



**Summary More than just luck:
Innovation in humanitarian action**

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HIF-ALNAP research on successful humanitarian innovation

This report presents the synthesised findings from 15 case studies, undertaken by ALNAP in partnership with ELRHA's Humanitarian Innovation Fund (HIF). It is produced as part of a broader research partnership between ALNAP and ELRHA that has sought to define and understand what successful innovation looks like in the humanitarian sector.

The outputs of this research are aimed at humanitarian organisations interested in using innovative practices to improve their performance, as well as organisations outside the humanitarian sector, such as academic institutions or private companies, seeking to engage in innovation in humanitarian action.

The **Humanitarian Innovation Fund (HIF)** supports organisations and individuals to identify, nurture, and share innovative and scalable solutions to the challenges facing effective humanitarian assistance.

www.humanitarianinnovation.org

ALNAP is a unique system-wide network dedicated to improving humanitarian performance through increased learning and accountability.

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The humanitarian system has a proven ability to produce innovations, but it does so sporadically and often struggles to take good ideas to scale quickly. The system does not consistently invest in innovation, and humanitarian actors have not always been successful at actively managing innovation processes. Due to this, the number of landmark innovations that have been integrated into the system has been frustratingly low and understanding of best practices for humanitarian innovation remains limited.

Giving more thought to the activities of innovation and how to support them is particularly important given the range of crises for which humanitarian assistance is needed today. Emergencies are more protracted and complex, with more barriers to accessing humanitarian assistance and an increasing range of needs (SOHS, 2015). As the nature of emergencies changes, current paradigms of humanitarian action will be challenged and humanitarians will need to adapt.

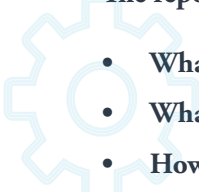
Viewed through this lens, innovation holds great promise for the future of humanitarian action, helping it meet new challenges and achieve better performance through different products, processes, positions and paradigms. And yet, despite the extraordinary rise in activity, funding and attention towards humanitarian innovation, there has been little advancement in understanding how to innovate successfully.

For innovation to deliver on its promise, humanitarian managers need to know how to innovate effectively and efficiently for humanitarian purposes. Innovation is a journey humanitarians have travelled numerous times, but it is also one they can learn to travel better and with greater frequency. This report provides a model for successful innovation in humanitarian contexts, based on a year-long study of 15 projects funded by the Humanitarian Innovation Fund (HIF). It provides the first analysis of specific project-level innovation processes in the humanitarian system.

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The report addresses the following questions:

- **What is humanitarian innovation?**
- **What does success look like?**
- **How do humanitarian innovators achieve success?**

It also offers 12 key messages for the future of humanitarian innovation.
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What is humanitarian innovation?

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Humanitarian innovation is an iterative process that identifies, adjusts and diffuses ideas for improving humanitarian action.

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In a humanitarian context, it can be difficult to differentiate between innovation practices and what might be considered standard good programming. This is partly because change is highly subjective: organisations that take on approaches that are new to them may feel they are engaging in innovation, whereas those who have already adopted these approaches no longer consider them innovative.

The key difference between standard programming and innovation lies in doing something differently with the aim of improvement at a system or sector level, where adaptation and invention require a uniquely iterative process. In standard programming, there is typically a robust understanding of the causal pathway for the improvement a programme is going to bring about. This can be supported by previous evaluations or prior experience. Previous applications of the intervention or tool in the same context can be used to construct theories of change that outline the causal pathways through which a humanitarian activity is expected to bring about the desired outputs and outcomes.

BOX 2 - THE 'WHAT' OF INNOVATION: THE 4-PS

The dominant model for understanding the 'what' of innovation is based on the classic '4-PS' model outlined by Dave Francis and John Bessant (2005). This model distinguishes between four broad types of innovation:

- **Product innovation** – changes in the things (products/services) an organisation offers
- **Process innovation** – changes in the ways products and services are created or delivered
- **Position innovation** – changes in the context in which the products/services are framed and communicated
- **Paradigm innovation** – changes in the underlying mental models that shape what the organisation does

Position and paradigm innovations are more likely to promise radical or transformative change, whereas product innovations tend to offer more incremental change. However, this is not always the case: product innovations, such as ready-to-use therapeutic foods (RUTFs), can be transformative by having ripple effects on processes and relationships in humanitarian assistance.

