FAILURE TO SCALE

Literature Review June 2024

elrha



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About Elrha

We are Elrha. A global organisation that finds solutions to complex humanitarian problems through research and innovation. We are an established actor in the humanitarian community, working in partnership with humanitarian organisations, researchers, innovators, and the private sector to tackle some of the most difficult challenges facing people all over the world.

Through our globally recognised programmes, we have supported more than 200 world-class research studies and innovation projects, championing new ideas and different approaches to evidence what works in humanitarian response.

About the Humanitarian Innovation Fund programme (HIF)

The HIF is a globally-recognised programme leading on the development and testing of innovation in the humanitarian system. Established in 2011, it was the first of its kind: an independent, grant-making programme open to the entire humanitarian community. It now leads the way in funding, supporting, and managing innovation at every stage of the innovation process.

The HIF's portfolio of funded projects has informed a more detailed understanding of what successful innovation looks like, and what it can achieve for the humanitarian community. This work is leading the global conversation on innovation in humanitarian response.

GLOSSARY OF TERMS AND ABBREVIATIONS



ADRRN - Asian Disaster Reduction and Response Network - https://www.adrrn.net/

CLIP - Community Led Innovation Programme

DEPP Labs - Disaster and Emergencies Preparedness programme

GCC - Grand Challenges Canada - https://www.grandchallenges.ca

Host Agencies - Legally registered and compliant organisations, that provide a range of systems, processes, policies and compliance services to 3rd party projects or initiatives with compatible values and objectives but which lack their own registration and compliance capability

Humanitarian Innovation Support Organisations (HISOs)

- Organisations with teams or programmes established to provide support to the innovation process and to innovators, often including the provision of funding as well as technical support – e.g. Elrha, GSMA, DRA Grand Challenges Canada **Humanitarian Innovation Adopters** – Humanitarian organisations including UN agencies and NGOs with potential to deploy innovations in their humanitarian programmes and activities at scale.

ICRC - International Committee of the Red Cross

Innovative Finance - A collection of different mechanisms including outcome-based funding, impact bonds and credit facilities that can mobilise funding from non-traditional donors including the private sector and private foundations.

LMIC - Low- and Middle-Income Countries

CMAM - Community-based Management of Acute Malnutrition

LITERATURE REVIEW



This literature review is an exploration of the concept of scaling within the humanitarian innovation literature – what it is, why it is important, to what extent is it happening and what are the barriers to it. To frame the review, we start with a brief framing of humanitarian innovation.

Other, more comprehensive literature reviews of the field of humanitarian innovation exist such as for example (Bruder & Baar, 2024).

Humanitarian innovation

One of the earlier innovation definitions to be adopted by the humanitarian sector is the 4Ps model developed by Tidd and Bessant which categorises different types of innovation as: **Product** (the products or services which an organisation offers), **Process** (the ways in which products and services are created or delivered), **Position** (the context in which the products or services are framed and communicated), and, **Paradigm** (the underlying mental models which shape what the organisation does). (Tidd & Bessant, 2005), (Currion, 2019).

In 2017 Sandvik noted that this definition "has achieved seemingly uncontested status as the principal reference point for what innovation 'is' " (Sandvik, 2017). However, there were variations on this theme with Betts and Bloom adding 'business models' to the different forms of innovation in their definition "a means of adaptation and improvement through finding and scaling solutions to problems, in the form of products, processes or wider business models." (Betts & Bloom, 2014), and to which (Bruder & Baar, 2024) add 'Policy' as a further form of innovation.

Several observers have critiqued the idea of humanitarianism as 'business' with an underlying business model and its assumptions of a market and the potential involvement of the private sector. (Scott-Smith, 2015), (Sandvik, 2017). There is a long standing acknowledgement in the literature of the humanitarian sector as 'at best' a 'quasi market' (Binder & Witte, 2007), (Harford, et al., 2004) and even this definition could be problematic. The definition of innovation as adopted by the Humanitarian Innovation Fund (HIF) and ALNAP is "an iterative process that identifies, adjusts, and diffuses ideas for improving humanitarian action." (Elrha, 2018). This definition makes the shift of moving the definition of innovation from its outputs to the process that is followed to achieve it and to its intended outcome (improving humanitarian action) – although 'improving' remains a broad term.

