Successfully scaling humanitarian innovation

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Content

Acknowledgements

Summary

For years, innovation has been seen as the solution to all humanitarian problems. Yet, many innovations remain unknown and confined to specific local context. They create impact on a small scale, benefiting only limited groups of people, 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 and anticipatory action are among the most famous and cited examples of successful innovations across the humanitarian system.

This paper aims to create a common language for scaling humanitarian innovations by outlining success factors that derived from CHA research on innovation scaling in humanitarian action. Flexible resource models and agile management promote constant learning, co-creation and adaptation. The active engagement of all stakeholders with inclusive and collaborative networks creates an environment for information and knowledge sharing between local, national and global levels. Visionary leadership nurtures a culture of creativity, power sharing and risk-taking. All factors build the key to success, thriving humanitarian innovation towards long-term success and social impact.

Abbreviations

CHS	Core Humanitarian Standards
CVA	Cash and voucher assistance
DEPP	Disasters and Emergencies Preparedness Programme
EWS	Early Warning Systems
GFFO	German Federal Foreign Office
HeiGIT	Heidelberg Institute for Geoinformation Technology
HiHFAD	Hand in Hand Aid Development
MSF	Médecins Sans Frontières

1. The issue of scaling innovation in humanitarian action

For years, innovation has been seen as the solution to all humanitarian problems. Climate change, armed conflict, digitalisation and sector-wide funding cuts are just a few of the many factors that have pushed humanitarian practitioners to be creative, regularly exploring new and progressive approaches to optimise processes, drive social impact and address complex problems in ever-changing environments.

The humanitarian system is filled with innovations that fail to scale

Yet, many innovations remain unknown and confined to specific local contexts. They create impact on a small scale, benefiting only limited groups of people, 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 – many falling victim to "pilotitis" or immoral testing practices, contributing to a growing "graveyard" of unsuccessful innovations. The reasons for failure are manifold and often systemic in nature (Sandvik 2024; McClure et al. 2024; Seo 2024; Townsend 2024).

Elrha's recently published report on *Failure to Scale* high-lights issues of weak incentives, insufficient funding, and fragmented, inefficient collaboration as major obstacles to addressing humanitarian complexities. Restrictive humanitarian mechanisms and financial instruments limit innovators from developing their own ways of working. The report further emphasises systemic inequalities and "a poor capability with wider humanitarian structures to hear and respond to the signals of needed innovation coming from those who experience crisis and the people who work most closely with them" (Townsend 2024, 9).

Meanwhile, some innovations do manage to scale, create impact and fundamentally change the way humanitarians work. Looking back at humanitarian history, the SPHERE Minimum Standards and Core Humanitarian Standards (CHS), the use of cash and voucher assistance (CVA) and anticipatory action with improved Early Warning Systems (EWS) are among the most renowned and frequently-cited examples of successful innovations across the humanitarian system. These examples differ in nature but share two central aspects: 1) Their pathway to scale took years if not decades, and 2) failures played a critical role in informing their success.

This paper aims to create a common language for scaling humanitarian innovations by outlining success factors derived from CHA research on innovation scaling in humanitarian action. The factors were defined based on a literature review, insights gathered from conversations with 15 innovation thinkers and practitioners, and validated during a virtual multi-stakeholder workshop conducted in October 2024. Furthermore, the factors are informed by an ongoing analysis of selected case studies, including Commit Global, Missing Maps and Sentry Syria. The paper presents interim findings from this ongoing research. The recommended factors of success aim to contribute to the discussion of successfully scaling humanitarian innovation.

2. A common language for scaling humanitarian innovation

Innovators across research and humanitarian operations face numerous challenges and complexities when designing and scaling impactful innovations. One such challenge is the lack of a common language, which hinders a deep understanding of how innovations function in humanitarian action. To address this challenge and foster better collaboration among innovation thinkers, practitioners and funders, key terminology is shortly discussed.