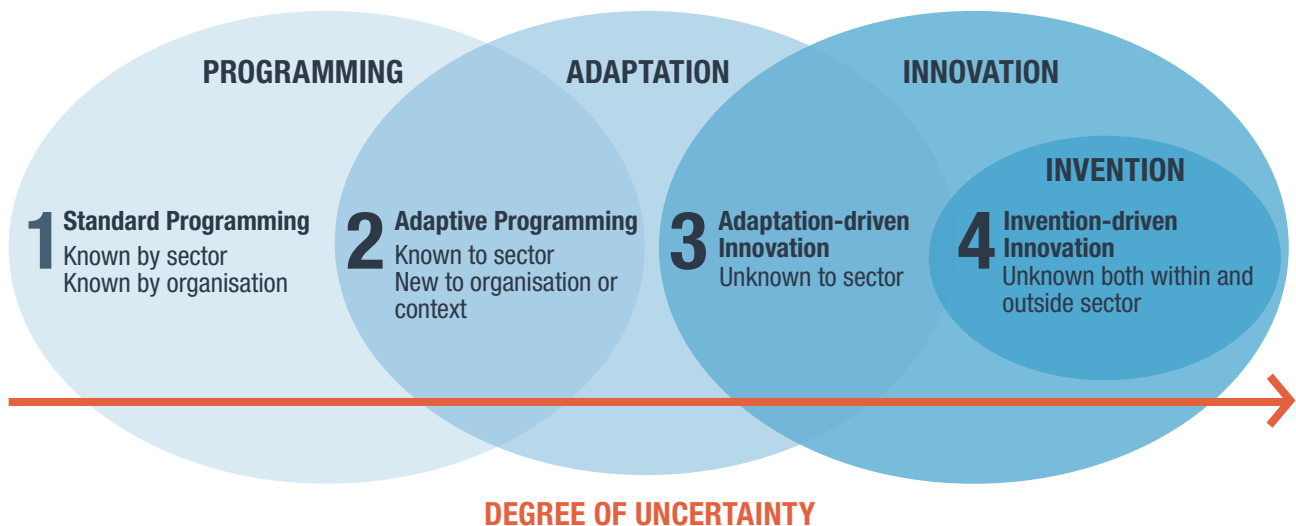
Some innovation processes can involve multiple types of innovation. For instance, The CMAM Report case study offers an example of a product innovation – a new software to monitor acute malnutrition interventions – embedded within a broader paradigm innovation – a new way to think about the categories and indicators used to monitor the performance of acute malnutrition interventions.

In contrast, in an innovation process, the potential results of the activity and its causal pathway for change are unknown. Innovation projects can construct a general theory of change but the assumptions and causal contributions are more conjectural, making the theory much more like a hypothesis. The innovation manager does not know if a new water treatment system will work or if an approach to disaster risk reduction will be successful because no one has tried these interventions in a humanitarian context.

Innovation is a process of identifying different products, processes, positions and paradigms, developing them, testing them to learn about their efficacy, making adjustments, observing for new effects, and then repeating. This leads to a process that is inescapably iterative, as an innovating team seeks to understand whether the initial idea works, why and how.

Although innovation can be broadly distinguished from standard humanitarian programming, they both sit on a continuum, as presented in Figure 1. The continuum is defined by the degree to which a humanitarian activity, process or product is known to have certain results. On the left side sits standard programming (1), where a humanitarian activity is well known and a project manager is fairly certain it will achieve expected results. As the activity begins to deviate from current practice, projects move into the realm of adaptation, first to adaptive programming (2), in which an activity is new to the organisation but used by others in the sector, then over the boundary into adaptation-driven innovation (3), in which an approach is new to the system or sector as a whole. Invention-driven innovation (4) sits at the furthest end of the spectrum, with the greatest degree of uncertainty in its programme theory and expected results.

FIGURE 1
The continuum from programming to innovation



What does successful humanitarian innovation look like?

A successful humanitarian innovation process is one that leads to:

Consolidated learning and evidence	There is new knowledge generated or an enhanced evidence base around the area the innovation is intended to address, or around the performance of the innovation itself.
An improved solution for humanitarian action	The innovation offers a measurable, comparative improvement in effectiveness, quality, or efficiency over current approaches to the problem addressed by the innovation.
Wide adoption of an improved solution	The innovation is taken to scale and used by others to improve humanitarian performance.