Other observers also noted this shift in defining innovation by its purpose, with Currion noting that:

Innovation practices are framed as a means by which the humanitarian community can identify the paradigm shift that it needs to survive in a rapidly changing world (Currion, 2019)

although he goes on to note that "this framing is based on a misunderstanding of economic theories of innovation and particularly of the nature of humanitarian economics. The lack of both a true market and a profit mechanism in the humanitarian industry means that innovations can be generated but will never be sustained." (Currion, 2019).

Betts and Bloom describe innovation as a pathway for changing the humanitarian system: "Despite the dramatic change in the operating environment, the structure of the humanitarian system has remained essentially closed and unchanged. As a result, pressure is building to fundamentally alter the way business is done, and many humanitarian actors and donors are looking to innovation as a vehicle for introducing these changes." (Betts & Bloom, 2014).

UN Pulse notes that: 'The United Nations sees innovation as one of the key ways it can transform itself into an institution that offers solutions for our increasingly challenging world. It is seeking to transform its internal operations and culture and the ways it helps promising ideas to emerge, develop and expand (scale) as widely as possible to help change the world.' (Bessant, et al., 2024). Similarly, "As the nature of emergencies changes, current paradigms of humanitarian action will be challenged. Humanitarians will need to 'adapt if they are to maintain their relevance, reputation and impact' (Rush, et al., 2021)", (Obrecht & Warner, 2016).

However, from their review, Bruder and Baar concluded that "Our analysis suggests that efforts to reform the humanitarian system by leveraging innovation have been primarily ad hoc, fragmented, and serving miscellaneous separate objectives. This results in the implementation of incremental improvements, rather than transformative change throughout the sector" (Bruder & Baar, 2024) Some observers have questioned whether innovation led by humanitarians is the right tool to change humanitarianism (Scott-Smith, 2015), (Sandvik, 2017). Questions are raised about the ethics of innovation, the potential exposure of the end user to harm and issues such as data protection and abuse.

However, not all innovations need to be systemic in nature or lead to paradigm changes to be successful. Innovations that save more lives or make the existing system more efficient in its use of resources for example are also necessary even if they don't lead to sectorial transformation. Scale therefore cannot only be judged by the degree to which it drives paradigmatic changes.

In the report for Grand Challenges Canda, 'How do great ideas scale', the authors note that "It is also important to recognize that not every innovation should scale, and that innovations that do not scale have not necessarily 'failed'." (The Research People, 2021)

"Obrecht and Warner identify four types of innovation outcomes: three successes (adoption, improved solution and consolidated learning and evidence), and one 'bad fail' (innovations that fail without enhancing the learning and knowledge around their given area of practice in the humanitarian system). This approach recognises the value innovation can contribute beyond scaling, including by generating improved solutions and consolidated learning and evidence." (The Research People, 2021), (Obrecht & Warner, 2016) In Bruder and Baar's analysis of 286 humanitarian innovations, using the 4Ps categories, they found the following breakdown by innovation type (Bruder & Baar, 2024):

Type of innovation	Frequence	Percentage
Product innovation	156	54.55%
Process innovation	148	51.75%
Position innovation	34	11.89%
Paradigm innovation	38	13.29%
Business model	4	1.40%
innovation		
Policy innovation	39	13.64%
Multipule	96	33.57%

Of note are the 'paradigm' innovations, which included innovations in localization, innovative finance and cash-based programing. Currion noted of paradigm innovations in 2019 that they are "extremely hard to come by and extremely hard to see, partly because it takes place over an extended period of time. Indeed, it is an open question whether it is even possible to intentionally design paradigm innovations" (Currion, 2019). It is possible that there is a slow shift underway, which is resulting in the emergence more systemic and transformative innovations.

