Approach Paper – WHS Theme 3: Transformation through Innovation

This approach paper is meant to replace the initial scoping paper that was drafted for the theme.

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Introduction

The United Nations Secretary-General will convene a global humanitarian summit in May 2016 in Istanbul, Turkey, with the goal of finding new ways to better meet humanitarian needs in a fast-changing world.

This initiative comes at a critical time. The world is facing humanitarian needs on an unprecedented scale. The number of people requiring international humanitarian assistance and the cost of helping them has increased significantly over the last decade. Humanitarian actors are being asked to respond to needs on a far greater scale than in previous years. At the same time, many ways of working no longer reflect current social, political and economic realities. Shifts in power and influence and global trends like climate change, population growth and urbanization must be taken into account. New actors must be involved in decision-making, new partnerships must be leveraged, and new approaches must be factored in. With humanitarian needs on the rise, the moment has come for a collective dialogue on the agenda for the future of humanitarian action. Maintaining the status quo is no longer an option. Rather, what is needed is to ensure that humanitarian actors have the capability and capacity to adapt to and address these future challenges, and to improve outcomes for affected communities.

Transformation through innovation is one of the four themes of the World Humanitarian Summit. This note sets out how the thematic team plans to approach its work in the lead up to the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016, providing indications of the outcomes that they will aim to deliver.

Approach

The themes of the World Humanitarian Summit are mostly concerned about answering questions on what needs to change in the humanitarian system, such as what needs to happen to better reduce risk? What needs to change to better assist those affected by conflict? What needs to change to improve the effectiveness of humanitarian action? In addition to addressing some of
these what questions, the theme of transformation through innovation is concerned with questions of how to effect, manage and accelerate change.

Innovation is a dynamic, managed process, which focuses on the creation and implementation of new or improved tools and approaches. Successful innovations are those that result in improvements in efficiency, effectiveness, quality or social outcomes and impacts. “Innovation may then be defined as the process of having original ideas and insights that have value, and then implementing them so that they are accepted and used by significant numbers of people. By this definition, a major innovation is one that is so successful that soon after its introduction few people can even remember what life was like before the innovation was introduced”. ¹

Providing a simple but practical definition to frame the conversations as to what is “innovation” will be critical for the stakeholders involved in the WHS process, the thematic team will therefore use the following definitions for innovation:

- Doing things better or in new ways
- Fresh thinking that creates value (recognizing the need for new but also focusing on the impact)
- Creative problem solving (recognizing that it is not just about novelty but results/benefits)
- Process for adaptation and improvement
- New models that realize breakthroughs

In approaching its work, the thematic team is itself committed to the application of cutting edge thinking on innovation management, drawing on best practices and expertise in the field. It will do so in two ways:

First, a key principle underpinning good innovation is that the user/ the client/ the customer is engaged and involved in the process. For many, this means putting affected populations and front-line responders at the center of their work. If the wider humanitarian system were able to do this, this in itself would be transformative. However, it cannot be assumed that there is a single affected population with a unified view on innovation. Users can also be taken to mean operational workers, whose creative ideas and insights are adopted too slowly by the institutions in which they work. In these cases, the affected populations are the users, but as innovations are impacting aid organizations, their staff and systems, affected populations are considered as indirect users. Therefore, users can be defined as disaster affected people, humanitarian aid

¹ Source: Richard K. Miller, “How Do You Recognize and Cultivate Potential Innovators?”
workers and front-line responders. The thematic team hopes that by drawing on and sharing tools and methods for engaging users in innovation, such as from Human Centered Design and user innovation principles, they can add value to wider discussions about accountability and participation in humanitarian response.

Second, in approaching their work, the thematic team will follow the stages of strategy development process framework. That is progression from problem definition and identification of areas where innovations are needed (either where improvements are needed in the humanitarian sector or in order to deal with future challenges and the complexity of crises), to selection and testing of solutions, to finding out what is needed to take ideas to scale. This approach will enable the thematic team to define key problems and challenges, thereby influencing the key focus areas to deliver a series of outputs and outcomes.

