

Humanitarian Innovation Funding Mapping: A Framework Towards Humanitarian Equity

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Abstract

Deep-rooted colonialism is one of the most significant problems plaguing the humanitarian sector today. Humanitarian innovation in the Global North is associated with multiple approaches, such as human-centered design, lean start-up, and integrated innovation. These approaches are heavily influenced by Silicon Valley concepts based on market-based ideologies emphasizing technology, access, economic efficiency, business models, and potential for scaling up geographical breadth. Using these concepts of innovation exclusively without being inclusive of a more globally informed approach widens the gap of existing inequity. Having dominant innovation funding largely committed to and from organizations in the Global North systematically fuels existing inequality gaps. In view of this, humanitarian innovation funders are constantly challenged to reflect on how they perpetuate a system of inequity and what they can do to change it. This is largely responsible for the sector-wide transition in the last decade in focusing on innovation in humanitarian response. Auspiciously, humanitarian innovation has been one emerging way to solve humanitarian problems. However, innovators are largely from Global North, which does not give room for innovators from Global South to emerge with locally driven solutions. As a result, several innovative approaches to global humanitarian challenges have emerged in various sectors, with dominance in technology, health, education, and climate change.

Executive Summary

This paper provides insight into the funding landscape of humanitarian innovation. Such funding is critical to addressing complex humanitarian needs – both acute crises and longer-term issues as laid out in the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). A funding mapping exercise investigated the humanitarian innovation funding landscape and sought to provide responses to questions such as “*What funding is available?*” and “*Who gets funded – from where and for what?*”ⁱ in order to interrogate equity within the humanitarian innovation funding landscape. The results from this analysis highlight the Humanitarian Innovation Funder’s (HIFs) perspectives on humanitarian innovations and the barriers involved in providing adequate funding to address complex humanitarian issues in the short- and long term. It is hoped that the findings shared here can serve as a global knowledge source to advance humanitarian equity through better funding innovations addressing humanitarian issues. There is an urgency to

ensure innovations are sustainable and locally relevant. This can be achieved by shifting the funding narratives and funding people closest to the problems as they are best suited to lead the innovation and implementation of solutions.ⁱⁱ

Introduction

According to UNICEF, a humanitarian crisis refers to any circumstance where humanitarian needs are sufficiently complex, requiring external assistance and resources. It also requires a multi-sectoral response with the engagement of a wide range of international humanitarian actors (IASC). The complexity of humanitarian crises requires humanitarian actors to consistently explore innovative approaches to deliver aid. Yet, there is limited data on what humanitarian innovation entails, who is doing it, and how they are doing it. What is, however, known is that there is a lack of ethical oversight or framework that governs humanitarian innovation funding. Often times innovation is interchanged with an invention. However, innovating does not necessarily mean something new; instead, it is often about adapting an existing idea to a different context. As such, funders and their implementing partners must base adoption on the viability of such innovation within a given context while providing humanitarian aid or exploring humanitarian innovations.

OCHA (2014) defines humanitarian innovation (HI) as adopting and improving scalable solutions to humanitarian problems through research and development. In essence, humanitarian innovation is about changing how existing systems work in times of humanitarian crisis. With the advent of sustainable development goals (SDG), evidence shows that often local innovators are not adequately considered in adopting humanitarian innovations. Humanitarian assistance is often marred by profit and funder interest. The research evidence indicates that humanitarian innovation funding (HIF) is driven by donor interest and priorities. With the dominant funders from the Global North,ⁱⁱⁱ one can observe the differences between the geographical location of international humanitarian actors. Over the years, developing countries have seen an increase in the number of innovators, as seen in the pilot funding. India is one of the biggest innovators of new health technologies; for instance, many are used in the humanitarian sector and are funded by donors like United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and PwC, among others. However, the problem for most local actors is the donor's lack of interest in funding innovation from developing countries and the selection criteria that disfavor innovators. Despite having some diversity of traditional and non-traditional donors, developing countries' innovation funders have minimal presence in humanitarian innovation funding, which has remained consistent for the past five years (GEGC 2017).

In the context of our research, this innovation funding mapping reviews the funding pattern: who is funding, what they are funding, who determines funding priorities and where the funding is applied, and the role of critical actors—donors, end-users, and agencies. This paper summarises our understanding of existing narratives on humanitarian innovation funding and the role of humanitarian innovation funders in scaling up local actors as a component of broader research on humanitarian innovations.^{iv}

Overview of Analysed Humanitarian Innovation Funders (HIFs) Methodology

This paper shares results from a research study that used primarily quantitative data sets from a desk review of over 75 HIF documents (including annual reports and budgets, program plans, and innovation funding calls) available on the HIFs website and an in-depth review of the Wazoku^v innovation funding map. The funding mapping is part of a research study, “Challenging and reimaging humanitarian innovation,” funded by Elrha UK.