These criteria were used to determine the success of the innovation processes in the case studies and identify factors that contribute to successful innovation. Three additional criteria for successful innovation were identified for further exploration and definition. Unlike the main success criteria, these additional criteria may not be relevant to all innovations:

Inclusion of affected people	Not every innovation in humanitarian action will involve affected people—some innovations are targeted more at improving internal processes or coordination amongst humanitarian actors. However, for those that do involve affected people, either directly or indirectly, demonstrating how the rights and interests of affected people are respected in an innovation process ought to be a minimum standard.
Efficiency	The potential wide-scale impact of innovations, coupled with the unpredictable amount of time it takes to achieve this impact, makes it challenging to weigh the cost-efficiency of innovation processes. However, the humanitarian system cannot afford to support innovation processes that go on indefinitely without producing a workable prototype.
Unique Impact	Similar to the realm of advocacy, innovation processes can have different types of impact. The unique impact of any innovation is often a function of its novelty, which in turn is shaped by how much the sector changes as the innovation process is taking place. What may be a radical innovation in 2016 can quickly become commonplace in 2020.

How do humanitarian innovators achieve success?

Successful innovation processes tend to feature five different types of activities, or ‘stages.’ Innovating teams can return to the same stage in an innovation process multiple times, and these stages, or activities, often overlap. However, in general these stages broadly track the chronology of an innovation process, and each serves a unique function by helping the innovating team answer a question that is necessary to achieve success:

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1. **Recognition: What is the problem or opportunity for improving humanitarian action?**
 2. **Ideation: What is the potential improvement for humanitarian action?**
 3. **Development: How can it work?**
 4. **Implementation: Does it work?**
 5. **Diffusion: How can wider ownership for this improvement be achieved?**
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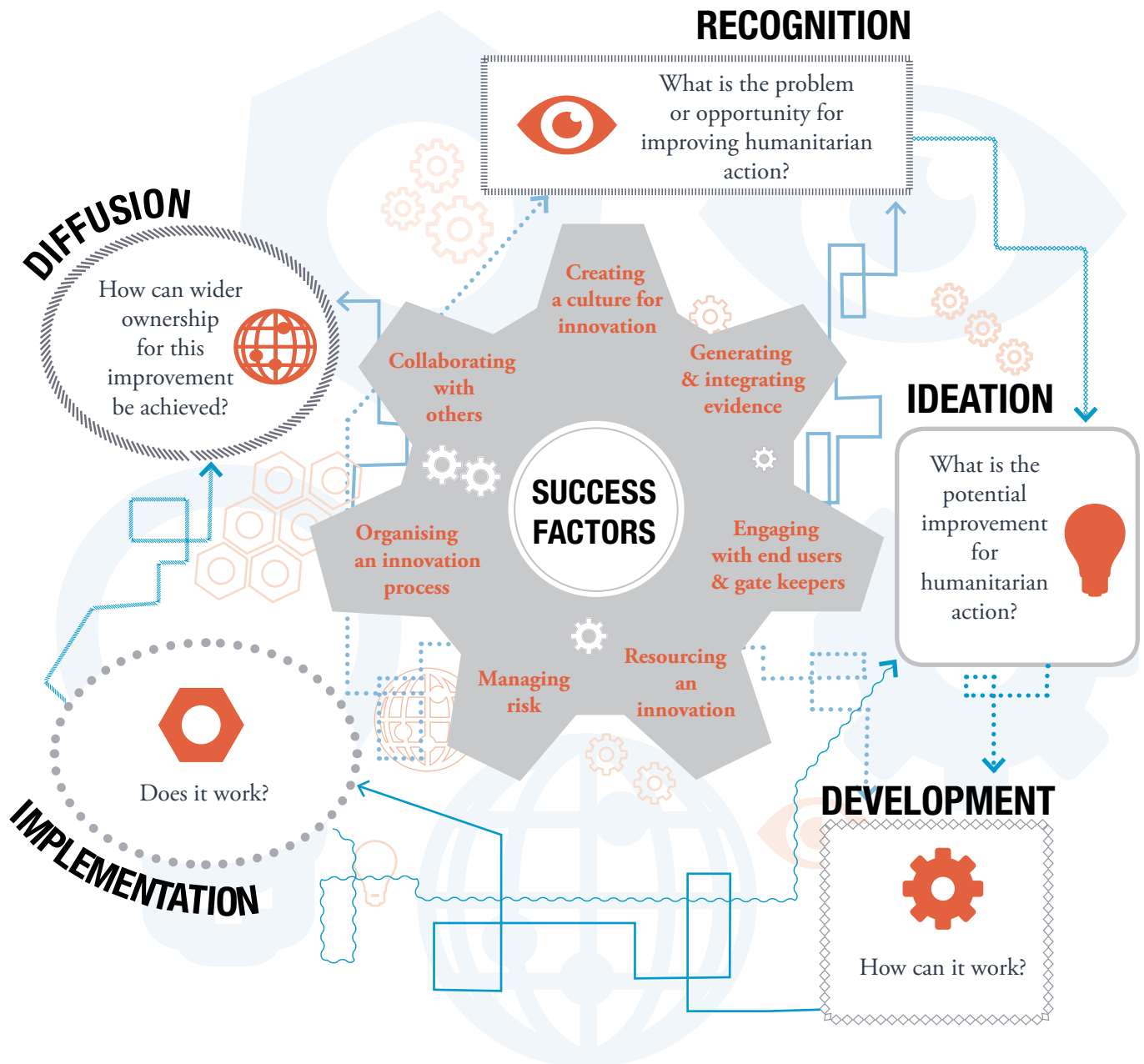
To engage in these stages effectively, innovating teams can undertake many approaches and activities. When innovation processes are successful, the following factors tend to be present and are understood by innovating teams and external stakeholders as contributing to success:

