Bargain agreement. This stressed the importance of local participation in humanitarian response through two key work streams: one which

1. Scriven, K (2016), Humanitarian innovation and the art of the possible. *Special Edition on Humanitarian Innovation, Humanitarian Exchange* 66 (2016): 5–7.
2. Scriven, K; Ramalingam, B & Foley, C (2009), Innovations in international humanitarian action. Overseas Development Institute.
3. Betts, A & Bloom, L (2014), Humanitarian innovation: the state of the art. New York: United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA).

focused on providing more support and funding to local people and the other on enabling greater participation of people receiving aid in decision-making around humanitarian response.[4]

At the same time, the guiding five core responsibilities of the Agenda for Humanity, around which the WHS was organised, included the

4. UNOCHA (2016), Initiative Grand Bargain at: https://www.agendaforhuman-ity.org/initiatives/3861.

The indigenous knowledge of the Kankanaey people of Besao for pine forest management is disappearing due to lack of interest, increasing the risk of soil erosion and landslides. Innovators of Batil-ang Peypeyan Clan aim to create and develop an ecosystem of indigenous knowledge by setting up a school of living tradition linking up elders and youth. **TUKLAS LAB**

Innovating in a context of disaster presents unique challenges. The Philippines lab and its innovators had to pause activities while responding to the category 5 Typhoon Ompong that struck in 2018. **TUKLAS LAB**

responsibility to "work differently around need".[5] This was described in the WHS Secretary General's report as a new way of working that "moves beyond the comfort of traditional silos.'' The aim was to bring together a wide range of organisations and individuals, with different mandates, sectors and institutional boundaries, with the collective goal of working for the benefit of people affected by crises.[6] While this referred predominantly to the need to transcend divides in the humanitarian development sector, for many organisations it also translated broadly into their already existing innovation efforts.

For the humanitarian sector as a whole, this focus on local participation and innovation simultaneously has allowed a more local approach to innovation work to evolve. Local innovation initiatives now form a small section of overall humanitarian innovation. However, while recognising the great potential that local participation holds for humanitarian innovation, many organisations seem unsure how to best approach it.

> **WHILE RECOGNISING THE GREAT POTENTIAL THAT LOCAL PARTICIPATION HOLDS FOR HUMANITARIAN INNOVATION, MANY ORGANISATIONS SEEM UNSURE HOW TO BEST APPROACH IT.**

Although progress against the many Grand Bargain commitments has generally been slow, there has been a proliferation of innovation initiatives aiming to support more resilient communities, to develop new types of humanitarian solutions and to improve the relevance and effectiveness of aid. Among these are the Disasters and Emergencies Preparedness Programme (DEPP) Labs, an initiative of the Start Network and CDAC Network to foster and encourage locally based, locally focused innovators. The labs are located in four countries where disasters remain a clear and present risk, and are led by teams who engage local innovators on local problems. The labs were built using the principles of adaptive management, where decisions are made in response to evidence and feedback on a regular basis and at a local level.

OVERVIEW OF THE PAPER

This research paper aims to explore what has been learned in recent years about support for local innovation at DEPP Labs and other humanitarian sector initiatives. It treats 'innovation' as a broad term: something that is new to the user or context, or in its application, and is better at creating social value (more efficient, effective, sustainable or just) than what already exists.[7] Humanitarian innovations are those that specifically address the needs of communities affected by crisis or

5. UNOCHA (2016), Agenda for Humanity at: https://www.agendaforhumanity.org/agendaforhumanity.
6. United Nations, 2016, One humanity: shared responsibility. Report of the Secretary-General for the World Humanitarian Summit at: https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/822154.
7. Adapted from a definition used by the Amani Institute.

disaster and the organisations that support them. 'Local innovations' are those that arise in the context in which they are used. The paper explores the models of support that work best for these types of innovations, and why, focusing on initiatives that operate within the following parameters:

- **Humanitarian contexts.** Humanitarian innovation takes place in environments that are prone to disaster and where 'duty bearers' are unable to meet basic needs or ensure that rights are respected. These environments are often unpredictable, with significant resource constraints, dysfunctional markets and an influx of external agencies. Development models from the private sector, the social innovation sector and even the development sector can come up short when applied to the humanitarian sector.

- **Local innovators, community-centred design.** The DEPP Labs innovators are individuals and teams who are part of the affected population, or who come from the surrounding areas, and have experience of the problems being addressed. The innovators focused on putting a specific group of users (or community members) at the heart of the innovation design.

- **Social impact innovations.** Commercial innovations are focused on technologies, products or services that can generate substantial profits at scale. 'Social innovations' are more concerned with delivering impactful change for a particular community group. Social innovations may be delivered to the intended community directly or via governments or established humanitarian organisations.

- **Links with the humanitarian sector.** Many local initiatives occur organically in humanitarian contexts, as individuals and communities regularly implement workarounds to improve their daily lives. This paper does not cover the wide range of naturally occurring grassroots innovation, but focuses on innovators who want to connect with the humanitarian sector for support.

This paper aims to address the following questions:

- What approaches and methods can be used to help local innovators in resource-constrained environments to develop viable and sustainable innovations for disaster resilience?

- What are the constraints, strengths and weaknesses of different approaches and methods?

- What evidence is there about the outcomes of different processes in low-resource or humanitarian environments (for example, engagement with local innovators, successful pilots, successful scaleups)?

- How has the DEPP Labs programme mitigated the weaknesses of the lab models and what has it learned?

This paper is based on a review of relevant literature on labs, non-lab alternatives and grassroots innovation, along with 20 semi-structured

A group of women test the online-offline mobile application for emergency reporting, information sharing, and mapping of vulnerable families created by the People's Initiative and Involvement in the Development of Technology (PINDOT). **TUKLAS LAB**

interviews with global DEPP Labs staff, DEPP lab managers, innovators involved in the four DEPP labs and senior innovation staff from other organisations that are also implementing labs or alternative innovation methods. These include: Response Innovation Labs (RIL), International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), UNHCR, Unicef, Elrha and the International Rescue Committee's Airbel Center (IRC Airbel). The research was carried out during June 2019.

The paper begins with a brief discussion of local innovation initiatives within the humanitarian sector. It describes the development of labs and other support mechanisms within the sector and outlines some of the major distinctions between the different initiatives. Chapter 1 examines the different types of support needed by innovators. It outlines six types of standard support, and ends by identifying some additional types of support that may be needed. Chapter 2 looks at how to better support local innovation within a humanitarian context. It identifies and unpacks five key considerations for organisations supporting local innovation to ensure that they maximise the impact of their support. The paper ends with conclusions and a discussion of possible future directions for humanitarian innovation.

Kohinoor stands outside of her new home, built from the unbaked fire resistant bricks designed by an innovator in the Bangladesh lab. As the first customer of the innovation, the bricks are now named after her. **UDHVABANI LAB**

BACKGROUND AND HORIZON SCAN

Many humanitarian support mechanisms draw on methodologies that were first developed by 'lean' entrepreneurs in the commercial sector. Lean entrepreneurship unlocked new 'lightweight' innovation techniques that could be supported by smaller units (or 'labs') inside or outside a larger organisation. These techniques were based on ideas of hypothesis testing, user-centred design and rapid testing, and were applied to new opportunities in technology. This 'lean innovation' methodology was popularly codified in Eric Ries' book *The Lean Startup*[8] and became the foundation of Silicon Valley startup culture and practices. Combined with venture capital financing, labs made it possible to uncouple creative work from large businesses.

The concepts of lean entrepreneurship were translated into social innovation settings and eventually into humanitarian activities. Organisations that were funding and supporting innovation developed a range of approaches that included innovation labs, innovation accelerators, challenge funds and innovation units.[9]

8. Ries, E. (2011) *The lean startup: How today's entrepreneurs use continuous innovation to create radically successful businesses.* Crown Books.
9. Nesta (2019) A compendium of innovation methods. Available at: https://media.nesta.org.uk/documents/Compendium-of-Innovation-Methods-March-2019.pdf.

Women living in Korail support the innovator of the Kohinoor unbaked brick to prototype her innovation for affordable, fire resistant homes. **UDHVABANI LAB**

A non-exhaustive scan of the landscape for local innovation initiatives reveals pockets of innovation happening in preparation for, and response to, humanitarian crises worldwide, with local level innovators bringing their skills, knowledge, experiences and insights to bear in the design of new solutions. They are supported by a range of labs, challenge funds and accelerators that support different types of innovators but with significant areas of overlap in their approach. For example, both the Humanitarian Grand Challenges ('challenge funds') and the DEPP innovation window ('labs') aim to support local and contextually relevant innovation through a mix of financial support, mentoring, convening and training.

However there are three important differences in these local innovation initiatives:

- Organisations have distinctly different reasons for supporting local innovation.

- Supporters of innovation focus on different pathways to scale.

- Different levels of support are needed, based on the human and social capital of innovators.

MOTIVATION FOR SUPPORTING LOCAL INNOVATION

Innovation (and more recently local innovation) has become a catch-all term that encompasses different and sometimes competing motivations,

aims and objectives. However, the goals of support organisations have a significant impact on the outcomes of the innovations they support. The lab managers and senior innovation staff interviewed for this study described five different objectives for their initiatives:

- **Aim 1: Skills development.** Several organisations describe social innovation processes as a means of supporting skills development and entrepreneurialism. For these organisations, the resulting innovations are a byproduct of the process, and not its main aim. The Unicef UPSHIFT programme is one example: it has developed a community-led youth innovation initiative as a vehicle to empower young people and develop their skills.

- **Aim 2: Community engagement.** A second group of organisations place the emphasis on providing space and resources for a new type of community engagement. These organisations focus on including users in the design process. In this model, the community sets the agenda for how shared spaces are used, and it is understood that community leadership may mean that different types of outcomes are prioritised. An interviewee from Communitere, for example, stated:

  "A project that creates something beautiful without any community engagement is less valuable than a project with a lot of community engagement, regardless of outcome."

- **Aim 3: Community preparedness.** A third group described an emphasis on community-level outcomes. The DEPP Labs programme, for example, aims to improve the preparedness of the local community to respond to humanitarian emergencies, through designing new products, services or processes relevant to their needs.

- **Aim 4: Local capacity to support innovation.** A fourth motivation was to build more capacity to support innovation among local and national networks and organisations. The Humanitarian Innovation Fund (HIF), for example, has adopted an enabling role in its approach to supporting humanitarian innovation. Through its work with the Asian Disaster Reduction and Response Network (ADDRN) Tokyo Innovation Hub, it seeks to build regional and national organisations' capacity and capability to support local innovation.

- **Aim 5: Scalable solutions.** The final group focused primarily on impactful solutions. They involve local people in the innovation process, but prioritise the efficiency, impact and scalability of solutions over the process. IRC Airbel, for example, brings together designers, community members ('context experts'), strategists, sector experts, practitioners, behavioural scientists and econometricians to carry out the different steps in the innovation process: concept generation, prototype design, local testing, impact evaluations, iterations and scaling. While local innovators are involved in the process, they don't necessarily develop the innovation or lead the process.

The aim of each lab is a leading factor in the type of support it will prioritise and how it will deliver that support.