It must also be noted that in the work of the thematic team, transformation will be the key to understanding innovation. While not all transformations result from innovation (e.g. crisis can be a great catalyst for change), all innovations should result in transformation, even if they are incremental in nature. The below model provides a visual of the conceptual framework that can be used in defining innovation for the thematic team.
In summary, the thematic team will put transformation at the center of its focus. There is a need to recognize that innovation cannot necessarily be plotted on a linear continuum of clearly differentiable categories, but that it is a dynamic and dialectic process. For example, incremental innovations can lead to transformation if taken to scale but there is no guarantee that radical innovations take root and become transformational, unless they are accepted and taken to scale. Therefore, it is not enough to only create a “green space” (i.e. dedicated resources) for radical or disruptive innovations, if we cannot manage the uptake. On the other hand, small innocuous incremental innovations can at times lead to huge transformational impact. This creates a need to strike a balance between radical and incremental ideas. The emphasis should then be on: can it result in transformations when taken to scale?

Innovation could therefore be a framework to help the humanitarian sector manage and harness disruptive innovations and trends impacting humanitarian actors. In other words, innovation can also be used to enhance adaptive resilience within the humanitarian sector/organizations.

The thematic team will aim to affect a major culture shift in the humanitarian sector such that in the coming years, there is acceptance that investment in innovation is a core part of the humanitarian endeavor and there is recognition that innovation is an important managerial tool that should be strategically leveraged.
Focus areas: three main questions

The thematic team will address three main questions:

- *Why is humanitarian innovation important?*
- *How can the humanitarian system accelerate the uptake of proven innovations?*
- *What are the priority areas for innovation?*

In developing answers to these questions, the thematic team will deliver important outcomes that will help shape the humanitarian sector and how humanitarian issues are addressed for the next decade and beyond. The following sections set these out in more detail, also providing an initial assessment of where the thematic team will commission specific studies.

1. Why is humanitarian innovation important? Making the case for innovation.

What will the thematic team cover?

It is commonly argued that humanitarian needs are so significant that the humanitarian sector cannot afford to invest in research and development. Research by the Humanitarian Futures Programme has found that in some situations the mention of humanitarian innovation has been greeted “with cynicism and even a chuckle or two”. More specifically: “…in the eyes of many humanitarian practitioners, innovation refers to a commercial sector practice that takes place far from the emergency response challenges of distributing food rations, digging camp latrines and providing screening to under-fives” (White, 2008, p. 1).

Such skepticism appears to be ignorant of the notable successes of humanitarian innovation. The entrepreneurial spirit embodied in innovations resonates strongly with the spirit of humanitarianism.

The motivation to extend assistance to those affected by conflict or natural calamity has driven individuals to extreme lengths – and led to considerable ingenuity and perseverance. The work of leading innovators – from Henri Dunant and Clara Barton through to Fred Cuny - has captured the humanitarian imagination through the ages, and pushed back the boundaries of what is considered possible in relief operations. At the same time, it is well understood that without innovation, the humanitarian community will either become irrelevant or too rigid to function effectively.

A key task of the thematic team, therefore is to make the case for investing in research and development in the humanitarian sector in order to improve humanitarian outcomes. The emphasis for this stream will be on gathering, demonstrating quantitative and qualitative evidence
and on proving that humanitarian innovation works and why the humanitarian sector can’t afford not to invest in innovation - particularly for those that might currently not be fully convinced by the importance of innovation (humanitarian workers, strategic thinkers, governments, donors and current/potential funders) or those whose possible efforts are not fully captured in innovating in the humanitarian sector (e.g. innovators from outside the humanitarian system).

**What evidence will need to be gathered?**

There is a need to better understand the potential scale and nature of improvements that can be achieved through careful and strategic investment in humanitarian R&D and innovation. The team will therefore build the case for humanitarian innovation drawing on both quantitative and qualitative evidence regarding how investment in innovation has yielded results within the sector and more broadly.