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1. **Collaborating with others**
 2. **Organising an innovation process**
 3. **Generating and integrating evidence**
 4. **Engaging with end users and gatekeepers**
 5. **Resourcing an innovation**
 6. **Managing risk**
 7. **Creating a culture for innovation**
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Figure 2 depicts the five stages of an innovation process and the factors that support its success.

FIGURE 2

The innovation process, stages and success factors



1. Recognition: What is the problem or opportunity for improving humanitarian action?

Through recognition activities, individuals and teams identify a specific problem or opportunity to be seized in relation to improving humanitarian action. In problem-driven innovations, the innovating team identifies a challenge or barrier to effective, high-quality humanitarian action. In opportunity-driven innovations, either humanitarian professionals become aware of technologies and approaches that could improve an area of humanitarian action or technical experts outside the system try to introduce a new technology or approach.

2. Ideation: What is the potential improvement for humanitarian action?

This is the most creative function in an innovation process – the phase in which new ideas are generated (invention) or existing approaches significantly rethought (adaptation) as potential pathways to improved humanitarian performance.

3. Development: How can it work?

Development activities bring an innovation to life. Through design, coding, manufacturing and/or project planning, the innovation is created. Development often occurs throughout the innovation process, from producing a ‘proof of concept’ – an initial design that can meet broad design criteria – to fine-tuning a successful prototype. Development activities tend to consume the bulk of resources in an innovation process and are often deeply intertwined with implementation activities.

4. Implementation: Does it work?

Implementation is the practical application of an innovation, typically for the purposes of understanding whether it works as intended when brought outside a controlled testing context. If successful, innovating teams or their collaborators then seek to take implemented innovations to scale. Implementation activities include lab tests, pilots and field-testing of processes or products.

5. Diffusion: How can wider ownership for this improvement be achieved?

Diffusion is concerned with achieving wider ownership of the idea for improvement. This is done by taking an improved solution 'to scale' by promoting its use by others. It consists of three main activities:

1. Accurately identifying who the innovation is for and who else needs to change in order for it to work;
2. Cultivating ownership for the innovation
3. Sustainably resourcing the scaling of an innovation

These activities can be focused internally, at the country offices of a large international organisation, or externally, to governments and other organisations in the sector. Diffusion can also occur through many different mechanisms, from commercialisation of an innovation to the use of grant or core funding. Diffusion is possibly the most complex and difficult aspect of innovation, as it is the stage that depends most on factors outside the control of the innovating team.

Looking ahead: Key messages for the future of humanitarian innovation

What is the future of humanitarian innovation? We outline 12 key messages on the relationship between innovation and humanitarian performance, the role of non-humanitarian actors, priorities for financing and research, and the importance of understanding innovation as more than just luck.

On innovation's contribution to humanitarian performance:

Humanitarian innovation is not pursued for its own sake – it is meant to lead to substantial improvements in the quality, efficiency and effectiveness of humanitarian assistance. Yet there remains little evidence on the relationship between innovation and humanitarian performance, resulting in ongoing questions as to whether innovation activity is actually leading to improvements in humanitarian action. This research offers three relevant findings for future research and evaluation of humanitarian innovation's contributions to quality, efficiency and effectiveness:

KEY MESSAGE 1

Building an evidence base and demonstrating performance are critical to successful innovation and should be considered at the outset of an innovation process.

KEY MESSAGE 2

There needs to be better performance measurement and monitoring across the humanitarian system, in order to support the identification and testing of better ideas and approaches and, where relevant, to provide a case for their scaling.