DIFFERENT PATHWAYS TO SCALE

Research from Nesta on social innovation highlights four key factors that distinguish between labs and other support mechanisms: the methodologies they use, the sectors they focus on, where in the innovation cycle they focus their efforts, and the extent to which they are involved or at arm's length from their donors or government sponsors.[10] While the DEPP Labs' experience underlines the importance of these factors, our interviews suggest that the question of **who** is supported and the **pathways to scaling** the innovation were actually more significant.

Different support organisations prioritised different pathways for scaling their innovations. A companion paper published by the DEPP Labs as part of this research series explored business models for innovators

Figure 1:
Innovator profiles and pathways to scale

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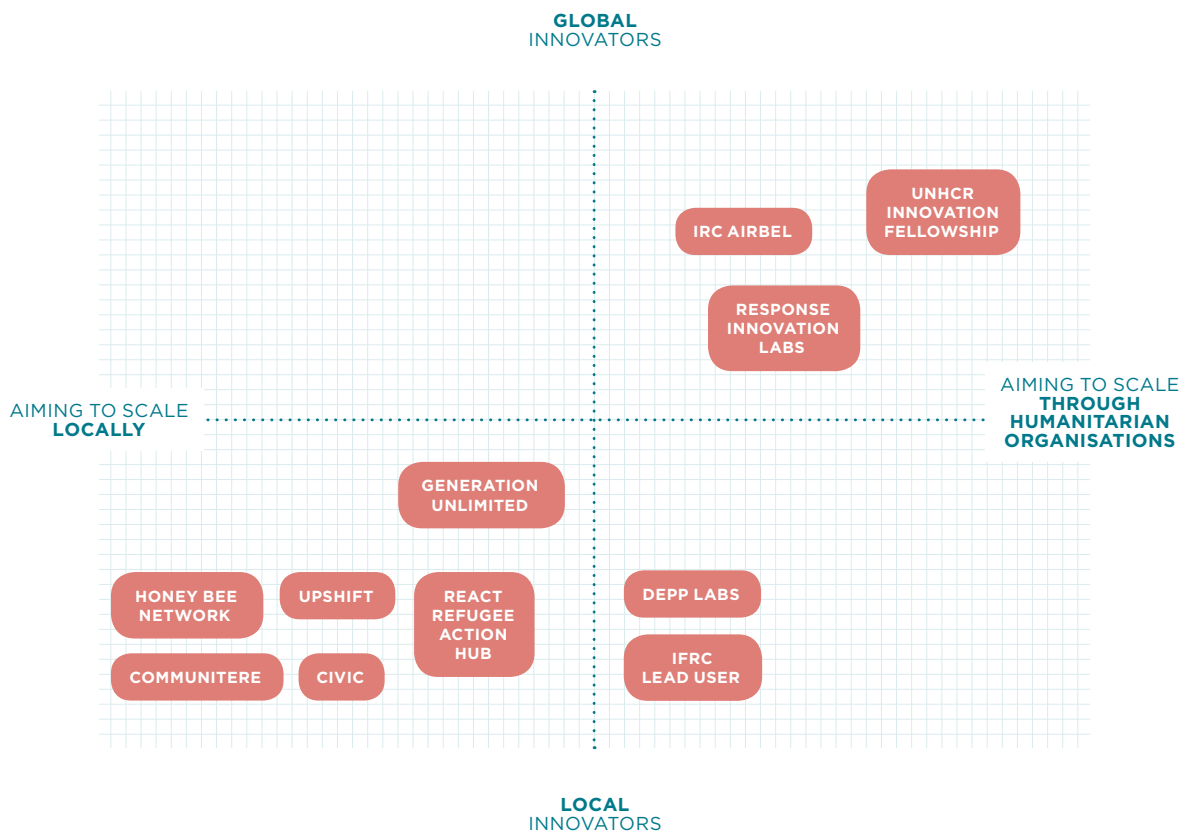
10. Nesta (2014) Innovation teams and labs: A practice guide. Available at: https://www.nesta.org.uk/toolkit/innovation-teams-and-labs-a-practice-guide/.

in humanitarian settings.[11] It described a number of different options, depending on whether the innovator is selling to people within the affected community or to humanitarian organisations or to donors (either directly or via grants). Some of the supporting organisations covered all of these, while others focused on one particular route.

The 'local innovation' support mechanisms reviewed in this paper can be arranged into three groups, each of which has a different focus of support:

- **Mechanisms supporting local innovators in scaling their ideas locally.** Civic, Communitere and the MIT Refugee Action Hub (ReACT Hub) are examples from this group. These labs tend to provide space, social support and tools to facilitate the innovators in developing their ideas. The innovations often sit within the 'social market' (where they are unfunded and rely on volunteers) or are low cost. These three organisations each operate in several different countries and have gained some recognition at the global level. However, it is important to note that there are a number of other local initiatives that may not use the language of innovation but that

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11. Gray, I. et al. (2019) Business models for Innovators Working in Crisis Response and Resilience Building. DEPP Labs. Available at: https://startnetwork.org/resource/business-models-innovators-working-crisis-response-and-resilience-building.

promote similar ideas or methodologies. These include initiatives to share and develop local knowledge on coping strategies, self-protection, early warning strategies and disaster risk reduction. The Honey Bee Network is one example of a global, volunteer-based network that promotes innovative local ideas – based on traditional knowledge produced at the grassroots level by individuals and communities – and disseminates them to the wider ecosystem.

- **Mechanisms supporting national or global level innovators in scaling their ideas through humanitarian organisations.** The UNHCR Innovation Fellowship and the Response Innovation Labs (RIL) seek out innovators with ideas that have the potential to change the ways that humanitarian organisations work. For example, RIL, which works at the response level, emphasises the importance of mapping local ecosystems and bringing together humanitarian 'problem holders' with people from other organisations, companies and institutions to adapt or develop new solutions. These are then adopted by the original organisation. These groups tend to emphasise methodologies that are prevalent in commercial innovation, including human-centred design processes, rapid prototyping and piloting.

- **Mechanisms supporting local innovators in scaling their ideas through humanitarian organisations.** The DEPP Labs and the IFRC Lead User labs have both developed methodologies that take local innovators with few connections to the humanitarian system and help them to develop their innovations in a way that facilitates take-up. The

IFRC lead users (or user innovators) are people already innovating to improve existing products, typically because those products do not meet their needs.[12] Like the DEPP Labs innovators, they are supported to develop their ideas through an iterative design process and by field testing the idea.

The type of support given will be informed by the purpose of the lab (described above), the type of innovator and the planned scaling pathway. For example, support organisations that focus on promoting local entrepreneurship and ideas that scale locally tend towards long-term, low-intensity engagement with innovators, promoting tried and tested revenue models. They support innovators in registering businesses, developing financial models and building personal skills. At the other end of the spectrum, where the goal is scalable solutions, support organisations work to build support for the innovators' ideas among humanitarian organisations. Their focus is on bringing different organisations together, building networks, and developing skills in grant writing and monitoring and evaluation (M&E). The process may still be participatory but there is less emphasis on factors such as the innovator's long-term livelihood.

DIFFERENT LEVELS OF SUPPORT BASED ON THE HUMAN AND SOCIAL CAPITAL OF INNOVATORS

Finally, the research suggests that the human and social capital of the innovator should influence the level and type of support they are given. 'Human capital' describes an innovator's skills, creativity, training and education; social capital includes the networks they can access for finance and non-financial support. In a humanitarian environment, an innovator may be highly educated with strong management skills and training but find themselves without financial support for their idea, or easy access to government or institutional buyers that might be interested in their product or service. In general, innovators with low human and social capital benefit from longer periods of more intensive support. For innovators with high human and social capital, lighter touch models can be effective.

Organisations that support innovation benefit from a coherent framing of their support in terms of motivation, pathways to scale and the types of innovator they support. In Chapter 1 we will look at which types of support are important, and why, along with specific considerations for grassroots innovators. ∎

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12. Cooper, N., Hazeldine, S., & Quaggiotto, G. (2017). Two Paths to Supporting Grassroots Innovation.

Indigeneous knowledge is too often overlooked in humanitarian response. Stiftung Solarenergie Foundation worked closely with the T'boli people of Sitio Datal Ligaw to mainstream their knowledge, attitudes, and practices in disaster risk reduction and management. **TUKLAS LAB**

Chapter 1
Types of support for innovators

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In this chapter, we explore the types of support needed by innovators operating in humanitarian environments. These focus on bridging the gap between the capability of the innovators and the social networks, resources and specific skills needed to build, test and implement an innovation.

The support process begins with an innovator who spots a problem or opportunity. The innovator may be inside or outside an organisation or they might be working with a few other people. Alternatively, they might take the insights of a group and start to think through new solutions, either on their own, with the same group or with another group. This individual or group is the initial 'user' of the innovation support.

If the innovator is successful in generating an idea, they will move through an (often messy) process of understanding the problem more deeply, searching to see if there are already solutions to the problem, and then, if there aren't any that are a good fit, developing a solution that is. This is the 'innovation' and often the focus of much of the literature and thinking in humanitarian innovation.

If the innovation evolves to be useful and impactful, the innovator will need additional people to take on new tasks during prototyping and piloting. This step marks the creation of a team, and ultimately an organisation or business if the innovator is an entrepreneur (or the harnessing of additional resources and people from the host organisation if the innovator is an 'intrapreneur').

This innovation journey is not linear, but each one tends to follow a similar path, with different types and levels of support required in different phases. At the start, the focus will be on the innovation, then later it will move to the team and organisation. Further along the line, there will be greater differences in the type of support needed, depending on each innovation's chosen pathway to scale.