The thematic team will generate:

- **Synthesis report**: A synthesis report of a number of studies to pull together a clear definition of innovation and to benchmark where the humanitarian sector is in this space
- **Rates of Return On Innovation**: Commission a study to quantify the rates of return on innovation, by both the public and private sector, considering not only the efficiency gains from innovation but also the broader aspects of effectiveness.
- **Multimedia innovation Library**: Build a library of stories, using multiple media and documenting how a range of different innovations have helped improve outcomes for those affected by conflict and natural and man-made disasters. This element of work will also include innovation by and for affected communities, examining and highlighting the contribution of crisis-affected communities to humanitarian innovation in a visually impactful and inspiring way to represent community innovation to the summit.
- **Benchmarks**: Develop indicators for an elementary index on humanitarian innovation (with linkages to humanitarian effectiveness) which when combined and measured with humanitarian data and trends will provide a benchmark for measuring innovation in the humanitarian system.

**What outcomes can be expected?**

This element of work will make the case for the importance, definition and identification of innovation in the humanitarian sector and will set the groundwork for the rest of the teams’ work. Based on this work it is expected that the thematic team will provide clear recommendations regarding the required levels of investment from the sector in this area.
2. How can the humanitarian system accelerate the update of proven innovations?

Humanitarian actors are constantly innovating and adapting to the difficult and diverse contexts in which they work- yet little of this is captured, fostered, embedded and rewarded. Recent years have also seen the emergence of a range of new mechanisms to support the development of new products and processes (e.g. the creation of innovation hubs within humanitarian organizations and the establishment of dedicated challenge funds). Experience suggests, however, that very few innovations go to scale or if they do, it takes an unnecessarily long time.

This work stream will aim to identify practical strategies that will enable the humanitarian system to capitalize on innovation. Specifically, it will aim to identify what facilitates and what hinders the development and diffusion of new approaches within the sector as well as the take up of innovations emerging from outside the humanitarian sector. In doing so, it will examine the ecosystem that surrounds innovation, identifying the institutional, financing and management of innovation in the sector and the practical measures that could be put in place in order to increase its effectiveness and efficiency.

An effective Innovation strategy includes both how to generate new ideas but also how to filter, adapt, scale and sustain them. A major challenge the humanitarian sector currently faces is how to SCALE - getting from prototype to full adoption across multiple contexts and organizations. This is where the sector could benefit from a common framework which recognizes that innovation management is different from change management and innovation should not be declared as scaled until it is so widely used that users no longer remember it as an innovation (i.e. climbing down the hill, passed the laggards on the bell curve).

At present there are major inefficiencies in the development and diffusion at scale of proven innovations, specifically:

- A large number of new products and processes are being tested, often in the same area;
- There is no space where these innovations are tested side by side which would enable both the development of minimum operating standards and/or to build confidence in adoption.
- This means that it is difficult to know when and whether to adopt a new approach at scale, slowing the rate of scale up.

The potential value of such approaches can be demonstrated by contrasting the processes that have led to the wide scale adoption, such as the community management of acute malnutrition (CMAM) which has displaced previous treatments and also those relating to the scale up of cash
and digi-tech innovations, both of which have the potential to disrupt existing approaches – bringing with them tremendous opportunities and challenges

**What will the thematic team cover?**
This element of work will consider the role of different actors (affected communities, operational agencies, governments, donors, the private sector and research institutions) in enabling innovation. It will also develop a systematic analysis of the factors – finance, organisational culture, incentives structures etc - that block the development, testing and scale up of new approaches.

**What evidence will need to be gathered?**
The thematic team will commission a series of studies to examine:

- **The Existing Humanitarian Innovation Eco-system**: This on-going study will build upon the existing literature from within and outside the humanitarian sector on understanding the nature of the ‘Humanitarian System of Innovation’, exploring reasons as to why the system does not perform in such a way as to meet current and future humanitarian needs, and assess the changes that are required by comparing the current system to how an ‘ideal’ system might operate.
  - Within this research project, five case studies are commissioned (WASH, food, health technologies, finance, shelter) with a view to considering comparisons that would lead to evidence-based recommendations.

- **Principals for Humanitarian Innovation**: Develop best-practice guidelines to inform the design of innovations in humanitarian assistance building on the “Principles for Innovation and Technology in Development” endorsed by the UN Innovation Network.

- **Ethical Standards for Humanitarian Innovation**: Develop ethics for humanitarian innovation, bringing together views from humanitarian policy-makers, innovation experts, and medical practitioners.