A spreadsheet of HIFs was developed with key information about them, their implementing partner locations, innovation actors and sectors, the type of innovations mainly funded, and the category of funding (pilot or scale). 25 HIFs innovation programs from 23 HIFs were identified, with two HIFs (World Bank and Grand Challenges Canada (GCC)) having two types of innovation programs. Out of the 25 HIF innovation programs, 15 HIF innovation programs were selected for analysis (Table 1), and 10 HIFs were excluded from the analysis.^{vi}

Information about the 15 HIF programs between 2016 - 2021 was analyzed. These 15 programs had an estimated value of USD \$2,295,353,747.

Table 1: 15 HIF Innovation Programs Analyzed

HIFs	HIF Innovation Program
ELRHA	Humanitarian Innovation Fund
Grand Challenges Canada (GCC)	Seed Grant (Stars in Global Health)
	Humanitarian Challenge Fund
International Development Research Centre (IDRC)	Research Innovation Fund
UNICEF (United Nations Children's Fund)	UNICEF Innovation Fund
World Bank Group	Data Innovation Fund
	Government of Korea Innovation Fund
World Food Program	WFP Innovation Accelerator (Sprint Program)

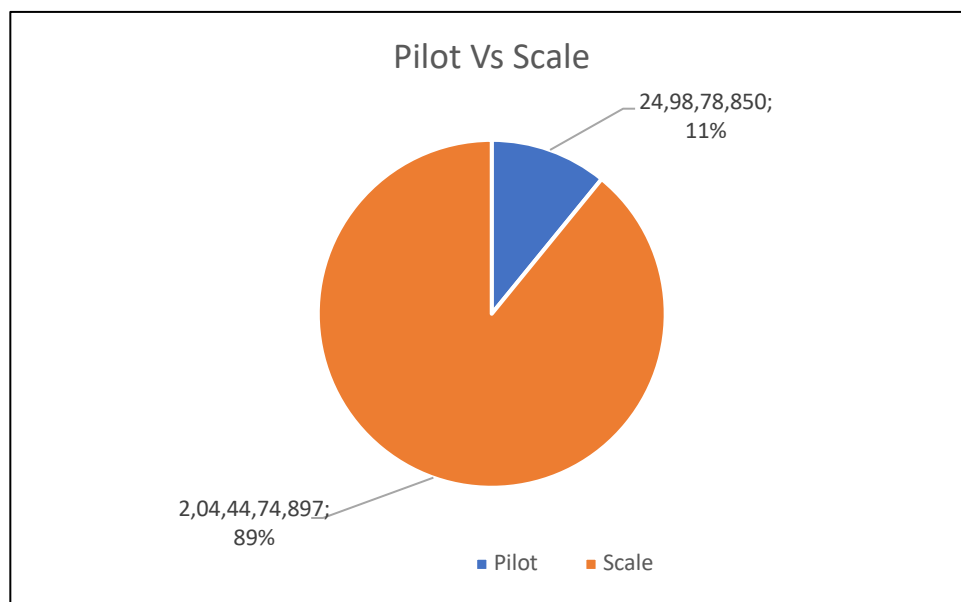
GSK	GSK Healthcare Innovation Awards
Wazoku	Innovation_360
Global Innovation Fund	Global Innovation Fund
Overseas Development Institute (ODI)	Digitalization
Manitoba Council for International Cooperation (MCIC)	Fund for Innovation and Transformation (FIT)
Google	Google Impact Challenge
Department for International Development (DFID), United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and UNICEF	Humanitarian Education Accelerator

Source: HIF's website, accessed between 2021/06/15 – 2021/08/

Findings

11% of the funding was spent on pilot projects and 89% on scaled innovation (Figure 1).