Figure 2
The innovation support process

INNOVATOR

**INNOVATOR
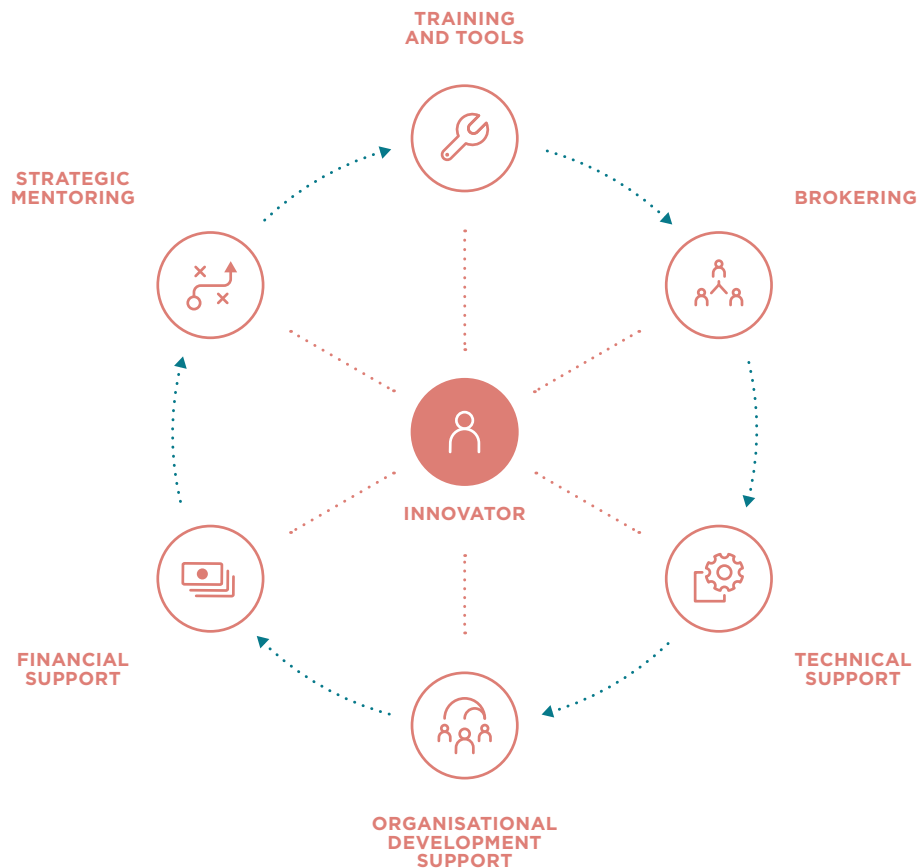+
INNOVATION**

**INNOVATOR
+
INNOVATION
+
TEAM**

**INNOVATOR
+
INNOVATION
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ORGANIZATION**
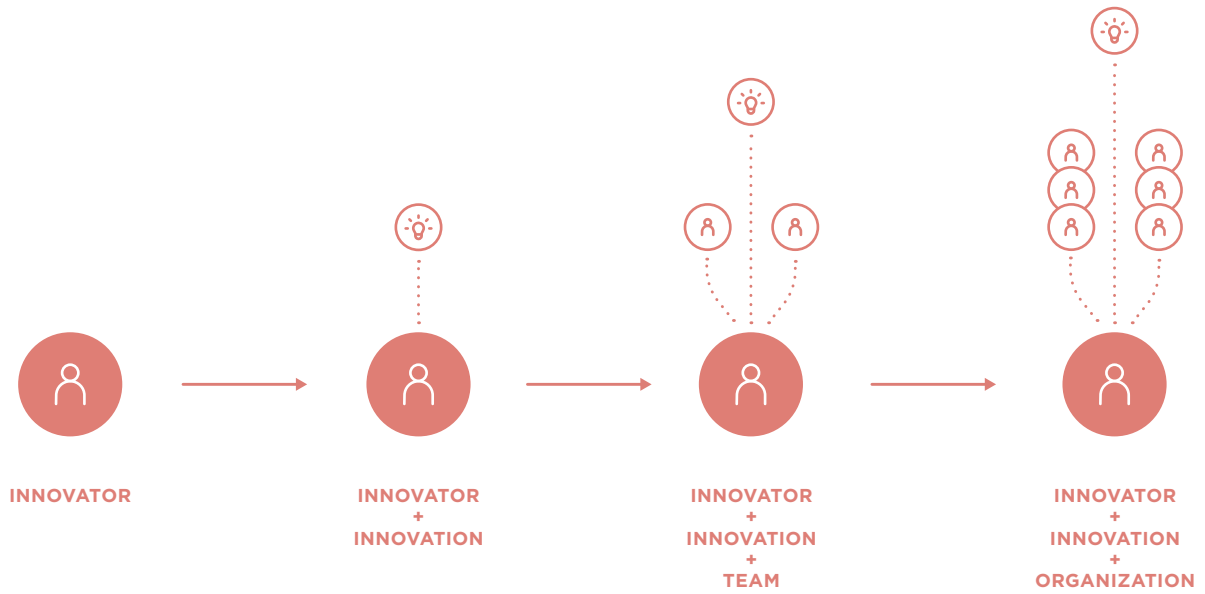
For the Ifugao indigenous peoples, camote is a critical economic and cultural heritage crop that is being threatened by a deadly fungal disease. This community-run green house is being used to grow trichoderma - a fungi that can control the disease that plagues camote. **TUKLAS LAB**

The six types of innovation support

TRAINING
AND TOOLS

STRATEGIC
MENTORING

BROKERING

INNOVATOR

Ian Gray

FINANCIAL
SUPPORT

TECHNICAL
SUPPORT

ORGANISATIONAL
DEVELOPMENT
SUPPORT

1.1 THE SIX TYPES OF SUPPORT

Research on humanitarian innovation has identified six different types of support that enable humanitarian innovators. These provide a useful starting point for considering the needs of innovators, their teams and their organisations. Labs and other support mechanisms play a role in bridging the gap between the innovator's existing position and the additional skills, assets or resources seen as important in each of these six areas.

1. **Financial support.** Many startups generate early funding for their ideas from friends and family members, via crowdfunding through their social networks or through their academic institutions. However, at some point, almost all innovators will need financial support. There is some evidence of innovation funding generated through diaspora networks, but most local innovators working in humanitarian environments will need external support to get their idea off the ground.

2. **Strategic mentoring.** This supports innovators in testing their idea, identifying pitfalls, making a plan for their team's development and addressing the things that the innovators themselves find challenging. Personal mentoring and emotional support will also be important.

Ajyal, Arabic for 'Generations', after winning a $25,000 grant for their solution to bring free early childhood education into public spaces in low-income neighbourhoods across Jordan. **MAHALI LAB**

3. **Training and tools.** This includes all the skills required to develop an idea and get it off the ground, from user-centred design approaches to finance and marketing.

4. **Brokering.** Innovators need to form relationships with a range of individuals and organisations including suppliers, distribution networks and humanitarian organisations. Support is needed not only to create these connections but also to help the innovators negotiate fair deals and manage their business relationships.

5. **Technical support.** Many innovators will benefit from technical support in actually materialising their idea. The type of technical support will vary, and could cover anything from design support to help with digital or engineering products, or help developing service delivery.

6. **Organisational development support.** People with brilliant ideas are not necessarily experienced in forming teams, or setting up and running young organisations, and will need support with these tasks.

1.2 HOW SUPPORT CHANGES THROUGH THE PROCESS

As we have identified above, support needs to be uniquely tailored to the innovator based on their particular capabilities and needs. This research – and the authors' experience – shows that the type of support required by innovators and innovation teams changes as they move through the innovation cycle. We use the process in the Humanitarian Innovation Guide[13] as the basis for identifying the type of support needed for each innovator through their individual journey.

SUPPORT FOR THE INNOVATOR

To understand the type of support an innovator might need, the support organisation needs to help them assess their capacity to innovate and to be a successful entrepreneur. A number of factors will determine how difficult or easy it will be for them to successfully innovate. (The number one indicator of an innovator's ability to create a successful innovation and see it to scale is their drive and tenacity, so do not underestimate an innovator that shows these characteristics, but appears weaker in other areas.)

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13. The Humanitarian Innovation Guide published by the HIF is available at: https://higuide.elrha.org/.

Many inhabitants of Marsabit County, depend on income generated by small quantities of milk that they take to market, but the journey is long and fraught with danger. The Mt. Marsabit dairy cooperative supports the most vulnerable members of the community, especially pastoralist women, to earn a livelihood through a structured micro-milk collection system.
MAARIFA KONA/J. MWAURA

Figure 4
## Focus of support across innovation phases
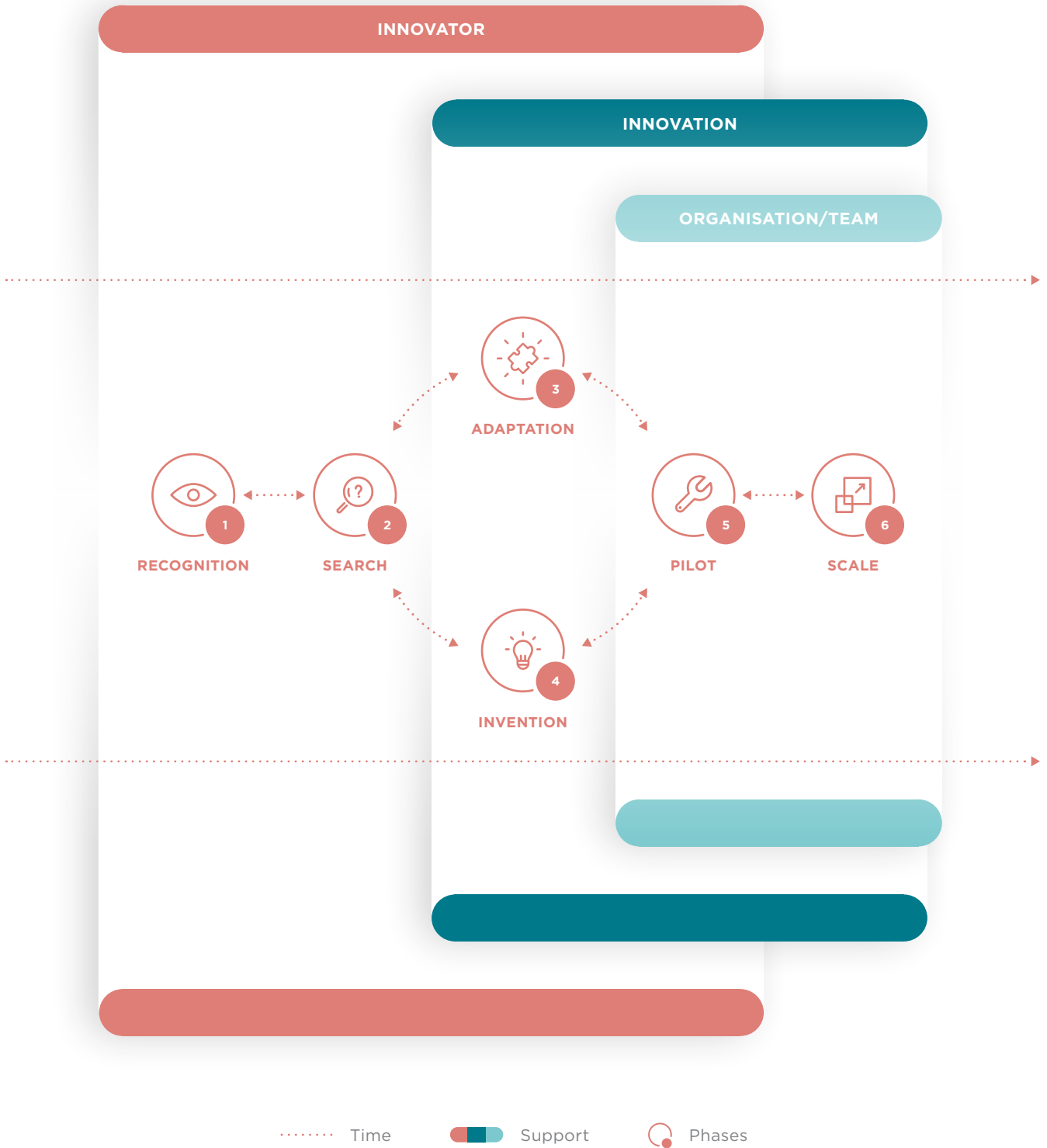
KEY QUESTIONS FOR SUPPORT AGENCIES

The research indicates that each innovator has unique capabilities and support needs. For each innovator, the particular focus of support will depend on the following eight factors:

- **Understanding the problem.** Have they experienced the problem personally, or do they know someone who has? How nuanced is their existing understanding?