Innovation is generally understood as an iterative process

One of these terms is "innovation". **Innovation** is generally understood as an iterative process that identifies, adjusts and disseminates ideas to improve a specific process or condition. The innovation process in humanitarian action typically follows a five-stage model that serves as a roadmap for innovation:

(1) A specific problem or challenge is identified.
(2) The solution intended to address the issue or capitalise on an opportunity is conceived.
(3) Plans and guidelines are developed.
(4) Real-world examples of change are produced, tested and compared to existing solutions or processes.
(5) Innovations are scaled and promoted for broader adoption (Obrecht and Warner 2016).

Scaling is often considered the final stage of the innovation roadmap. However, innovations scale in many ways, such as optimising processes, expanding geographically, increasing the number of users, creating impact or transforming systems. The roadmap to scale is not strictly linear – stages and activities overlap and repeat, highlighting the dynamic and iterative nature of innovation. Thus, scaling is not simply the last stage but a set of activities that are shaped by the innovation's problem statement, purpose and objectives.

Humanitarian problem statements are complex and constantly changing. While the purpose and objective of addressing a problem may be similar across different environments, scaling requires contextualisation, particularly during implementation. It requires flexibility and agility to define specific milestones, develop scenarios informed by contextual drivers and disrupters, collect evidence, and continuously refine and improve innovation. Scaling is an ongoing process without a definite end, requiring different approaches and strategies to "scale out, scale up and scale deep" (Townsend 2024; Moore et al. 2015).

Scaling is an ongoing process without a definite end

Due to its innate complexity, scaling is widely regarded as the most challenging and resource-intensive phase of innovation. Innovation journeys designed without a clear scaling objective, or an integrated expansion plan often fail. Scaling requires continuous testing and piloting while demonstrating success, tracking progress and assessing performance. Aligning the scale of the innovation with the size of the problem and ensuring impact along the entire journey is key (Gray et al. 2024; McClure et al. 2024; Bessant et al. 2023; Taylor et al. 2022; Elrah 2018).

The level of an innovation's **impact**, however, differs. There are intended and unintended, positive and negative effects (Obrecht et al. 2016). Impact creation serves different purposes and depends on the audience and perspective. Humanitarian innovations typically aim to create impact by considering social, economic, technical and environmental effects at different scales and levels. Unlike other sectors, humanitarian innovators are value-driven and follow the unspoken norm of prioritising social impact for the most marginalised and vulnerable people affected by crisis (Townsend 2024).

3. Thriving innovation towards long-term success and social impact

There is no single factor that determines the pathway to scale or the success of an innovation. Rather, it is the interplay of multiple factors that creates a conducive environment, enables the design of durable solutions, adds value and ensures impact at scale. The key factors are discussed below and summarised in the recommendations.

3.1. Flexible and sustained resource models

Funding innovation to scale is a lengthy and costly process. It requires regular testing and adjustments, all of which demand flexibility, time and resources. As a result, flexible and sustained resource models are among the most critical factors for successfully scaling innovations.

The humanitarian system is designed for quick fixes

However, the humanitarian system is designed for quick fixes, prioritising short-term-interventions over medium- and long-term frameworks. Many humanitarian innovators, therefore, rely on a mix of short- and long-term funding sources. To avoid dependency on specific institutional donors, they diversify their approaches and invest in grant mapping to identify new opportunities. They also liaise with development-oriented actors and build relationships with non-traditional donors, foundations, philanthropies and the private sector. Yet, engaging with new funding partners can create friction, particularly in value-driven organisations. For example, some private sector partnerships may conflict with organisational principles and standards, leaving innovation practitioners with limited flexibility to work with non-traditional funders.