KEY MESSAGE 3

Innovation makes substantial contributions to the evidence base for humanitarian action in multiple ways, including the generation of baseline data and the creation of protocols for assessing performance.

On the role of non-humanitarian actors

Innovation benefits in many ways from collaboration – from the cross-sectoral and cross-organisational fertilisation of ideas, to partnership in the development, implementation and scaling of an innovation. While there is a widespread acknowledgement that partnership and collaboration need to be

improved (Deloitte, 2015; Ramalingam et al., 2015; UN Innovation, 2015), these issues are often seen as system-level problems to be addressed with larger, incentive-changing initiatives rather than as issues for individual organisations to tackle.

KEY MESSAGE 4

The humanitarian system remains averse to partnering with non-humanitarian actors as well as to considering innovations offered from outside the humanitarian sector. Addressing this requires not only system-wide solutions to facilitate greater collaboration, but also a shift in humanitarian agencies' mind sets as to how they approach and invest in partnerships.

KEY MESSAGE 5

Organisations that are well placed to create networks or opportunities for collaboration across humanitarian and non-humanitarian actors should consider the options for open collective innovation and how best to foster this. Drawing on examples from the technology community may be instructive.

On user-centred design and the role of affected people

Engaging with end users should be thought through carefully by innovating teams and planned well. For affected people, it is particularly important to communicate clearly how an innovation is different from standard programming and what are the implications if the prototype is successful (e.g. will affected people continue to receive it if it is successful?) or unsuccessful (e.g. is there good understanding of what a 'pilot' means and has consent been provided?) User-centred design in humanitarian innovation does not require importing a completely foreign set of tools and methods from the private and/or IT sector. Humanitarians often already have community engagement and participatory tools at their disposal that can be employed in innovation processes with affected people. The mystery of user-centred design with affected people is not in how to do it but in why so few humanitarian innovations make use of it.

KEY MESSAGE 6

While understanding needs is important for success, engaging end users of an innovation should be thought through carefully and done strategically.

KEY MESSAGE 7

User-centred design methods from outside the humanitarian system should be further explored, while recognising that many have been developed for customer engagement in developed consumer economies, potentially limiting their relevance. Humanitarian actors may also already have many tools at their disposal, including participatory methodologies from development programming.

KEY MESSAGE 8

There needs to be significantly more involvement of affected people in humanitarian innovation, and greater attempts to address problems and solutions from their perspective.

On innovation as luck or intentional

One of the key questions for this research was: Can innovations be managed, or are they driven by serendipitous events and informal relationships that cannot be meaningfully controlled? While informality and serendipity were found to play a role in many of the innovation processes examined in this research, this was often enabled by intentional organisational decisions or strategies.

KEY MESSAGE 9

Successful innovation can be shaped by serendipitous events or factors; however, there are clear choices organisations and teams can make to improve their culture for innovation and increase the likelihood of serendipity occurring.

Issues for the innovation research agenda

The findings of this report provide the broad brush strokes on how to achieve successful innovation. Further issues to be explored by a future research agenda for humanitarian innovation include:

- Innovating across the humanitarian–development divide
- Strengthening monitoring and evaluation for innovation
- Doing innovation better: deepening our understanding of the success factors for humanitarian innovation

KEY MESSAGE 10

Humanitarian innovation is still under-researched. Further research is needed to support organisations and teams to achieve successful innovation.

Funding humanitarian innovation

This research identified two key issues facing donors in their support for humanitarian innovation: offsetting the risks involved in creating flexible funding streams for innovation and navigating the different risk levels of innovation processes to achieve impact.

KEY MESSAGE 11

Looking ahead in humanitarian financing, donors should seek to focus on increasing the flexibility and impact of their funding. This requires greater attention to the 'how': supporting innovations with strong processes in place and looking more at system-level facilities and mechanisms that can cultivate better innovation at the organisational level.

Enhancing innovation and its value in the humanitarian context

There are several useful toolkits and resources for innovation management outside the humanitarian system. These should be adapted to the constraints and characteristics of the system in order to provide practical guidance to humanitarian innovators. Existing tools and approaches within the system, such as those used for accountability to affected populations, could also be adapted as tools in an innovation process. Meanwhile, humanitarian innovators need not only better tools but also customised support that speaks to their specific capacities.

KEY MESSAGE 12

Many factors contribute to successful innovation. Humanitarian innovation management could benefit from the development of a 'toolkit' that provides practical guidance on how to achieve these in different innovation settings. The customised support offered by key facilitators of innovation such as the HIF is also critical for the future of humanitarian innovation.



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