- **Motivation.** Why do they want to create a new solution?

- **Mindset.** How open-minded are they? Are they able to adapt their ideas and learn

from others? How confident are they in presenting their ideas to a new audience?

- **Understanding the solution space.** How well do they understand the alternative solutions that already exist? What extra technical assistance might they require to design the new product or service?

- **Social capital.** Do they have strong networks that might provide financial and non-financial support (such as connections to buyers)?

- **Livelihood security.** How much time can they realistically give to the innovation, based on their other time pressures, such as

Figure 5
Factors in innovation support
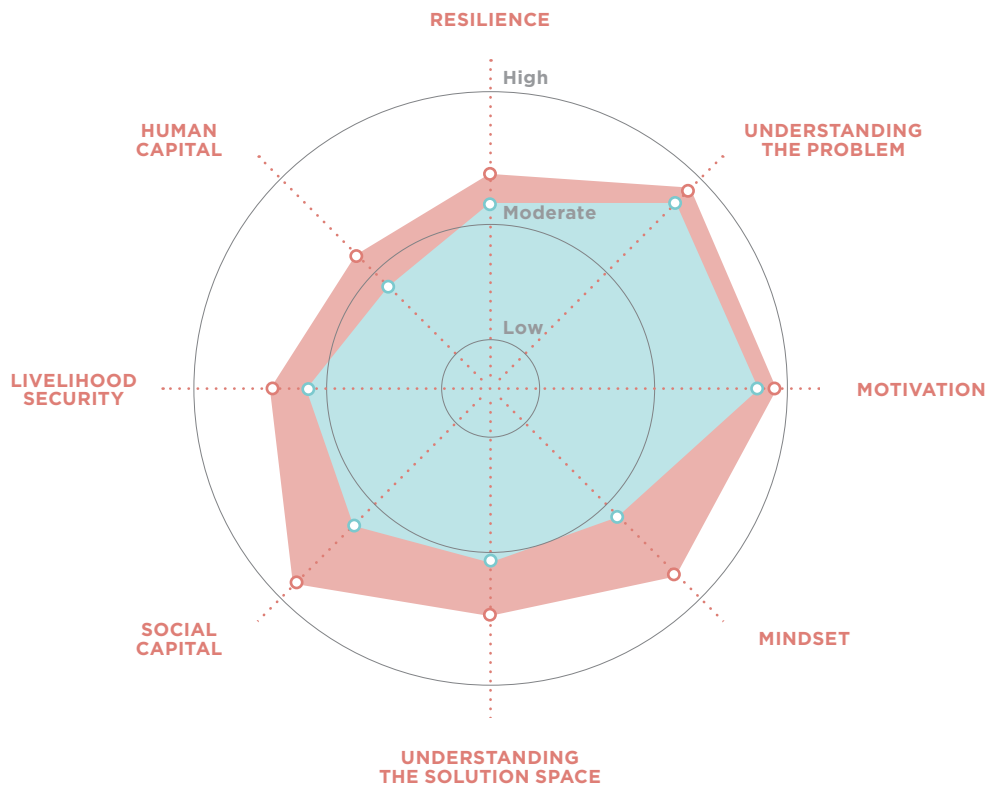
earning an income or caring for a young family?

- **Human capital.** What is their literacy and numeracy, skills and experience? How ready are they to manage a project or organise a team?

- **Resilience.** What is the level of uncertainty and trauma that the innovator has already experienced? How well are they able to cope with further setbacks or failures?

It is particularly important in humanitarian settings to consider human and social capital, because innovators may have faced displacement, a loss of social networks or limited access to education or training.

Innovation support mechanisms should focus on identifying the existing capabilities of the innovator and then supporting them according to their priority development areas.[14] Local innovators often have a nuanced understanding of the problems they are trying to address and are often very motivated to develop useful solutions for their communities.[15] However, they may struggle with poor access to finance and limited social capital.

Our interviewees highlighted how innovators' priorities and skills may change over time. For example, some innovators needed greater support with their mindset and confidence in the early stages (for example through mentoring) while for others it was more important to learn how to conduct user research. In later stages, innovators emphasised the need for greater support in brokering relationships as well as technical skills around M&E, finance and organisational management.

For the four DEPP labs, significant levels of investment were needed to adapt lab support to varying levels of literacy. The Mahali lab in Jordan, for example, noted that their selection processes favoured people with higher levels of education and some level of related experience. This meant that those from outside the capital of Amman were more likely to be deselected during later stages of the programme. Maarifa Kona lab in Kenya addressed this issue by adapting their process for people from a wider range of educational levels. They recruited team members who spoke local languages, and community mobilisers who could help collect ideas from people in local languages. Women with higher levels of education were also recruited into the programme to provide technical support and to mentor female innovators in brokering relationships and negotiating confidently.

Personal mentoring emerged as very important to many local innovators, but was only mentioned by one of the organisations interviewed during this research. Innovators local to humanitarian settings may have experienced personal trauma, economic loss, displacement or a loss of social support networks. They are likely to experience periods of immense frustration as they try to develop their idea into something that works and that can be taken up by humanitarian organisations. Research has highlighted the challenges of accessing funding, maintaining volunteer effort and 'sustaining emotional stamina' to keep going.[16] Given this, finding capable mentors with the ability to provide personal encouragement and entrepreneurial support is difficult (and is likely to require financial resources).
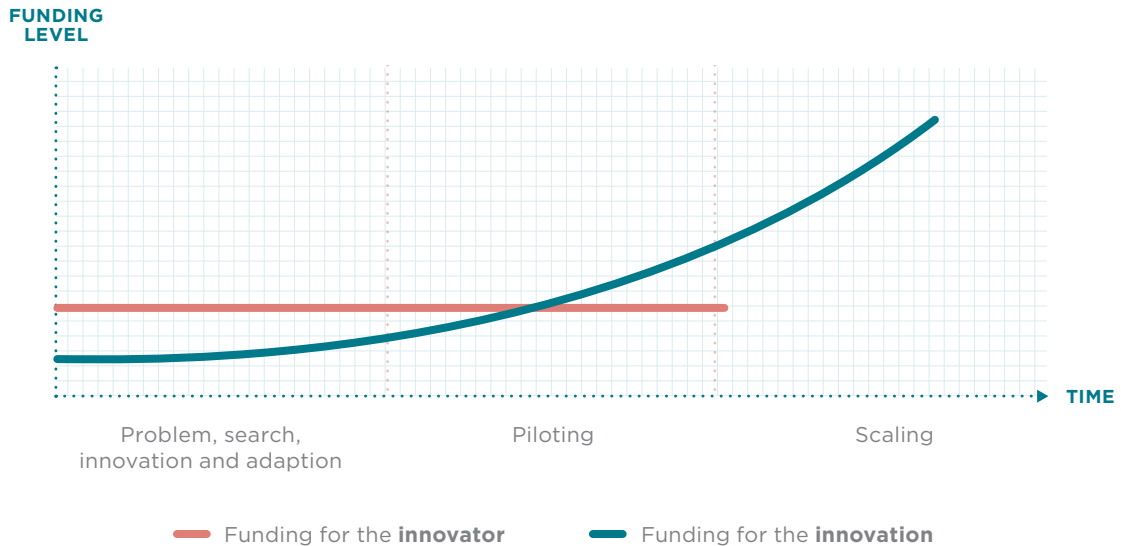
Commercial innovation emphasises the importance of team members having 'a stake

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14. This requires the support organisation and the innovator to collaboratively conduct an individual assessment of the capabilities and needs of the innovator. It is vital that this process is carried out with their informed consent and that they are part of assessing themselves against each of the areas with the innovation support provider. This should be followed by a discussion with the innovator on their requirements and areas of difficulty, and a bespoke support plan for the innovator should be co-developed to address their particular personal needs and maximise their capabilities, before they embark on the innovation.

15. Konda, N. et al. (2019) Human-centred design for humanitarian innovation. DEPP Labs.

16. Martiskainen, M. (2017). The role of community leadership in the development of grassroots innovations. *Environmental Innovation and Societal Transitions*, 22, 78–89.

Figure 6
Funding for innovation

Finally, it is important that mentoring, brokering, training and other support does not only come from the lab itself. Lab staff may provide some support functions but should work with each innovator to identify and develop the necessary skills, relationships and investments they specifically need. This also involves helping the innovator to grow their social networks and to benefit from peer learning with others in the labs.

SUPPORT FOR THE INNOVATION

The innovators interviewed emphasised the importance of financial and technical support for the innovation. For example, an innovator supporting deaf people in Jordan needed technical support on content, graphic design, printing and videography. In Kenya, many of the innovators working on reducing risks from drought needed technical support around water services and agriculture. They drew on experts with a mix of local knowledge and scientific knowledge. Those in isolated locations with less exposure to technology needed more support in accessing some types of technical know-how.

in the game'. However, making a commitment to a project that doesn't generate income is a luxury that few humanitarian innovators can afford. Many of those included in the four DEPP labs came from locations where there is restricted access to employment and without remuneration for innovator's time, only the most privileged people living in each area would be able to apply. This meant that a key component of DEPP Labs' services was financial support to enable participation regardless of socio-economic status. Special consideration may also be needed for people without ID or with legal restrictions to formal banking.

Nevertheless, the relationship between financial incentives, passion and commitment vary from person to person. Moreover, remuneration may encourage participants to leave secure employment to join lab processes that are ultimately uncertain. Some projects address this by focusing on training and skills building through low-intensity programmes that allow people to attend while employed elsewhere, slowly building the skills they need to start their business or develop their idea.

Top: The innovator of Mathenge Maisha creates his unique flour from a common drought-resistant tree previously thought of as a weed. **MAARIFA KONA/J. MWAURA**

Bottom: The final Mathenge Maisha flour, after months of testing and development of the product with support of the Kenya lab. **MAARIFA KONA/J. MWAURA**

SUPPORT FOR THE INNOVATION TEAM

A growing idea will often need a team to support it. For some local innovators, this may initially be a team of volunteers to help with testing and piloting. Others will need to identify co-founders for their emerging businesses.

The four DEPP labs were unusual in that they supported some innovators in forming teams. The challenges around building and sustaining these teams were a recurring theme in the interviews.[17] Across all examples there were difficulties in identifying people with the right mixture of skills and aligning the priorities and interests of different participants. For example, one innovator reflected:

"The most difficult thing is to be a leader in the team, and this is a huge responsibility. There are people who would not work unless you give them certain tasks and clear instructions. I got a comment from Mahali team that I am giving orders to one person in the team, but we've been working together for ten weeks and I had to do that. I had worked in civil society for almost seven years, but it is very different when you work on your own idea. The team is the most difficult thing."

KEY QUESTIONS FOR SUPPORT AGENCIES

- What (and who) is motivating innovators to form teams?

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17. The different outcomes of individual vs team-led innovations has been documented elsewhere. For example Abdullah Gok (2013) The Impact of Innovation Inducement Prizes.