The use of Cash and Voucher based Assistance (CVA) has been one significant area of innovation scaling over the last decade, which has the potential to result in transformation at the level of choice, resource flows and power that can be exercised by crisis affected people. Research suggests that progress on the use of CVA has stagnated in recent years, failing to achieve its full potential (Monich, et al., 2023) and, the most recent State of the World's Cash report noted that "agency mandate and self-interest continued to be a barrier to putting in place the mechanisms and ways of working that would lead to a higher proportion of humanitarian aid being delivered as CVA." (Komuhangi, et al., 2022), (Jodar, et al., 2020).

The extent to which innovative finance and the localization movement have been able to transform the sector also remains an open question, with the strong likelihood that they have been inhibited by some of the same barriers to scale.

Scale and Scaling

Elrha's definition of scaling is "Building on demonstrated successes to ensure that solutions reach their maximum potential, have the greatest possible impact, and lead to widespread change." (Elrha, 2018)

This definition is also used in a report for Grand Challenges Canada, with the authors noting that: "This definition focuses on the change achieved and the extent to which the solution addresses the problem identified, as opposed to setting out a numerical target for scale. It allows for the inclusion of innovations that have had a transformative effect on one organisation, but that have not scaled beyond that organisation." (The Research People, 2021).

Other similar definitions also relate the concept of scaling to the size of the problem domain, such as 'The process of increasing the impact of an innovation to better match the size of the social problem it seeks to address.' (Taylor & Salmon, 2022) and 'The process of increasing the impact of an innovation to better match the size of the social problem it seeks to address' (Dodgson & Crowley, 2021).

Sandvik observes that scaling may be linked to the capability of an innovation to generate revenue "The humanitarian innovation literature often talks about successful innovations as those that are adopted and those that manage to "scale," resulting in sustainable commercial revenue models." (Sandvik, 2017). By this definition, very few humanitarian innovations could be said to have scaled.

In other places we have definitions of scaling more specifically related to the reach of an innovation, such as "implementing in a way that reflects its maximum appropriate reach" (Komuhangi, et al., 2022).

McClure and Gray found in interviews that there is a challenge to know when scaling has occurred: "There were discussions as to what scaling innovation actually means.... For example, do 40-50,000 deployments of Ushahidi across 159 countries, or Frontline SMS being downloaded 200,000 times across 130 countries constitute scale? Does the widespread adoption of an innovation within large INGOs who can afford it like Oxfam and Save the Children amount to scaling?" (McClure & Gray, 2015)"

Scaling Progress and Success

The literature, particularly over the period of 2015 – 2020, includes multiple references to the lack of progress in bringing innovations to scale. For example, McClure and Grey in their series off papers for the World Humanitarian Summit found that:

"There is growing sense that a systemic problem exists with our ability to scale these successful inventions. Even as the number of pilot programs continues to multiply, and skill at managing a portfolio of new ideas matures, there are few examples of great ideas that have been deployed at scale, impacting large populations and serving needs in varying environments. After several years of growing success in fostering Pilot programs based on the lean testing of creative new ideas, the growing gap between the ideas we imagine and the innovations that have actually been taken to scale is disheartening." (McClure & Gray, 2015)

Similarly, from Obrecht and Warner's More Than Just Luck, "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" and, "Due to this, the number of landmark innovations that have been integrated into the system has been frustratingly low." (Obrecht & Warner, 2016).