Impact measurement is particularly challenging for practitioners

To promote trust and confidence, innovation practitioners document progress and track the innovation's performance. They often rely on non-humanitarian business tools to test ideas before designing an innovation (e.g. proof of concept), pilot and demonstrate its value (e.g. minimum viable product), measure its impact (e.g. theory of change) or evaluate its cost efficiency (e.g. return of investment, value for money). Impact measurement is particularly challenging for practitioners. For example, interviewees noted that while Missing Maps is a powerful initiative, proving the direct impact of cartography and maps on humanitarian outcomes is difficult. Another interviewee cited impact measurement as one of the main challenges when scaling Commit Global.

Humanitarian innovations operate within complex systems with constantly evolving environments and rapidly changing conditions, making measurements difficult. Disrupters like natural disasters and conflict are critical to understanding impact and success, as emphasised during our multi-stakeholder workshop. However, restrictive operational frameworks like log frames "that traces the development of projects and measures their success against predetermined, measurable indicators" (Madianou 2019, 44) are often seen as a hindrance and unfit for purpose. To satisfy institutional reporting requirements, humanitarian innovators frequently rely on commonly used output indicators, such as "numbers reached" – a notable but "imperfect and perhaps unhelpful measure of scale" (Townsend 2024, 20).

Instead, many innovation practitioners rely on outcome indicators and qualitative evidence to demonstrate impact. They use storytelling techniques, map user and non-user journeys to illustrate seamless and engaging user experience (UI/UX design) or conduct simple baseline studies comparing business-as-usual to optimised processes. Innovation storytelling is considered critical to innovation success, described as "the art and science of communicating strategic narratives and personal stories about new product developments, systems improvements, and groundbreaking new thinking" (Taylor et al. 2023, 19). Impact stories are another way to share progress and illustrate outcomes for humanitarian audiences (Aslanidis 2021). The approach depends on the specific innovation, its context and the problem it seeks to solve. Steve Jobs' story – tracing Apple's journey from a garage startup to a leading tech company – is a well-known example of the power of storytelling. Another compelling personal story comes from an interviewee discussing Commit Global, a global initiative providing digital infrastructure for civic, humanitarian and climate work: "They have just a very convincing story to tell. […] it really makes you believe in their product. […] It's so inspirational!".

Another way to support flexible resource models and agile innovation management is through in-kind contributions such as mentoring, coaching and volunteering. Mentoring offers an opportunity to accelerate the innovation by providing external, objective views and guidance on the scaling journey (Gray et al. 2024; Bessant et

al. 2023). The example of Missing Maps showcases the importance of working with volunteers. Missing Maps is a collective network of different Red Cross Societies (including the German Red Cross), Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), academia such as the Heidelberg Institute for Geoinformation Technology (HeiGIT) and many others who work towards creating accessible, open-source maps for humanitarian operations in underserved regions. Volunteers at local, national and global levels bring diverse skillsets and expertise, contributing essential knowledge and driving ongoing development. 'Mapathons' are organised to gather mappers across the globe, process geo data and create maps that are further developed and validated at national and local levels. The scaling journey of Missing Maps demonstrates the effectiveness of combining a flexible resource model, in-kind contributions, and short- and long-term funding sources (Open Street Map 2024).

Providing flexible and sustained resources, diversifying funding strategies, and simplifying operational humanitarian frameworks and reporting schemes are key factors in supporting successful humanitarian scaling.

3.2. Agile management and integration

Agile project and information management remain relatively new across the entire humanitarian system

Agility has become a defining trait of rapid technological and business development, referring to the ability to respond quickly and adjust to challenges and opportunities. While humanitarian innovators regularly navigate complex challenges and emerging opportunities, agile project and information management remain relatively new across the entire humanitarian system. Traditional approaches often compete with agile management practices, as well as with information- and knowledge-sharing within organisations and with external stakeholders. Mutual learning can help mitigate risks and build trust amongst innovators, users and funders (Bouman 2024; Bessant et al. 2023; The Research People 2021). In this way, humanitarian innovation would benefit significantly if agile management were more widely integrated into humanitarian programming (Pellowska 2023).