After the 2011 drought in the Horn of Africa, a group of small-scale livestock farmers from Marsabit County formed a cooperative with the aim of working together to find a solution to the problem. **MAARIFA KONA/J. MWAURA**

- Are the teams coming together organically?

- Are the teams flexible?

The first consideration is whether a team is needed (and sought) by the innovators. If so, it is important that the teams grow organically. Innovators who were 'expected' to form teams described challenges around the level of skills and expertise of their colleagues. That led to tension, power dynamics, a lack of clear roles and frustration within the innovation team. In general, innovators who were already in teams found it easier to execute their plans, compared to those who had to form teams during the process.

Related to this is the need for flexibility. As an innovation progresses, different people will be needed in different types of roles (see next section). It is important that the lead innovator can select and – where necessary – replace team members. In the Kenya lab, some team members were selected from outside of the target area and travelled long distances to contribute.
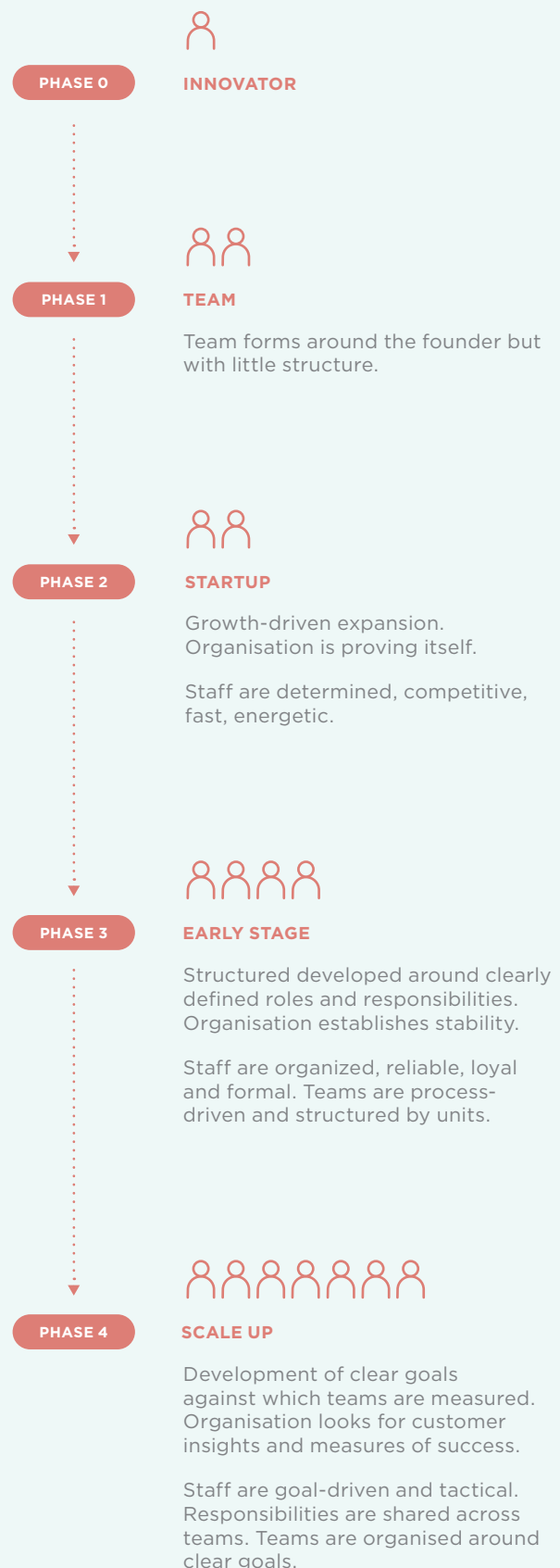
SUPPORT FOR THE INNOVATION ORGANISATION

Once an innovation has been piloted, the focus of support turns to developing an organisation around the innovator, their innovation and the team. Unfortunately, the lack of locally led innovations that developed from pilots into scaled ideas makes it difficult to draw firm conclusions about how humanitarian agencies can help innovators to build startups that grow into sustainable organisations (see Figure 7) or about alternative routes for scaling innovations within established humanitarian organisations.

KEY QUESTIONS FOR SUPPORT AGENCIES

Empirical research by Elrha highlighted common factors that enable humanitarian innovations.[18] Support agencies can help to

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18. Obrecht, A., & Warner, A. T. (2016). More than just luck: Innovation in humanitarian action. *HIF/ALNAP Study*.

Figure 7
Phases of organisational development*

PHASE 0 — **INNOVATOR**

PHASE 1 — **TEAM**

Team forms around the founder but with little structure.

PHASE 2 — **STARTUP**

Growth-driven expansion. Organisation is proving itself.

Staff are determined, competitive, fast, energetic.

PHASE 3 — **EARLY STAGE**

Structured developed around clearly defined roles and responsibilities. Organisation establishes stability.

Staff are organized, reliable, loyal and formal. Teams are process-driven and structured by units.

PHASE 4 — **SCALE UP**

Development of clear goals against which teams are measured. Organisation looks for customer insights and measures of success.

Staff are goal-driven and tactical. Responsibilities are shared across teams. Teams are organised around clear goals.

*ADAPTED FROM WORK BY KERSTIN VAN ECKERT AT PATHFINDER

The Bakwit Kit is a portable living unit designed to give families the experience of privacy in public evacuation shelters, where dozens of families can end up living in close quarters for extended periods of time. **TUKLAS LAB**

strengthen these enabling factors through mentoring, brokering and training. The factors listed below all arose from piloting and scaling innovations within existing organisations, but they provide a helpful starting point for any humanitarian innovator because they address some of the key barriers to moving beyond the pilot phase.

- **Access to end users and gatekeepers.** Does the innovator have access to the end user being targeted? Are there gatekeepers that control this access, or control whether the innovation is supported within organisations or the community?

- **Strategy.** If the innovator is in an organisation, does their proposed innovation align with the organisation's strategy?

- **Culture.** If the innovator is in an organisation, does its culture support innovation?

- **Financial resources.** Does the innovator have access to flexible financial resources?

- **Evidence.** Has the innovator built up a strong evidence base regarding the problem: how effective their solution is at addressing it, and how it compares to the current practice?

- **Partnerships and collaborations.** How effectively does the innovator identify potential partners and develop strong partnerships for their innovation?

- **Team management.** When the innovation has a team working on it, how effective is the team, and how well-managed is it?

- **Risk management.** Are the risks in the innovation process well-considered and managed?

Identifying and implementing viable business models is a particular challenge for humanitarian innovators, particularly when the innovation addresses a problem that is unrecognised or underfunded. A number of pathways to scale have been identified and explored in a companion research paper in this series.[19] These include selling to proxy buyers (donors) or intermediaries (aid agencies), as well as directly to users. A key lesson from the DEPP Labs was the need for flexibility to allow for different types of business models. However, it is also possible that some innovators may not want to develop independent organisations or businesses. Others may look to scale their innovations through social markets (depending on volunteers, for example) or as small businesses selling directly to their neighbours. Providing flexibility for innovations to develop at their own pace and in their own directions can help to encourage a diverse set of innovations.

The six types of support outlined in section 1.1 above remain relevant, but the specific priority of the innovation team will depend on their pathway to scale. For example, innovators selling to proxy buyers (donors) emphasised the importance of skills in research and M&E, grant writing and forming relationships with humanitarian organisations. The HIF, for example, provides training on how to develop funding applications, articulate ideas and use the right terminology. This uses a two-stage process starting with training for innovators, who submit applications for HIF funding, after which HIF provides feedback. The innovators then do a second round of applications, taking on board the feedback and comments to reposition what they're doing to access funding.

Irrespective of the specific business model, many innovators needed ongoing support in financial management as their ideas and organisations became more expensive and complex. A team of innovators in the Philippines lab, for example, emphasised the importance of building skills in financial management. They had designed an emergency partition kit, so that families who fled from their homes during cyclones would have a safe and private area to live in within communal buildings. They explained that, as designers, they were confident in developing the prototype and testing

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19. Gray, I. et al. (2019) Business models for Innovators Working in Crisis Response and Resilience Building. DEPP Labs. Available at: https://startnetwork.org/resource/business-models-innovators-working-crisis-response-and-resilience-building.

it with the community. However, they had little understanding of possible business models, of how to register their organisation or the financial management needed to sell to local government or into international NGOs. They were also keen to learn more about different types of legal and financial structures for their organisation, such as a business, an NGO or a social enterprise.

Relationship brokerage is vital for any innovation team. But it is particularly vital for teams of people who have been displaced and whose social networks have been disrupted. There may be stigma attached to labels such as 'displacement', 'refugees', 'outsiders' or 'foreigners', and this can lead to exclusion from social networks or from the market they are looking to penetrate. Innovators emphasised the need for support in forming links with a wide range of people and organisations including regulators, suppliers, purchasers and distributors.

It is important to note that brokering relationships involves more than just making introductions. It often means supporting negotiations and finding ways to integrate the innovation into the supplier or purchaser's organisation. One of the innovators at Marifa Kona lab in Kenya, for example, needed to source a component of their new form of livestock feed. The lab manager provided an introduction to a supplier in Nairobi, around 600km away. He also helped the innovator to develop a business-to-business relationship with the supplier, including negotiating business rates for the product and organising transport of the product between Nairobi and the innovator in Garissa County.

Finally, organisations supporting innovations to scale reported mentoring as being vital throughout the process – not only at the outset. Mentoring support can help innovators to talk about the innovation in a way that will attract funding, networks and the uptake of the idea. Training around humanitarian principles, ethics, standards and jargon was also important for innovators who had limited experience of the humanitarian sector but wanted to be able to access funding or other institutional support. ∎

The lab team collects household information in Korail to ensure that innovators focus on the right problems. Later, innovators are supported to learn research methodologies and design their own survey instruments as they develop their innovations. **UDHVABANI LAB**

Chapter 2
How to better support humanitarian innovation at a local level

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This chapter highlights how external factors can have a significant bearing on the type of support needed and how much benefit is gained from this support.

One of the first questions that new supporters of innovation ask is: 'Which model of support should we use?' However, our research suggests that **what** is done to support local humanitarian innovation is less important than **how** it is done. Selecting a model is a key consideration, but how you use the model is ultimately more important.

Building on the types of support for local innovators, this chapter seeks to address questions about how to better support local innovation within a humanitarian context. It is critical to identify the type of support that is best for a local innovator. Yet the different types do not operate in isolation and cannot be understood without looking at the broader organisational context or sector that the innovation depends

on for support. Numerous innovation startups have arisen in the sector but most struggle to make it beyond the pilot phase.[20] If the broader organisational context or sector does not provide an enabling environment, the innovation will struggle to flourish or to continue beyond the pilot phase. A lab manager explained:

"It's not enough to just support the innovation to develop and hope and assume that if it's a good enough idea and it's developed well enough that it will be taken up and implemented.

I think there's an incredible amount of work that needs to go into the ecosystem that supports that innovation and a lot of work that needs to go into supporting humanitarian organisations to understand how to adapt innovations, how to get funding, how to monitor them, make sure that lessons are learned and captured. There's no shortage of amazing ideas and innovations out there. A lot of them are piloted and never used again. That's because there isn't the support to share them, in how to use them, to connect actors to these innovations."