McClure, Bourns and Obrecht writing in a report for GAHI found that this problem continued to exist in 2018 "The challenge is widely recognized: good ideas, demonstrated through pilots, often fail to reach a scale at which they can maximize value." (McClure, et al., 2018) In 2022 for the ALNAP State of the Humanitarian System Report, we see reference to some successes, but the overall problem persists: "Yet, despite some successes, overall, the system has been slow to change or to adopt innovations, even those with proven track records (Komuhangi, et al., 2022)

In the HIF evaluation in 2023, it emerges that scaling is taking a significant amount of time and that earlier scaling investments were the ones showing most progress (Greenaway, et al., 2023)

The evaluation noters from the overall portfolio of reviewed projects that "15 projects achieved impact at some scale. Of these, ten had collectively reached over 900,000 people. This portfolio of 15 scaled projects is a good result, especially given that the HIF has only awarded 15 scale grants since 2011." (Greenaway, et al., 2023), (my italics). Here, the authors have described projects achieving 'impact at some scale' as 'scaled projects', which may not be consistent with many definitions of scale. None the less, it is clear that some progress towards scaling is starting to happen.

Finally, the evaluation also observes the importance of follow up funding over time: "10 of the 15 projects with evidence of scale had received multiple HIF grants; a total of 28 grants were awarded to the 10 projects between 2011 and 2020, indicating the value of long-term HIF funding and support across different stages of the innovation pathways." (Greenaway, et al., 2023)

Barriers to Scale

Multiple barriers to scaling have been identified in the literature.

Barriers related to the lack of incentives for change within the system are frequently referenced, for example: "humanitarian funding flows through a few large agencies and there are few incentives that encourage large agencies to adopt new innovations, while there are strong incentives to avoid risks or reduced 'value for money'. The incentive structure therefore results in a low tolerance of failure and resistance to ideas 'not invented here'." (Komuhangi, et al., 2022). (McClure & Gray, 2015) and Elrha's 'Too Tough to Scale' (Elrha, 2018) find similar issues relating to misaligned incentives.

McClure, Bourns and Obrecht note that "The existing political economy and lack of incentives to disturb entrenched roles can undermine some of the disruptive change required to address the humanitarian system's challenges and the scale of its demands" (McClure, et al., 2018). Rush observes that: "Innovation processes are idiosyncratic and subject to multiple interests and biases." (Rush, et al., 2021) while Ramalingam observes that "Novel solutions may be rejected because of not invented here and other immune system responses" (Ramalingam, et al., 2014)

Currion specifically notes the absence of a profit motive as a missing incentive for sustained innovation at scale: "The lack of both a true market and a profit mechanism in the humanitarian industry means that innovations can be generated but will never be sustained. Unless this obstacle is addressed –

perhaps through emerging networked approaches to economic activity – humanitarian innovation will continue to be a dead end." (Currion, 2019)

A lack of innovation financing is identified as a major barrier, including: "investments in humanitarian research and development are low in comparison to other sectors and industries. (Komuhangi, et al., 2022) and similar analysis in the Deloitte analysis for the World Humanitarian Summit, (Deloitte, 2015), as well as is (Rush, et al., 2021) and (McClure & Gray, 2015). Too Tough to Scale noted the specific problem of shortterm inflexible funding (Elrha, 2018), while the Humanitarian Research and Innovation Landscape Report for Elrha noted a similarly low level of funding, whilst also noting an increase in overall research and innovation funding over their review period. (Issa, et al., 2024)

Another commonly identified barrier is the lack of the necessary capabilities within humanitarian organisations, for example "In addition to these challenges, there are a few examples of 'ambidextrous' organisations, which have demonstrated the capability to deliver standard programmes while simultaneously adopting and implementing innovations at scale. (Komuhangi, et al., 2022) which complements similar findings in (Elrha, 2018). Rush et al noted in 2021 that the need for greater innovation management skills in the sector was still an issue (Rush, et al., 2021).

