Executive Summary
Successfully scaling humanitarian innovation

CHA
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Why do some humanitarian innovations fail while others succeed?

For years, innovation has been seen as the solution to all humanitarian problems. Climate change, conflict and digitalisation are just a few of the many factors that have pushed humanitarian practitioners to regularly explore new, progressive approaches that create social impact and address complex problems in constantly changing environments.

Yet, many innovations remain unknown and confined to specific contexts. They create impact on a small scale, but rarely expand across different contexts or countries. Others disappear shortly after the pilot phase. The humanitarian system is filled with innovations that fail to scale. Meanwhile, some innovations do manage to scale, create impact and fundamentally change the way humanitarians work. The use of cash and voucher assistance is one of the most cited examples of successful innovations that scaled across the humanitarian system.

This paper examines the interconnectedness of successful scaling and failure. It outlines factors of success that evolved from CHA research. With this, it aims to create a common language and contribute to the discussion of successfully scaling humanitarian innovation.

Key Findings

The success of humanitarian innovations depends on a combination of factors that create an enabling environment for durable solutions and social impact. The pathway to scale is characterised by a mix of flexible resource models and agile management practices, active stakeholder engagement and visionary leadership that supports strong operating models.

Providing sustained resources is as important as diversifying funding strategies. Innovators collaborate with non-traditional humanitarian donors and employ mentoring and matchmaking approaches to complement scarce humanitarian resources. Without a clear strategy that articulates the innovation's purpose and roadmap across its design and scaling stages, it risks becoming a procedural task rather than

Successful innovators collaborate with non-traditional humanitarian donors
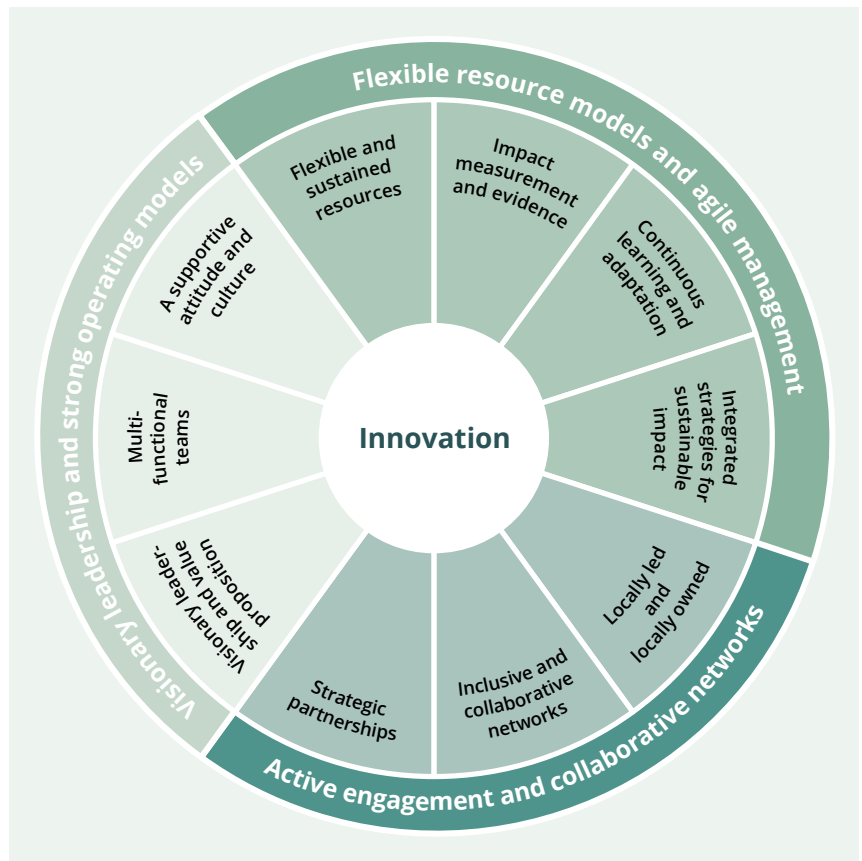

Chart 1: Success factors for successfully scaling humanitarian innovation

providing meaningful impact. Agility and flexibility guide this process of integration.

Strict operational frameworks and reporting schemes further influence the scaling journey, as many practitioners struggle with measuring impact. Humanitarian innovations operate in complex environments, facing disruptions such as natural disasters and conflict. To navigate these challenges, innovators advocate for diverse forms of evidence to promote constant learning, co-creation and adaptation. Measuring success at different stages requires a range of methods, varying from business tools to storytelling and qualitative approaches.

Inclusive and collaborative networks play a crucial role in fostering trust and facilitating information and knowledge sharing across local, national and global levels. Yet, the humanitarian system is characterised by power imbalances and arbitrary practices. Engaging diverse actors – particularly local actors – remains challenging due to the high costs, lengthy processes and resource-intensiveness. As a result, sufficient and adequate resources are required to manage expectations and equip all actors with the resources necessary to strengthen their capacities, build relationships and create confidence. While inclusive innovation design and scaling have proven to be more impactful and sustainable, they are also more demanding, time-consuming and complex.

Finally, visionary leadership nurtures a culture of creativity, power sharing and risk-taking. To avoid competing over scarce resources and capacities, humanitarian innovators have started exploring open-source and for-profit models to attract experienced personnel and fund their solutions in the long run. However, many humanitarian donors remain hesitant to fully embrace this shift.

> **Visionary leadership, a culture of creativity, and risk-taking contribute to the success of innovations**

Ten Factors of Success

Flexible resource models and agile management

1. Flexible and sustained resources
2. Impact measurement and evidence
3. Continuous learning and adaptation
4. Integrated strategies for sustainable impact

Active engagement and collaborative networks

5. Locally led and locally owned
6. Inclusive and collaborative networks
7. Strategic partnerships

Visionary leadership and strong operating models

8. Visionary leadership and value proposition
9. Multi-functional teams
10. A supportive attitude and culture

Methods in Brief

The success factors were defined based on a literature review and informed by 15 qualitative interviews with innovation thinkers and practitioners. These findings were validated during a virtual multi-stakeholder workshop in October 2024 and analysed based on selected case studies, notably Commit Global, Missing Maps and Sentry Syria. The policy paper presents interim findings from the ongoing research.