Innovations are best understood as "a piece of the puzzle", part of a complex broader ecosystem, as one of the Missing Maps partners describes in an interview. It is about "starting small, thinking big but going slow".

Scaling innovations in isolation or without a clear problem statement is prone to failure. For innovations to be successful, they must be agile but also integrated across organisations, programmes, sectors and ecosystems. Understanding the operational environment, key stakeholders and existing relationships while embracing complexities and building on already existing and functioning processes helps to define the specific scaling strategy and determine whether roll-out is feasible in a specific context. One interviewee, for example, noted that the lack of contextual knowledge and local counterparts created major obstacles when attempting to scale Sentry Syria – an early warning system developed by Hala Systems to warn Syrian civilians of airstrikes – into Yemen.

Without a clear strategy that articulates the innovation's purpose and roadmap across the design and scaling stages, an innovation risks becoming a procedural task rather than achieving meaningful impact (Gray et al. 2024; Townsend 2024; Elrah 2018; McClure et al. 2018). Agility and flexibility are essential to guiding this process of integration.

It is about "starting small, thinking big but going slow"

3.3. Active engagement and collaborative networks

CVA is widely regarded as a success story that has significantly shaped the humanitarian system. At the same time, it is also a story of innovations that, while scaling, have failed to deliver on their promises – sometimes causing more harm than good. Cheesman (2024), for instance, describes a humanitarian blockchain project in Jordan that was tested and implemented at the expense of humanitarian principles and the needs and priorities of affected people. Many humanitarian innovations reach scale but perform poorly in terms of principled humanitarian action and their value proposition for users, particularly affected people (Cheesman 2024; Townsend 2024; Düchting 2023; Madianou 2019).

Trade-offs are often made in favour of cost efficiency and effectiveness. Innovation practitioners feel that humanitarian innovations are mainly promoted for optimising a specific way of working, increasing the number of users or spreading its geographic reach and maintaining organisational reputation. At the same time, research underscores that for innovations to be truly successful, they must generate impact by "creating value for all those involved" (McClure et al. 2024, 200) and actively engaging relevant stakeholders, notably local actors and affected people.

For innovations to be truly successful, they must generate impact by "creating value for all those involved"

Yet, the humanitarian system is characterised by power imbalances and arbitrary practices that often hinder the uptake and scaling of humanitarian innovations. During our multi-stakeholder workshop, the roles and responsibilities of so-called experts, users and beneficiaries were discussed, emphasising the need for more integration and active engagement of local peers in designing and scaling humanitarian innovation.

Innovations are more meaningful when built inclusively on existing practices, designed at low cost and scaled from the bottom up, as proven by the examples of Missing Maps, Sentry Syria and Commit Global. For instance, Missing Maps relies on volunteers to identify and support mapping unknown areas during natural disasters and for preparedness purposes. Similarly, Sentry Syria is built on pre-existing networks of people communicating and warning each other about potential airstrikes. By integrating machine learning systems for better predictions and adding features such as physical alert devices and a user-friendly mobile application, Sentry Syria was able to enhance the accuracy and coordination of warnings for both users and observers. Commit Global, in turn, originated as "Code for Romania", a platform enabling Romanians living abroad to access information about voting locations and conditions.

Engaging diverse actors, notably local stakeholders, remains challenging

Engaging diverse actors, notably local stakeholders, remains challenging: it is costly, time-consuming and resource-intensive (Bessant et al. 2023; Wyan 2022; Rush et al. 2021). Sandvik (2024), for example, explores the dilemma of fully 'localising' the entire innovation cycle by examining the Disasters and Emergencies Preparedness Programme (DEPP) Innovation Labs, initiated by the Start Network. Between 2016 to 2019, four labs were established in Bangladesh, Jordan, Kenya and the Philippines, primarily to support local-level innovations in disaster preparedness and response (Start Network 2021). Over time, the labs experienced logistical, financial, capacity and cultural challenges when introducing new concepts. To ensure local actors could understand and apply these concepts, they had to be adapted from standard business frameworks – including the notion of clients, the role of customer relationships, and the introduction of costing or business models like social enterprises – into diverse humanitarian contexts and audiences (Sandvik 2024; Batali et al. 2019).