Make support

✓ AVAILABLE

✓ ACCESSIBLE

✓ FLEXIBLE

✓ EMPOWERING

✓ SKILLED

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20. Scriven, K (2016), Humanitarian innovation and the art of the possible. *Special Edition on Humanitarian Innovation, Humanitarian Exchange*, 66, 5-7.

Drought Cure is an alternative fortified feed for livestock – made from locally available materials such as crop residuals, grass, leaves, pods and tubers, which are then mixed with commercial nutrients.
MAARIFA KONA/J. MWAURA
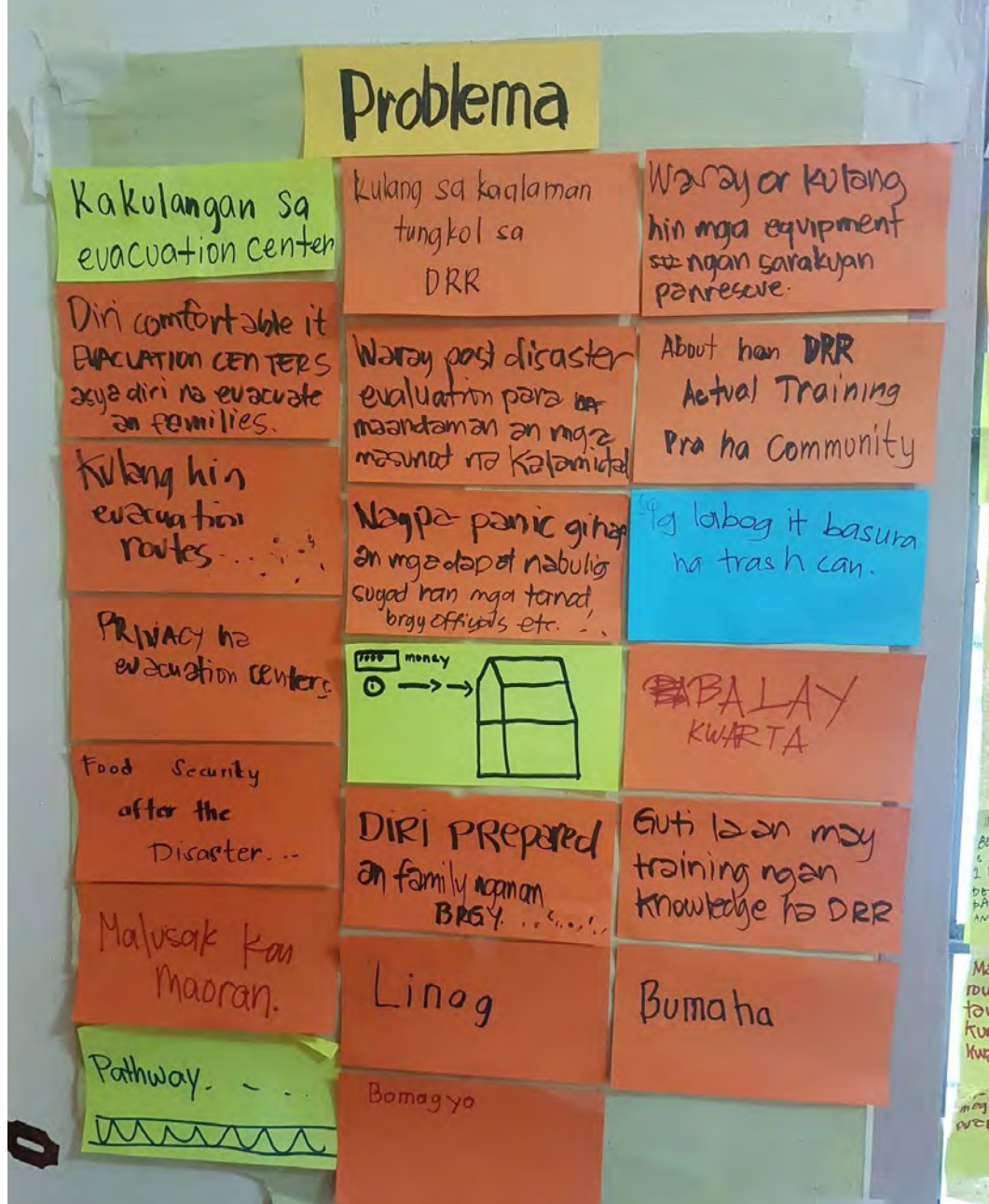
Left and right: Innovators' work on display in Philippines, after an exercise to understand the elements of the problem and possible solutions, all conducted in Tagalog. **TUKLAS LAB**

Our research has highlighted five key factors that are important in creating an enabling environment for local innovation and that organisations looking to support local innovation need to consider.

Currently, the vast majority of formal humanitarian innovation is dependent on the humanitarian sector for support. However, there are other avenues of support for humanitarian innovation, including individual philanthropy, foundations or academic institutions. One example is MIT's ReACT Hub, which provides higher technology education for refugees. At present, these other avenues remain largely untapped by humanitarian innovation, but could provide an opportunity to circumnavigate some of

the specific barriers within the humanitarian sector. While this chapter focuses largely on the humanitarian sector, it can broadly be applied to other kinds of support organisations or sectors.

2.1 MAKE SUPPORT AVAILABLE

START WITH THE PROBLEMS

People supporting local innovation place particular emphasis on recognising and re-framing problems. Social innovation labs often aim to take a large societal problem, and collaborate with the affected users in

an experimental learning space outside of the dominant failing system.[21] Interviewees emphasised, again and again, that the early stages of setting up this type of innovation process take time. For example:

"Identifying themes and challenge-framing with the affected community is important because they frame their problem so differently from how NGOs frame their problems. And that took so much time. You need to front-load your model in that problem-finding, relationship-building, challenge-framing phase, to get good results."

The Mahali lab in Jordan was the only one of the DEPP labs that started with individuals and not with ideas for innovations. They tried two open calls for proposals to see if they could find innovators for the lab who were already at the prototype phase of their innovations and support them through the piloting phase, but were only able to source one innovation team out of hundreds of applications. Although there is a lot of innovation support available in Jordan, the applications failed to demonstrate the requisite quality of ideas to address the kind of social problems that the DEPP Labs aimed to support. The Mahali lab

21. Kieboom, M. (2014). *Lab Matters: Challenging the Practice of Social Innovation Laboratories.* Kennisland Available at: https://www.kl.nl/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/lab_matters_paper_2014_web.pdf.

team concluded that if you're working with grassroots innovators you need to start with ideation and concept development, facilitating a process for communities to frame their problems and generate quality innovation ideas.

SOURCES OF SUPPORT FOR INNOVATORS

Despite the increasing interest in innovation since 2009, support for the process of humanitarian innovation remains limited. Funding is often sporadic, timebound and focused on early results.[22] As a result, support mechanisms end up prioritising basic products and services and early stage ideas. Like other innovation support programmes, DEPP Labs provided time-limited funding and after two years of investment the funding for the labs in Kenya, Jordan, Bangladesh and Philippines has now ended. The end of the lab funding is particularly difficult for innovators based in relatively remote areas in Marsabit and Garissa in Kenya, outside of the major hubs, where there are no other sources of support for the next phases of the innovation cycle.

Many of the innovators connected with the Maarifa Kona labs in Kenya are continuing to operate and it is arguable that the withdrawal of support following the end of the funding has encouraged a greater self-sufficiency among them. However, a complete end to all forms of support is likely to pose significant challenges to the innovators as they seek to push their innovations through the pilot stage and begin to consider scaling options. While they may not currently require such intensive financial support, other forms of support such as brokering and organisational development are becoming more essential. An abrupt and total end to support also forces the innovator to redirect attention away from developing the innovation and on to identifying or creating alternative sources of support.[23]

Even when other support mechanisms are available, they may not provide the tailored mentoring or brokering needed for scaling in the humanitarian system. In DEPP's Mahali lab in Amman, Jordan, innovators developed validated prototypes with a promising path to scale during the programme. Finalist teams were offered six additional months of incubator support through a for-profit incubator. However, the incubator may be unable to provide the networking opportunities within large humanitarian agencies that are vital for the longer-term survival of some of the innovations.

Continuity of support is specifically relevant for local innovation because the people involved are often working to solve things that are important for their own daily lives and well-being. If a package of support ends, the problem areas and innovation ideas identified may be easily forgotten by external actors. Yet local people continue to face the same problems, and the need for change, on a daily basis. Their motivation for the innovation is less likely to fluctuate than the motivations of support organisations that are dependent on funding cycles and organisational priorities. It is critical to ensure that support is embedded with local people and local organisations who will keep working on those issues and remain motivated to seek out additional sources of support where possible.

DELIVERING SHORT-TERM SUPPORT WELL

In the cases where short-term funding is unavoidable, interviews emphasised that relationships with partners, suppliers and purchasers should be brokered early in the support cycle. This means that innovators won't be left negotiating very new relationships when the support mechanism disappears. This is especially important for

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22. Currion, P (2016) The Life and Death of an Innovation Lab: A Personal Reflection. Humanitarian Practice Network Available at: https://odihpn.org/magazine/the-life-and-death-of-an-innovation-lab-a-personal-reflection/.

23. The same is true for supporting organisations. Uncertainty surrounding the availability and duration of financial support for innovation often detracts from them supporting the innovations and innovators themselves. As one staff member put it: *"When you're busy fundraising in your role, it's difficult to actually work on supporting innovation to take place."*

local innovators who may not have other avenues of support to rely on. As one lab manager commented:

"If you're operating a lab you have to broker relationships way earlier and more intentionally and more aggressively, because you know that your specific model of support for the innovators isn't going to get them to implementation. You have to do something additional to get them to that."

Moreover, after the initial short-term funding for a project stops, many projects are unable to continue or succeed without continued support. Providing innovators with the skills and capabilities to look and plan ahead – and to continue developing their innovations despite lower levels of support – is an important type of skills strengthening that is often overlooked. This is likely to include familiarising them with the resources that they can access going forward – you may not be the only support service in town.

2.2 MAKE SUPPORT ACCESSIBLE

Access to labs may be limited by failing to account for people with specific vulnerabilities, by a perception that innovation labs are only available to particular groups of people, or by physical proximity. Accessible support requires the lab to address each of these barriers.

BARRIER 1: SPECIFIC VULNERABILITIES

Interviewees noted the importance of designing labs that actively include innovators with specific vulnerabilities. There are currently almost no support mechanisms designed (for example) for people with specific disabilities, for older people, for survivors of violence or for people with poor health.

Where support mechanisms do seek to be more inclusive, it is important for this inclusive approach to be consistent for the duration of the support. It is not enough just to lower

Changemakers from the Nueva Ecija Persons with Disability Cooperative designed a disaster risk and response guide for first responders and local government from the perspective of people with disabilities, considering practical steps to meet their unique needs when disaster hits. **TUKLAS LAB**

The all-woman-team of Mt. Marsabit has worked with mentors from the dairy industry, conducting value addition studies, research and development, branding and marketing, and registering their business.
MAARIFA KONA/J. MWAURA

barriers to participation in the early application stages. For the Mahali lab in Jordan, their first application round provided volunteers to complete applications with people who had low-literacy levels or who weren't confident filling out a written application. However, the rest of the support programme was not designed to accommodate people with low literacy and all the individuals with low literacy levels were deselected as the process progressed.