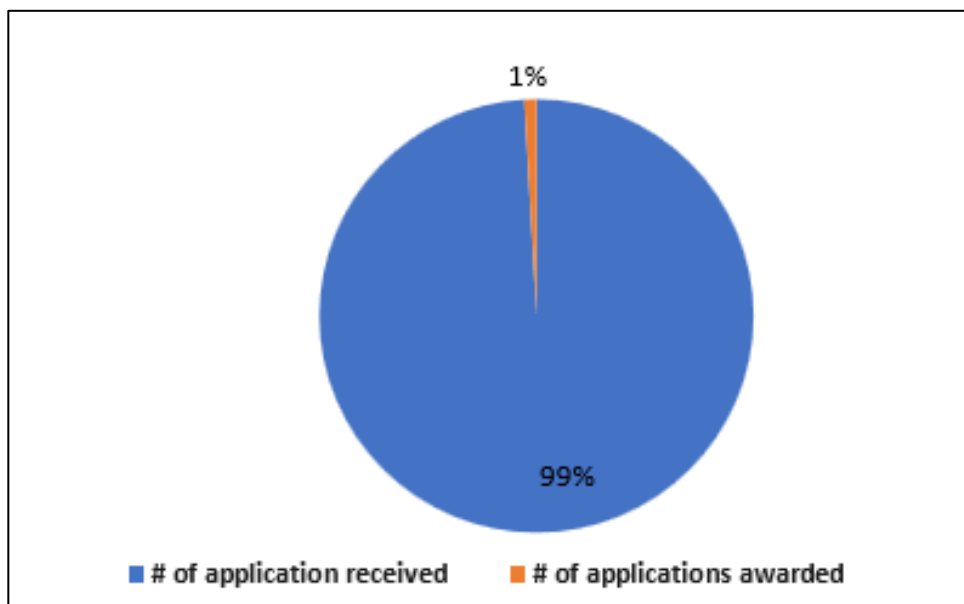
Figure 1: Pilot Vs Scale Funding



Source: HIF's websites, accessed between 2021/07/30 – 2021/08/30

Funding for innovation programs in the Global South was extremely limited as illustrated by Figure 2.

Figure 2: Percentage of awarded applications from Global South



Source: GCC Seed Grant, GCC HI, Data Innovation Fund, WFP Innovation Challenge, GSK Healthcare Innovation Awards and Wazoku websites, accessed between 2021/0715 – 2021/08/30.

Out of the funded pilot projects, only one percent of the pilot innovation funds were used to pilot innovations from innovators from the Global South. Only five of the thirteen HIFs fund innovation directly from the Global South.

Limitations to the desk review include the fact that HIFs have more information on scaled projects than pilot innovations. In addition, most HIFs do not have precise information about the amount committed, disbursed, or spent on humanitarian innovations. They present their financial information without separating the amount a particular donor has contributed to innovation. The financial information is merged for multiple years, sometimes with grant and operation costs. This would call for more rigorous data sourcing through in-depth case studies, interviews, or long-term action research.

Discussion: Why Must We Map Innovation Funding?

Innovation Funding Mapping comes from the desire of stakeholders to address the current asymmetry in humanitarian innovation funding. Mapping humanitarian innovation funding provides insight into the annual commitments by private, philanthropic, public, and development actors. As noted here, such mapping also highlights the funding split between the Global North and the Global South. The results of this mapping highlighting these splits may serve as a baseline for revising future funding commitments and making them more inclusive.

The results raise again the question of why the implementing partners are primarily from the Global North. Our findings suggest that humanitarian innovation is at a critical point where researchers should emphasize the importance of a bottom-up approach. We need more information on why local innovators in the Global South fail in the funding process to receive innovation awards.

HIFs spend a tremendous amount of money on humanitarian innovations. However, ideas are centralized in the Global North. It is not because there is a shortage of local innovators with bold and creative ideas on sustainable solutions in the Global South. It might be due to the challenges HIFs have investing directly through these local innovators and the risks involved in investing in untested solutions in new environments. HIFs are focused on obtaining positive outcomes with success stories due to pressure from taxpayers, and many private sector innovators are driven by profit.^{vii} Acknowledging the bravery in investing in pilot innovations specifically, it takes many risks to commit funds to pilot a new idea or existing ideas in a new context; hence, they are looking to invest more in scaling innovations. Piloting new ideas is critical to finding new ways to sustainable solutions. The world is evolving rapidly, and old ways of doing things are no longer relevant to ongoing and emerging problems.