At the same time, the prioritisation of locally managed processes has proven to be more sustainable (Mwenda et al. 2024; 2020; The Research People 2021). As one of the interviewees put it "scaling is about equal partnerships that move from global to local and from local to global levels". Achieving this requires the active engagement of key stakeholders across all levels, sectors and functions to develop and maintain state-of-the-art solutions. Long-term, diverse partnerships – including those between profit- and non-profit organisations, tech- and non-tech providers, governmental and non-governmental actors, and academic and non-academic institutions – enable mutual learning as well as knowledge- and resource-sharing). Interviewees discussing Missing Maps and Sentry Syria highlight the importance of bottom-up approaches and low hierarchies in fostering this inclusive environment.

As a result, sustained and adequate resources are required to manage expectations and equip all actors, particularly local ones, with the tools needed to strengthen their capacities, foster relationships, and build confidence and trust. While inclusive innovation design and scaling yield greater impact and long-term sustainability, they also require more time, effort, and complexity to implement successfully.

3.4. Visionary leadership and strong operating models

Scaling innovation across structures and systems requires supportive leadership that encourages a culture of learning, experimentation and adaptability. While there is widespread recognition that failure is essential for growth, the fear of risking organisational and individual reputations makes openly discussing them a major challenge in the humanitarian sector. There is little to no research about humanitarian innovation failures. Anecdotal evidence and knowledge are typically shared informally between trusted peers. To create a trust-based environment and overcome cultural barriers, it is key to showcase change, ideally supported by strong visionary leadership (Townsend 2024).

Failure is essential for growth

Innovations require robust operating

Innovation practitioners highlight the role of direct line managers in supporting the design and scaling process. The examples of Missing Maps and Commit Global emphasize the visionary mindset of their leadership. In the case of Commit Global, one interviewee highlighted: "It is amazing to feel her energy. You are directly drawn into [the work of Commit Global]". Research further shows that scaling is highly dependent on a culture that nurtures creativity and experimentation that are not misunderstood for "experimental practices" (Sandvik 2024), solutionism or experiments among people (Madianou 2025). Leadership buy-in is crucial, as management must be willing to commit to long-term investments and take on potential risks (Düchting 2023). Innovators talk about an environment without fear of failure. Innovation teams