BARRIER 2: LABELLING THE SUPPORT

A lot of innovation terminology is broad and has been taken to mean different things to different people. Our research identified concern around some innovation terms, including the word 'lab'. Terminology, in both English and local languages, is important in determining how the support and the innovations being supported are perceived and how people choose to interact with them. For example, one lab manager noted:

"A lot of these terms are very northern/north American [...] for some of the models we have, we sort of want to rename them or talk about them in very concrete layman's terms

because it alienates a lot of people. You start to notice demographics that congregate away from those models."

Similarly, another noted:

"In some cases we wish we didn't even call them labs because it has certain connotations. Like that it's a space with 3D printers and testing apps. In some cases that is what we have in place, but in others it's not."

BARRIER 3: DISTANCE

Local innovators may not be able to access available support due to distance or lack of technology. Innovation support tends to be located in major hubs and capital cities and these can be difficult to access for innovators that are based in remote or non-central locations. Proximity to the innovators and to the affected population are both important factors in the level of financial and non-financial support needed to enable participation.

The vast majority of innovation support is delivered through face-to-face interaction on a regular basis. Innovators we spoke to placed a

high value on the safe, supportive spaces that local innovation labs provide and the feelings of ownership, attachment and community they offer. Providing physical space also offers a level of flexibility for innovation support. The space can be used in different ways and this can be determined by the innovators themselves. The Mahali lab in Jordan, for example, provided a training space that was used for building relationships among the cohort and giving them somewhere to work. In Bangladesh, the lab was used as a meeting point for innovators and the local community, to introduce them to the concept of innovation and provide a space for feedback.

Communitere also see physical space for the community to use as a key component of the support they offer. Like a lab, an important part of the space is that it is considered a 'safe space'. It provides a space for

"community members and outsiders to experiment with new ideas that can fail without negative impact on the communities they intend to help.''

This speeds up the process of innovation. Having an accessible space also ensures that successful innovations are visible "for others to see, copy and improve upon". Providing this kind of space also helps to reduce overhead costs for organisations and businesses, and lowers barriers for the local community to engage in innovation.

However, face-to-face support is not always realistic. At the Maarifa Kona lab in Kenya, innovator teams lived between 3km and 250km from the lab locations. The lab staff supported the innovation teams through bi-weekly phone calls and regular visits to deliver materials or to discuss challenges that arose. However, it was often necessary to "mobilise other support" such as local mentors. The lab manager emphasised:

"We can support innovators anywhere but the difference is the time and resources required for those that are far away."

For local innovators, virtual support can help overcome access challenges. MIT ReACT Hub, for example, created a blended programme for refugee innovators from several different countries using both physical and virtual spaces. The 12-month learning programme combined a two-week intensive bootcamp, where the students all congregated together in one location, with online learning and a professional, paid internship component which took place in their individual locations. Virtual English language support was also available for students. As well as more formal types of support, the programme also provides support through edX platform forums, Skype and WhatsApp groups and this played a key role in the creation of the virtual support space.

"Virtual support through social media and WhatsApp is almost hyperactive in terms of how much communication happens there. It ranges everything from specific course questions, to job and internship opportunities outside of ReACT to this almost emotional, psychosocial support. For example, we had a student's father pass away very early on in the programme, the information sharing and the rallying that happened around the student to support her in that time [happened in the WhatsApp group]."

Based on their experiences, the ReACT team advocate for a multi-modal and multi-channel approach in the creation of virtual spaces.

"If you're going to go online do it across multiple channels, not just one."

However, an increased reliance on virtual support raises additional questions around access, including the need for technological literacy, and for computer and internet access with sufficient bandwidth. Another issue is that the internet is heavily monitored in many countries.

2.3 MAKE SUPPORT FLEXIBLE

Different innovation teams do well at different stages in the innovation cycle. Any support package therefore needs to provide a level of flexibility to enable innovators to experiment with ideas and to 'pivot' (change direction) as they learn more about the problem, the users, and the solution. However, humanitarian organisations tend to be constrained by

SUPPORT MODELS FOR LOCAL HUMANITARIAN INNOVATION

cumbersome, lengthy and restrictive opera-
tions and funding processes. This holds three
significant risks for local innovation:

- It can exclude local innovators who may not
  meet the requirements of bureaucratic pro-
  cesses, especially when it comes to funding.

- It can make innovation 'safe' and predicta-
  ble, sidelining less conventional ideas.

- It can result in disruption to support
  to innovators.

The dilemma, as outlined by Geoff Mulgan,
is this:

*"If they operate as part of the system, these
innovation labs risk losing their edge. But if
they operate separately from the system, they
risk having little impact."*[24]

Our research highlighted this tension between
the nature of innovation and the inflexibility of
humanitarian organisations as a key chal-
lenge. To address this, some organisations
have created one-off support packages for
individual innovators with an especially unique
or appealing idea, and made exceptions
to funding and bureaucracy requirements
to provide them with support. One lab, for
example, hired innovators as consultants and
provided scholarships where grant funding
was not possible.

But providing a support package that is
generalisable to larger segments of affected
populations – or that supports more radical
ideas within an organisation – is proving
more of a challenge. This sentiment was
echoed by organisations across the inno-
vation ecosystem:

*"I'm absolutely certain that we've UN-ed and
humanitarianised innovation and that is a real
shame. We've made it safe. Innovation is now
safe, it's complacent. Where's the revolution,
rebellion and creativity?"*

*"I think one of the challenges is that we're
hosted by a very big bureaucratic NGO
which is like the antithesis of innovative. We
often find that there's a disconnect between
the way that innovation needs to work and
the organisations that host these entities.
Which can make it painful for innovators,
but also pushes the limits of the bureaucracy
where it's hosted."*

*"Humanitarian organisations are not very good
at supporting a lab model, [where] you have to
move quickly, adapt, be agile … it was like hell
to do that within an NGO."*

*"When we do channel funds directly to
refugees, that is when our bureaucracy is… it
is a big challenge. We have to be accountable
for that money."*

As described in the paper 'Lab Matters':

*"We do not solely need incremental solu-
tions that continue to lean on a reluctance
to imagine alternative practices. What is
needed is discontinuous change: change that
displaces an established structural order for
something new."*[25]

Flexible support is therefore vital to realise the
transformational possibilities of innovation.
Without it, innovation labs will struggle to
define or address new types of problems,
to work with local innovators, or to develop
solutions that challenge the existing system.
However, by addressing the bureaucratic
barriers to innovation, organisations may also
provide space for more adaptive humanitarian
programming more widely.

2.4 MAKE SUPPORT EMPOWERING

There is an inherent power imbalance preva-
lent throughout the humanitarian sector and
this has often been replicated in humanitarian
initiatives to support local innovation. Support

24. Cheney, C (2017) Are innovation labs delivering on their promise? Devex. Available at:
     https://www.devex.com/news/are-innovation-labs-delivering-on-their-promise-89045.
25. Kieboom, M. (2014). *Lab Matters: Challenging the Practice of Social Innovation Laboratories*. Kennisland.
     Available at: https://www.kl.nl/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/lab_matters_paper_2014_web.pdf.

organisations are cast in the role of providers and sources of knowledge, while innovators are seen as 'beneficiaries'.[26] This role division potentially threatens the continued development of an innovation because it is contrary to the premise of local innovation – that local people should be the sources of innovation.

For organisations that provide other sources of support to local populations (such as food, shelter or protection services), engagement with the community is also significantly affected by already established roles. Innovation programs do not offer the tangible benefits

that people have become familiar with over years of interacting with humanitarian services. Some organisations expressed concern that opportunities for participation in innovation processes would raise people's expectations and they would participate on the basis that the organisation would provide other forms of material support, which ultimately were not available.

It is also important to consider who determines the role allocations in partnerships between local innovators and support organisations. Role distribution tends to be automatically

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26. Sphere (2014) In search of innovative contributions to address power imbalance in the humanitarian sector. Q&A learning event background note. Available at: https://www.alnap.org/system/files/content/resource/files/main/20181010-Background-Note.pdf.

Temperatures can reach over 40 degrees celsius inside the tin structures where many live in Korail. The innovators of the P-foam cooling ceiling insulation tested at least three designs to optimise its cooling properties, and the rate that it burns in the case of a fire. **UDHVABANI LAB**

This participatory 3D map by A2D enhances community disaster preparedness and resiliency through the active participation of vulnerable sectors with the local government units to identify hazards and capacity to inform contingency plans. **TUKLAS LAB**

decided by the supporting organisation, which is another way in which local innovators' perspectives and specific skills or experiences can be overlooked. As an alternative approach, Communitere make it possible for the community to choose how much or how little support they want or need at different stages of the innovation process. They see the importance of making resources and support available, but how much or how little is taken up is determined by the innovators themselves.

Another key question raised by our research was who is accountable for implementing the innovation, especially when support ends before the implementation phase has begun. The model currently adopted by most support organisations, including the DEPP Labs, is now one where the innovator does

everything – regardless of whether they are local, or within an agency – and if they fail, they fail. To integrate local innovation into humanitarian work, this has to shift to a model where support organisations have a bigger stake in the implementation and success of the innovation – but without disempowering the innovators themselves.

The research highlighted five ways in which organisations could make their support more empowering:

1. **Through diversity.** Support organisations need to recognise the power dynamics and inequalities **within** communities. An awareness of who within the community is receiving support, their position within the community, and who is included and excluded is important. An informed and

suggestions they received during feedback sessions. One of the lab managers noted:

"Building people's confidence to think critically about feedback they're getting and make intentional choices about developing their innovation was a really big part of our support."

3. **Through promoting financial independence.** It is undeniable that the humanitarian sector provides a large and relatively untapped market of opportunity for local humanitarian innovators, but it is also not the only available source of financial support (see beginning of chapter). Local humanitarian innovators may struggle to obtain funding from humanitarian organisations, due to strict reporting requirements and restrictions on the distribution of funds to people without ID or who have been displaced or have refugee status. The 'Lab Matters' paper argues that diversifying funding sources and helping innovators in "acquiring funding that is 'free' from requirements, monitoring and regulation, increases the possibilities for change that is discontinuous and independent of existing systems."[27] As an example, MIT ReACT Hub sourced their support for a refugee education programme from outside the humanitarian sector and in doing so minimised the restrictions often associated with funding from humanitarian sources.

considered approach to enabling local innovators depends on recognising that the way a support organisation engages with a community can empower some individuals while disempowering others.