Exclusion of key actors, especially aid recipients, frontline staff and local organisations from the innovation process is a similarly frequent analysis, for example, (Rush, et al., 2021) sate that "Attention should be paid to how the innovation ecosystem can be made more open to new and excluded actors: end-users, scientists, private sector operators, and non-traditional partners". The GAHI recognized a need to 'radically localize innovation capacity' in its 2019 report. (GAHI, 2019)

The HIF evaluation in 2023 found that applicants from LMIC countries were still struggling to access funding, with 1% (6 of 824) of such organisations that submitted an Expression of Interest succeeding in receiving funding (Greenaway, et al., 2023). This links to a broader problem of poor information and innovation intelligence within the innovation sector (Rush, et al., 2021), (Elrha, 2018).

This can lead to the wrong problems being prioritised and the wrong solutions supported. e.g. "Innovations that were adaptations of current aid ways of working, such as CMAM or Sprinkles, have scaled because they easily slot into traditional funding mechanisms. However, those that are addressing problems that are not currently prioritised by humanitarian donors – such as communicating with communities in their own languages – have had slow journeys to scale that required significant advocacy efforts." (Komuhangi, et al., 2022).

Other barriers referenced in the literature include risk aversion, e.g. "risk aversion may well be embedded in structures for decision-making and operations" (Ramalingam, et al., 2014), and a preference for "new over scale" (McClure & Gray, 2015).

Multiple problems relating to the evidence of impact for innovations and of an underlying lack of impact evidence in humanitarian work more broadly are surfaced, for example, "A particular challenge to overcoming this inertia is the difficulty of comparing the effects of humanitarian interventions with control groups in a way that is technically sound and ethical. This is compounded by the lack of baseline data that would allow humanitarians to compare the effectiveness of innovations with more traditional approaches in most sectors." (Komuhangi, et al., 2022) and similarly, "There is insufficient evidence of the impact of humanitarian innovations. Evaluation of an innovation's impact is sporadic There is a lack of baseline data demonstrating the effectiveness of current practice The sector lacks both in-depth and sector-wide evaluations of humanitarian innovation". (Elrha, 2018).

However, whilst noting the same evidence problem, Rush et al identify that "There might be scope for exploring alternative models for evidence accumulation better matched to the high-frequency learning cycles associated with prototyping entrepreneurial projects." (Rush, et al., 2021)

The report for the GAHI, 'Untangling the Many Paths to Scale' finds an inadequate response to complexity within innovation ideas and pilots (McClure, et al., 2018) and similarly, from Too Tough to Scale, "Scalability is often insufficiently considered during the early stages of innovation development" (Elrha, 2018).

Wilde also notes the need for a systemic approach when addressing complex problem areas and states, "Big, systemic problems simply cannot be addressed by building a new kind of toilet or designing a new mobile app, but rather an innovator needs to take in the whole problem and consider all the actors, resources and parts of the problem to make real, sustainable change." (Wilde & McClure, 2021) At an overall, systems level, we find that "The innovation ecosystem is weakly integrated and needs active facilitation, networking, and brokering of relationships between existing and new actors" and, "Where innovation does take place it often happens in spite of the mainstream systems" (Rush, et al., 2021).

"To achieve transformative change, we need to address the key systemic barriers. These systemic barriers remain significant and intractable. To date there has been little or no action to tackle these. Moreover, they can only be addressed through collective action and collaboration." (Elrha, 2018)

This links to the main recommendation from the post GAHI report, which is, "to explore if and how a collaborative alliance may be designed to be powerful enough to do something meaningful in the space of humanitarian innovation." (KPMG, 2019)

Overall, we find a relatively new humanitarian innovation system, with multiple needs for improved capability, increased funding and enhanced ways of working. This humanitarian innovation system operates within a wider humanitarian context which has multiple contextual and systemic barriers to scale. However, Deloitte note that many of these barriers are not unique to the humanitarian context and that they have been overcome in other systems (Deloitte, 2015). We also find that, given enough time, some innovations that have already been well supported are showing evidence of achieving some level of scale. This success percentage could be increased, possibly significantly, by addressing some of the barriers and through improved, targeted collective action.

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