Flexible resource models and agile management

Flexible and sustained resources

Impact measurement and evidence

Continuous learning and adaptation

Integrated strategies for sustainable impact

Innovation

Flexible resource models and agile management

Active engagement and collaborative networks

Locally led and locally owned

Inclusive and collaborative networks

Strategic partnerships

Visionary leadership and value proposition

Multi-functional teams

A supportive attitude and culture

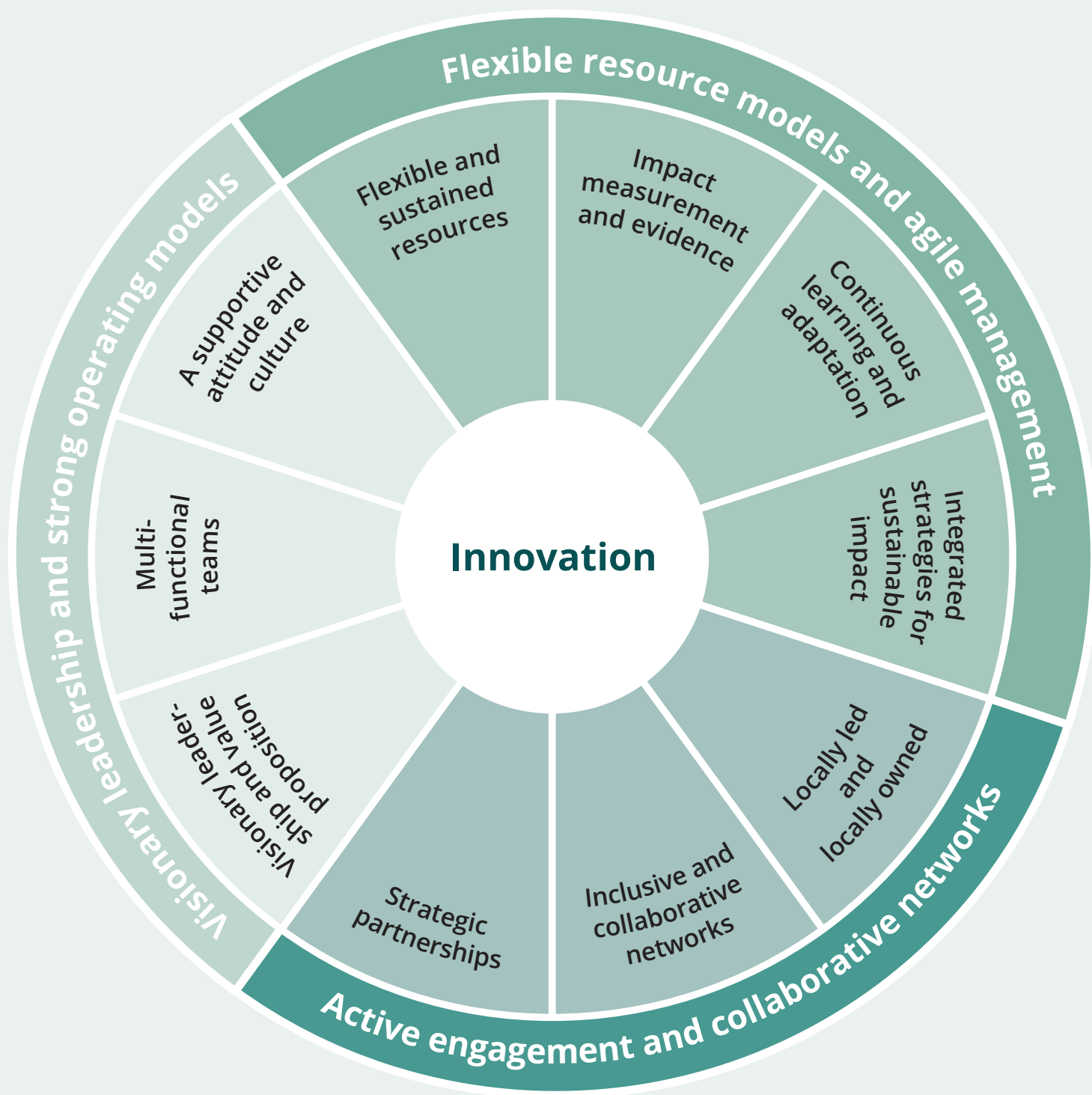Visionary leadership and strong operating models

Chart 1: Factors for successfully scaling humanitarian innovation

thrive in environments that allow for experimentation without fear of failure, leading to the development and implementation of more meaningful innovation (Spring Impact 2021; Elrah 2018; Cooley et al. 2014).

The examples of Commit Global, Missing Maps and Sentry Syria further indicate that successful innovators share a set of common values and a clear vision. They act as catalysts in driving the complex innovation process forward while recognising and reacting to potential trade-offs and risks (McClure et al. 2024). Dedicated teams bring together diverse skill sets and contribute at different stages of the scaling journey. A combination of technical and non-technical expertise – spanning across programme, finance, technology, legal, procurement and logistics departments – is essential. For example, Hala Systems operates with three cross-functional teams, including the Humanitarian Intelligence, Emergency Response and Platform teams, to continuously improve its technological solutions, including but not limited to Sentry Syria (Hala Systems 2023, 6).

