Executive Summary

# Balancing Innovation, Efficiency, and Principled Humanitarian Action

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**How can humanitarian innovations, including AI, be scaled effectively while staying true to core humanitarian principles?**

The humanitarian system is at a crossroads. Needs are rising, yet funding is shrinking, trust is eroding, and reform fatigue is widespread. At the same time, innovation – especially artificial intelligence (AI – offers the promise of faster response times, greater efficiency, and new ways of working. AI is not new to the sector: narrow AI tools have long supported tasks like damage detection, early warning, and language processing. But the rise of Generative AI (GenAI) marks a turning point. These tools can generate text, images, and scenarios, offering transformative potential but also raising significant ethical concerns. As technologies advance, tensions between effectiveness and humanitarian principles become increasingly difficult to ignore. This paper takes that tension as a starting point, not to ask whether (Gen)AI should be used, but to explore how humanitarian innovations, both AI and non-AI, are scaled in practice. In doing so, it examines what this reveals about related ethics, power, and responsibility in humanitarian action.

## Key Findings

**AI brings connected ethical dilemmas around effectiveness and humanitarian principles into sharper focus.**

The paper begins with the recognition that terms like "innovation," "scaling," and "success" are far from neutral or technical terms. Instead, they are deeply political and context dependent. Who defines the problem, who controls the process, and whose standards determine success all play a crucial role in shaping the path of innovation.

Drawing on seven case studies of both AI and non-AI innovations, the paper finds that key success factors rarely operate in isolation. Instead, they interact dynamically – either reinforcing each other or creating trade-offs that innovation owners must carefully navigate. Those who successfully scale their innovations – whether AI-based or not - adopt smart ethical positioning strategies that manage these complexities within an ethical grid balancing effectiveness-based performance and people-centred principles (see figure 2). This approach allows them to manage complexity, align stakeholders around shared values and negotiate tensions. Scaling success, therefore, depends not simply on technology but on how innovation owners ethically and politically position


*Figure 1: Overview of AI-based and non AI-based use cases included in this paper*

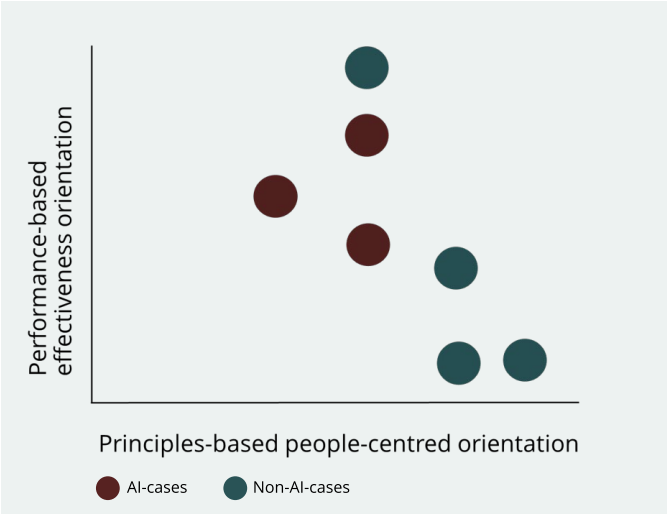


*Figure 2: Ethical Grid*

themselves within diverse operational and governance contexts.

AI innovations bring these dynamics into sharper focus. While the fundamental tensions between performance and principle are not unique to AI, AI amplifies them, making trade-offs more visible and harder to avoid. This positions AI as an ethical stress test for the humanitarian sector: AI systems – especially those relying on opaque or black-box models – challenge traditional expectations of transparency and accountability, placing increased pressure on oversight and feedback mechanisms. Moreover, the speed and efficiency AI offers often come at the expense of participation, informed consent, and meaningful contextual adaptation. This dynamic puts humanitarian commitments to inclusion and local relevance under strain. As a result, scaling AI innovations in humanitarian contexts raises not only technical and operational questions but also forces a confrontation with the ethical and political foundations of humanitarian action itself.

### Key Considerations

- **Drive innovation with clear intent:** Especially for AI innovations, prioritise humanitarian principles over efficiency. Define success through people-centred goals.
- **Shape nuanced strategies:** Recognise trade-offs and balance ethics, impact, and inclusion. Align innovation with relevant, contextualised ethical and legal standards.
- **Foster collaboration over competition:** Share lessons across organisations and support "lighthouse" initiatives to consolidate best practices.
- **Strengthen transparency and accountability:** Apply explainability, audit trails, human-in-the-loop processes, and ethical oversight to ensure responsible AI use.
- **Support locally owned and adaptive innovation:** Fund co-designed, context-relevant solutions and adapt existing tools with accountability, continuous feedback, and inclusive, participatory design.
- **Build cross-functional teams:** Combine technical, ethical, and humanitarian expertise, and invest in AI literacy across roles.

## Methods in Brief

This paper primarily uses a qualitative, comparative approach, analysing seven use cases of humanitarian innovations spanning both AI and non-AI domains (see figure 1). The analysis is complemented by a literature and document review, key informant interviews, a stakeholder workshop (Nov 2024), and a rapid survey of 32 respondents.



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