There is a desperate need to find faster, cheaper, better ways to solve global humanitarian problems, especially in the Global South. The dominance of HIFs actors in the Global North is a failed system impeding help reaching those most in need. Security situations in fragile countries and travel accessibilities also prevent international humanitarian organizations from reaching

people in the most vulnerable communities despite these organizations receiving the most extensive funding to innovate and solve humanitarian problems in those complex regions of the Global South. Simply put, we need a more comprehensive approach to target local innovators in the Global South and develop an approach to strategically ensure innovation funds target the people closest to the problem to bring about more effective solutions for both immediate crises and for longer-term solutions to meet the SDGs. With most innovation funds favoring groups of innovators from the Global North, this is an urgent call to bridge the gap between the location of HIFs and recipients of their funds. By developing funding strategies and mechanisms tailored to local philosophies and values from the Global South, it is hoped that humanitarian issues – including those related to inequities – will be solved.

How Do We Shift the Funding Narrative?

One of the critical findings from our research is the lack of transparency in humanitarian innovation funding. Consequently, we recommend that there should be an open-data policy on financial commitment to humanitarian innovations, including understanding the funding commitment to humanitarian innovations. Open data policies can develop standards to make humanitarian innovation funding data routinely available to all, regardless of geographic location. Additionally, we found that to shift the narrative on funding, Global North actors must:^{viii}

1. **Interrogate underlying norms and values:** This includes recognizing and interrogating our own position of economic privilege, power, and geopolitical interest and doing more to honor and enable local and Indigenous knowledges.
2. **Facilitate community ownership of the design, development, and evaluation criteria of projects:** This includes developing locally relevant indications of a program's impact that encompass more than economic impact but that reflect alternative ideas of what counts as impact and that support local knowledge and participation.
3. **Reimagine power dynamics through reciprocal collaboration and partnership:** This includes not holding on to power and decision-making as a funder or collaborator and intentionally shifting it to local innovators and communities.
4. **Rethink the value of scale:** This includes recognizing that scaling up can occur across time as well as continents, so we should consider the environment and future generations. For many Indigenous communities, sustainability means the world must still be as rich for future generations as our own.

Conclusion

There is an urgency to ensure innovations are sustainable and locally relevant if we are working towards addressing humanitarian crises and achieving the SDGs. We need to change the narrative, approach, and course of action. Further research is necessary to understand better why HIFs do not fund local innovators directly. Additionally, it would be useful to examine why grant applications from Global South for humanitarian innovations funding are often

unsuccessful. We agree that most HIFs need precise information about the amount committed, disbursed, or spent on humanitarian innovations. We also believe that people closest to the problem must lead the innovation and implementation of solutions. By people closest to the problem, we mean local innovators, i.e., frontline health workers and sometimes end-users, who are knowledgeable about the particular context ('proximate leaders').

Further research should explore ways in which the needs of both proximate, innovative leaders in the Global South and HIFs in the Global North might better communicate to identify shared goals and alignment of strategies. This research may include more qualitative approaches, such as interviews and focus groups. Future action may include advocating for better policies around data transparency and encouragement of risk-taking by HIFs in the Global North to explore innovative solutions from proximate leaders in the Global South.

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ⁱ The project was funded by ELRHA UK under the supervision of Dr. Athena Madan (Royal Roads University), with a final product titled “Challenging and reimagining ‘humanitarian innovation’”. All the information shared here was retrieved and accessed within the research period of June to August 2021.

ⁱⁱ Proximate leaders are often best-suited to addressing local issues (Jackson, Kania, and Montgomery 2020).

ⁱⁱⁱ The term “Global North” in this paper is used to refer to what are generally considered to be economically developed nations. Relatedly, the term “Global South” used here includes countries that are considered to be “developing” or “less developed”, low-economy, and/or politically or culturally marginalized.

^{iv} Summary report available at <https://www.bond.org.uk/news/2022/01/ngos-need-to-include-indigenous-philosophies-and-values-in-humanitarian-innovation/>.

^v Wazoku was formally known as Innocentive at the time of the research in 2021.

^{vi} The ten excluded HIFs were: EIT Climate-KIC (Pathfinder), IFRC Solferino Innovation Academy, Visa Innovation Grants, Deloitte Humanitarian Innovation Program, WFP Cooperating Partners Innovation Fund, Verizon’s Powerful Answers Award, OCHA Humanitarian Research and Innovation Grant, Response Innovation Lab, DEEP Innovation Lab, and World Bank Africa Gender Innovation Lab.

Exclusion criteria: business innovations, humanitarian aid, innovation labs and innovations before year 2016.

^{vii} Summary report available at <https://www.bond.org.uk/news/2022/01/ngos-need-to-include-indigenous-philosophies-and-values-in-humanitarian-innovation/>.

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