Effective communication and coordination across these teams are critical for identifying entry points, addressing gaps and creating buy-in across all levels. Donors can play an important part in this process. One of the interviewees, for example, explained that the German Federal Foreign Office (GFFO) introduced Hand in Hand Aid Development (HiHFAD) to Hala Systems after learning that they needed a system to protect their staff at the medical facilities from airstrikes. This link was very much appreciated.

Innovation thinkers emphasise that successful innovations require robust operating models characterised by adequate resources, continuous engagement with relevant networks and strategic partners, ongoing enhancement of the innovation, and, last but not least, a clear understanding of risk tolerance and value structure to support scaling (Gray et al. 2024). This observation is evident in larger organisations, particularly UN Agencies, which have introduced new business models with dedicated innovation teams, innovation accelerators and labs. Townsend (2024) refers to a "structured humanitarian innovation support sub-sector" (Townsend 2024, 19) that is continuously building new skills, processes and structures for effectively designing and scaling innovation in humanitarian action. To mitigate competition over limited resources with entities like the private sector, humanitarian innovators have begun to explore open-source models and for-profit approaches to attract experienced personnel and ensure the sustainability of their solution. However, humanitarian donors remain hesitant to engage with social enterprises and similar models.

Humanitarian donors remain hesitant to engage with social enterprises and similar models

4. Recommendations

Many of the findings in this paper may be familiar and not entirely new. However, it underscores the persistent challenges that must be addressed to successfully scale humanitarian innovation. We summarise the ten factors of success as follows:

1. **Flexible and sustained resources:** Innovation scaling requires flexible and long-term funding. A mix of financial and in-kind contributions ensures that innovations are built with adequate capacities and capabilities to experiment, grow and adapt until they are fully established.

2. **Impact measurement and evidence:** Providing contextual, clear and credible data on the feasibility, efficiency, and effectiveness of innovations informs decision-making, builds trust among stakeholders and encourages investment in scaling efforts.

3. **Continuous learning and adaptation:** Scaling requires structures that are flexible and adaptable to complex, evolving humanitarian conditions. By regularly reflecting on successes and failures, innovators can navigate their scaling journey in an agile, problem-driven manner. This agility allows innovations to sustain themselves beyond the initial phases, meet changing conditions, and mitigate risks.

4. **Integrated strategies for sustainable impact:** Many initiatives struggle to scale due to unclear problem statements and a lack of integration. A well-designed problem, ecosystem awareness, and scenario-based planning create an ability to scale out, scale up and scale deep. Embedding scaling as a goal from the outset increases the likelihood of achieving sustainable, long-term impact.

5. **Locally led and locally owned:** To avoid doing harm, every stage of the scaling process must ensure local relevance and sustainability. Prioritising locally managed processes and solutions encourages local initiative, ownership, empowerment and long-term impact.

6. **Inclusive and collaborative networks:** Successful scaling requires active engagement with key stakeholders across local, national and global levels, as well as across systems, sectors, and functions. Their collaboration, buy-in and trust are crucial for ensuring the successful implementation and uptake of innovations.

7. **Strategic partnerships:** Partnering with diverse actors facilitates learning, knowledge- and resource-sharing. A strong partnership promotes state-of-the-art solutions and amplifies the reach and impact of innovation efforts.

8. **Visionary leadership and value proposition:** Scaling innovations in humanitarian action requires a clear vision and buy-in from leaders who recognise the value of scaling. Commitment, shared values and intrinsic motivation act as catalysts in driving the process forward.

9. **Multi-functional teams:** Dedicated teams with broad skill sets, technical and non-technical capacities, diverse capabilities, and local, national and global expertise are essential. Effective communication and coordination, mentorship and coaching enable teams to make informed decisions and address challenges throughout the scaling journey.

10. **A supportive attitude and culture:** Scaling innovation thrives in a culture that nurtures creativity. Innovation thinkers, doers and funders must be empowered by their organizations and partners to innovate and take risks, supporting them in the scaling journey without fear of failure.

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Impressum

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