- **Financing of Humanitarian Innovation**: Identifying potential new sources and mechanisms for financing of humanitarian innovation. Within this work stream consideration will also be given to donor processes in creating a more enabling environment for innovation, not only to encourage innovation but to also build on incentives and conditions that would support adoption of proven innovations.

- **Moderating Innovation**: Commission a study to examine potential models for ‘moderating’ humanitarian innovation, which will consider the way in which the humanitarian community as a whole can agree when, whether and how new approaches should be adopted at scale. The study will draw on experiences in both the public and private sector where a range of different systems are in place to develop shared standards and adoption of new products and
processes. The study would build on the previously mentioned study of the humanitarian innovation eco-system to identify options to improve the ways in which the humanitarian sector can agree on a new framework with new standards and accelerate the adoption of proven approaches. These could build on existing mechanisms, such as the clusters, specialist technical expert committees or require the establishment of a new bespoke mechanism.

- The team will also develop a series of case studies to identify how a number of current innovations could be further brought to scale such as on Cash and Shelter and how the moderating/brokering of innovations works in in the digital space.

- **Defining Success in Humanitarian Innovation:** a Key Performance Indicator (KPI) is a measurable value that demonstrates how effectively an organization is achieving its objectives and allows organizations to evaluate their success at reaching targets. In order for innovation to be measured for success, KPI indicators and definitions will be required from an innovation management perspective, allowing for prioritization of successful innovations to go to scale.

- **Methodology for Scaling innovations:** Building upon the above mentioned elements for a humanitarian innovation eco-system, a methodology will be developed on how the humanitarian system should prioritize successful innovations to go to scale and how to technically progress from proven ideas to broad-based application.

- **Role of the Private sector and SMEs:** Consideration of barriers and options for opening up the humanitarian system to enable new entrants to enter, stimulate and scale innovations with particular emphasis on R&D, procurement, scaling and intellectual property related aspects.

- **Humanitarian Innovation Network:** The humanitarian innovation eco-system would greatly benefit from the creation of an informal network of innovators to address humanitarian innovation, act as facilitators in developing innovative solutions and to create communities of practice for key sectors.

What outcomes can be expected?

This work stream will establish a clear vision of the elements needed to build an innovation eco-system for the humanitarian sector, including but not limited to:

- A set of principles and ethics to underpin innovation in the humanitarian sector with practical examples and best practices for different actors;
- A series of recommendations in terms of future financing and resource mobilization of humanitarian innovation;
- A proposed common innovation management model/framework to broker innovation for the humanitarian sector, enabling effective new solutions to go to scale more quickly.
3. What are the priority areas for innovation?

An innovation process must begin with a clear definition of the problem(s). Evidence suggests that change is most likely to come about when there is agreement on a limited number of challenges around which resources can be corralled. In the humanitarian sector, crowding resources (money and people) is particularly important, given the impact of changes as well as the limitations on those resources. In other words, there is a need for challenge/campaign-based approaches to identifying priorities for innovations, not just a suggestion box which tends to be driven by solutions. While the more product-oriented innovations will naturally evolve, the challenging problems will need more leadership and strategic direction, which are to be provided through the WHS processes.

**What will the thematic team cover?**

The evidence-based approach of the previous focus area of thematic team will allow for the identification of gaps in the current humanitarian innovation eco-system. Working in collaboration with the other three WHS themes, the thematic team will thereby further explore mechanisms for crowd-sourcing 3-4 issues/problems/challenges around which the global community should focus its innovation efforts and around which resources are to be leveraged to develop solutions. In line with the human-centered approach across the theme, the thematic team will also aim to ask affected populations where change is most needed.

**What evidence will need to be gathered?**

- Views from affected communities and humanitarian practitioners on the priorities for change;
- Data on trends and challenges for the humanitarian sector.

**What outcomes can be expected?**

A methodology will be developed to identify 3-4 issues through crowd sourcing of problem definitions in order to build legitimacy and agreement around which innovation efforts should be prioritized in the coming years. The thematic team would then propose an innovation methodology for the identification of possible solutions to these crowd-sourced problems, through launching a series of challenges in these domains and recommending how to further take them to scale.