2. **Through encouraging innovators to be critical.** This included developing self-confidence, along with the skills needed to listen to, analyse and use feedback both from the support organisation, mentors or trainers, and from the innovation's users. Innovators often began by expecting that the input from the support organisation or within the humanitarian sector was always right. This meant they would implement whatever

4. **By operating as a bridge between local innovation and the humanitarian sector.** People supporting innovation walk a fine line: providing the support needed without taking power or control away from local innovators themselves. This requires models that position the supporter as a bridge between local innovators and the humanitarian sector. While many local innovators may be keen to access a level of support from humanitarian organisations, they also have a lot to offer the humanitarian system. For example, local people have profound and nuanced

27. Kieboom, M. (2014). *Lab Matters: Challenging the Practice of Social Innovation Laboratories*. Kennisland Available at: https://www.kl.nl/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/lab_matters_paper_2014_web.pdf.

Innovators from the Ifugao Peasant Movement in Northern Luzon present their innovation for preventing root disease and improving food security at a demo day for humanitarian actors and investors. **TUKLAS LAB**

knowledge of their environments and are best placed to identify problems within their communities or localities.

5. **Through challenging the humanitarian ecosystem.** Structural barriers often prevent innovations from being adopted, supported or scaled.[28] Humanitarian organisations may be risk-averse or resistant to change. For example, the significant length of time taken for cash-based programming to be accepted and adopted by humanitarian organisations demonstrates how internal resistance may arise across the sector, even when an innovation has been shown to be cheaper, faster and more effective than the existing solution.[29] Local innovators will face similar barriers to accessing funding and networks, and to getting uptake of their solutions (with

some innovations and organisations posing more of a challenge than others). Innovators may need specific support to understand the reasons for inertia or resistance within supporting humanitarian organisations, and how to navigate it. In these cases, innovation support systems can help to challenge implementing organisations. UNHCR, for example, conducts whole-staff training in offices where they support specific innovation projects. They have learned that the more that people engage with the model of innovation, the more effective they can be in fostering support for innovation within the organisation as a whole.

Finally it is important to consider that innovators will also have their own networks of support and personal connections, which

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28. Elrha. (2018) 'Too Tough to Scale? Challenges to Scaling Innovation in the Humanitarian Sector.' Elrha: London.

29. Bessant in Elrha. (2018) 'Too Tough to Scale? Challenges to Scaling Innovation in the Humanitarian Sector.' Elrha: London.

they can rely on even when there are no formal avenues of support available. Support organisations should be aware of these existing networks and connections, without trying to replace them. Horizontal support between innovators can often be more effective and more accessible than support from external sources. However it will likely need to be supplemented with other support to meet the innovator's full range of needs.

2.5 MAKE SUPPORT SKILLED

Hiring the right staff can be challenging. As one organisation put it:

"Most people who know about innovation want to be innovators and are very entrepreneurial which can be a barrier to them supporting other people."

An effective lab manager needs to have an understanding both of innovation and of the humanitarian sector, and should ideally be local to the environment. An additional consideration is whether people with the required skills would want to work for NGOs or would even be aware of relevant work available in the NGO sector.

The skills, assets and networks of the support organisation are vital in determining what types of innovators can be supported and in what ways. A lab manager in Kenya explained that early-stage innovators often "do not know what technical support they will need" so the lab itself must be able to help assess the innovators' capabilities and gaps and identify appropriate support.

For early stage innovators, it was not unusual for gaps in lab capabilities to be reflected in the problems that the innovation teams faced. For example, all four DEPP labs initially overlooked the need to employ staff members with a specific knowledge of business models. As a result, training in this area and

the development of business models was not incorporated into the support package for local innovators until very late in the programme. Consequently at the end of the DEPP Labs programme the innovators' business models are not as fully developed as they could have been.

The humanitarian innovation sector is relatively more developed in cities that host major humanitarian response operations, for example Amman, Jordan or Nairobi, Kenya. In these locations, there are more sources of support so innovators can tailor support to their own needs by identifying complementary types of services from different sources. This allows support organisations to focus on providing support within their own areas of expertise. However, even when more sources of support are available, awareness of these is also critical. One lab manager noted:

"My current feeling is that we're just a little bit too ad hoc. Things emerge, and then disappear, they're here and then not there, geographic focus or thematic focus. It just means that actually the ecosystem has got a lot of gaps in it, and that makes it hard to navigate."

Finally, the lab staff should not provide all the support themselves: labs are a platform that allow skilled support to be drawn from people across the sector as well as providing a space for peer-support. Literature on social innovation emphasises the need for labs to help innovators draw on diverse perspectives from the whole system.[30] Access to external mentors and other supporters can help them design solutions with the perspectives of the potential buyer, adopter or distributer in mind. By expanding their networks, it can also provide an important way for grassroots innovations to grow, particularly from one location to the other.[31] ■

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30. Bliss, A. (2014). How social innovation labs contribute to transformative change. *The Rockefeller Foundation*.

31. Martiskainen, M. (2017). The role of community leadership in the development of grassroots innovations. *Environmental Innovation and Societal Transitions*, 22, 78-89.

Conclusions

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LIMITATIONS OF LABS

This paper has looked at how organisations funding and supporting innovation can foster successful innovators and innovations. These organisations are motivated to generate positive change but are at least one step removed from the actual act of innovation. Instead of delivering projects directly, they must build systems of support that help those enacting creative change to be successful.

Creating effective support systems for innovation has been a strategic goal for many aid organisations in the last decade. However it has also been a significant challenge because the aid sector and the fragile crisis-affected communities it serves have unusually complex needs around innovation. This paper explored how initial attempts to foster and enable local innovators have drawn heavily on the practices of labs that were established to support commercial product innovation. This model has allowed humanitarian innovators to generate rapid prototypes using human-centred design methodologies and to create pilots. It has demonstrated that local innovation can help the sector to understand affected people's needs differently.

This paper highlights how an organisation's innovation support will depend on its underlying objectives, the types of innovator it is supporting and the pathways to scale for the innovations that emerge. Organisations benefit from a clear idea of their objectives, which will allow them to plan for the type of support they need to provide.

Establishing viable pathways to scale has proved to be particularly challenging for many humanitarian innovators.[32] There are huge barriers to developing supply chains, establishing relationships with buyers, demonstrating that the innovation solves an important problem and is better than existing solutions, and then accessing funding.[33]

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32. Gray, I. et al. (2019) Business models for Innovators Working in Crisis Response and Resilience Building. DEPP Labs. Available at: https://startnetwork.org/resource/business-models-innovators-working-crisis-response-and-resilience-building.
33. McClure, D., & Gray, I. (2015). Scaling: Innovation's missing middle. *Submitted for the Transformation Through Innovation Theme for the World Humanitarian A Landscape Review*, 65.

After a disaster it often takes too long for relocation or house rebuilding to finish. The Innovators of KADUAMI designed an easier and faster way to construct permanent housing by using traditional indigenous housing methods and adding modern technologies. **TUKLAS LAB**

Even the simplest innovations need to deal with the complexity of the international aid system and the diverse nature of local communities in crisis. To create complete, consistent and sustainable solutions from their pilots, innovators need to pull together finance, supply chains, sales, training and maintenance services. Even after all that has been achieved, there will often still be varied, and shifting, barriers to adoption – practical, legal and cultural.

These challenges are even more significant for local innovators who have less human or social capital. The type and intensity of support will depend on the starting point of the innovator. Support for innovators should be based on a self-assessment of priority needs. Where the innovator is starting at a point of lower social or human capital the support should be higher intensity and delivered over longer timeframes.

Finally, the research highlights the benefit of a diverse range of complementary initiatives. Innovation support mechanisms work best when they provide complementary functions (different phases, sectors, technical support) and when the support does not only come from the lab itself. Instead lab staff should work with innovators to identify and develop the necessary skills, relationships and investments for the specific innovation and team. This also involves helping the innovator to grow their own social networks and to benefit from peer-learning with other innovators in the labs.

FUTURE OPTIONS

This paper has described the importance of flexible and long-term support for innovators. Implemented in this way, labs – like other structures – have the potential to facilitate a wide range of solutions (including

things that aren't products or services, such as policy changes). However, inflexible funding, time-bound funding and preconditions on innovator solutions can all place restrictions that limit successful innovation. A future-looking paper written during a review of the Udhvabani Lab in Bangladesh suggests that humanitarian agencies can build on the experiences of DEPP Labs and others to address more complex and challenging problems.[34] The recommendations include:

- **Problem-led approaches.** The DEPP Labs and others have invested in extended processes for problem definition that put people at the heart of decisions about what to prioritise and how.[35] Support organisations should continue to build upon these approaches, placing a greater emphasis on understanding humanitarian 'problem spaces', and funding problem-driven ideas. This can be accompanied by a greater emphasis on adaping solutions that already exist to address those problems.[36]

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34. McClure, D. (2019) Labs and Beyond: Opportunities to Advance Innovation Support Extending & Transforming Systems of Support for Aid Sector Innovators.
35. This is discussed in more detail in an accompanying paper: Konda, N et al. (2019) Human-centred design and humanitarian innovation. DEPP Labs.
36. The Humanitarian Innovation Guide provides an overview of processes for problem recognition and search: https://higuide.elrha.org/about/.

The mountain villages of Ilocos Norte have experienced natural disasters that cut off their communication with the response. The Ilocos Center for Research, Empowerment and Development worked with village residents to co-create and test Quik Data, a disaster reporting app that connects communities and responders after a disaster. **TUKLAS LAB**

- **Addressing complex systems.** This paper has emphasised how addressing the complex challenges prevalent in humanitarian settings requires labs to develop methodologies that focus on developing better understandings of problems and working with multiple actors to address them. This will include the users alongside the people who can inform, fund, purchase, and support the design and adoption of the innovation.

- **Accessible support.** Lab-based support is high cost and can only support a small number of innovators in any given period. There is a need to expand support for changemakers across communities that face humanitarian risks. Approaches might include making one-to-one mentoring more widely available, seeking to bring innovation into existing public spaces and exploring opportunities for digital engagement.

- **Addressing systemic barriers.** It is extraordinarily difficult to scale a humanitarian innovation when the problem that it addresses is not recognised by major donors or implementing organisations. Moreover, even when the problem is recognised, there may be systemic regulatory, cultural, budgetary or organisational barriers to adopting solutions that address it. Labs need to develop support mechanisms to identify these systemic barriers, facilitate greater network-building and provide the resources, advocacy and brokerage to address them. ■

Senior residents of the village participates in the project to institutionalise indigenous knowledge into local education systems and practice, to prevent the unsustainable land management currently threatening the area with soil erosion, deforestation, and landslides. **TUKLAS LAB**

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The Disasters and Emergencies Preparedness Programme (DEPP) Innovation Labs is a two-year programme that aims to foster, and eventually scale up, innovations that address key problems faced by disaster-prone communities. It takes a community-centred approach, meaning that people and organisations affected by disasters are involved in the design, development and implementation of solutions, helping to ensure their relevance and appropriateness.

Are you interested in finding out more about the programme, labs and our innovators, including opportunities to support innovators to scale or deploy their ideas?

Visit startnetwork.org or email DEPPLabs@startnetwork.org.

A woman runs a local food shop in Korail, which is often used as informal childcare for parents in the neighbourhood. An innovator in Udhvabani lab is replacing the unhealthy foods in those shops using a market-based strategy to supply the shops with more competitive, nutritious meals co-designed with the children. **UDHVABANI LAB**