



## **The Humanitarian Innovation Project**

The Humanitarian Innovation Project seeks to explore the emerging and under-researched way in which innovation can be harnessed to transform humanitarian assistance, particularly in relation to refugee protection. As an academic research project, based at the University of Oxford, the focus of the project is on research, but with the aim of making both a practical and an academic contribution. On a practical level, the project aims to creatively identify ways in which innovation, technology and the private sector can enhance refugees' entitlements and opportunities within both emergency settings and protracted refugee situations. It aims to make an academic contribution by conceptualising the changing relationship between states, markets and international organisations in humanitarian governance. The project is funded by Stephanie and Hunter Hunt, through the Communities Foundation of Texas, and has a cooperation agreement with the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and its recently formed UNHCR Innovation initiative.

### **Background**

Humanitarian assistance relies upon a range of products and processes in order to address the health, water, sanitation, livelihoods, education, communication, and other protection needs of the most vulnerable people. As an area dominated by a relatively small number of organisations, humanitarianism has often been institutionally closed to new ideas and ways of thinking. The result has been that the scope for product and process innovation has been limited, and that humanitarian institutions have drawn upon a restricted array of possible solutions and ideas to understand and address humanitarian challenges.

The idea of 'innovation' can be defined as "the creation of better or more effective products and processes". Innovation is not the same as invention. It is not about creating novelty but rather identifying better ways in which problems can be matched with the most appropriate available solutions. Innovation is a core part of private sector culture. Businesses constantly strive to create cultures within which efficiency gains can be made in all aspects of their work. If they do not, then alternative providers emerge and compete away their market share.

Humanitarianism has historically been seen as antithetical to the idea of innovation. As a realm predominantly dominated by public actors – whether states or intergovernmental organisations – it has generally been insulated from the competitive pressures of the market. Meanwhile, where humanitarian actors have involved private sector actors, it has often been based on an assumption of philanthropy and charitable giving rather than developing

partnerships to determine new ways of identifying problems and matching them with the most effective and efficient solutions. However, in an ‘era of austerity’ in which there are fewer governmental resources available for humanitarianism, and in a context in which humanitarian challenges require new and innovative technologies, ‘humanitarian innovation’ is being increasingly embraced.

In response to this recognition, a new trend of ‘humanitarian innovation’ has begun to emerge. Within the United Nations (UN), the United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF) and UN Global Pulse have developed “innovation labs”. A range of private initiatives such as \*iHub in Nairobi, *un techo para mi pais*, and CrisisCommons have engaged in related areas of work. The Humanitarian Innovation Fund, a grant-making fund, has recently been created with the purpose of supporting organisations “to develop, test and share new technologies and processes that will make humanitarian assistance more effective and cost-efficient”<sup>i</sup>. University projects relating to humanitarian innovation have proliferated in the US at schools such as Stanford, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), and Dartmouth College.

Beyond these formal initiatives and partnerships, a significant amount of innovation has also taken place ‘below the radar’, within humanitarian field contexts such as the Haitian earthquake or civilian protection in Afghanistan. Meanwhile, untapped sources of innovation are constantly taking place in the private sector within sub-sectors that implicitly comprise humanitarian assistance. Some of these innovations have been applied to social or even humanitarian contexts, while others remain untapped. Potential sources of product and process innovation in shelter, water and sanitation, health, education, livelihoods, internet and communications technology, for example, may exist in sectors outside the humanitarian realm and have great relevance for improving the effectiveness and efficiency of humanitarian response.

In brief, humanitarian innovation can be broadly defined as “the creation of better or more effective products and processes in the provision of material and logistical assistance for humanitarian purposes”. The idea is applicable to thinking about responses to populations affected by, for example, natural disasters, conflict, or human rights violations, and might be applied at the emergency, stabilisation, or solution phases of an intervention.

## **Practical Contribution**

Many existing activities are relevant to humanitarian innovation however there has been a lack of systematic research on humanitarian innovation. This is a significant gap because understanding and documenting what is ‘out there’ and what is applicable (or not) to particular humanitarian contexts has the potential to improve both humanitarian innovation

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<sup>i</sup> Humanitarian Innovation Fund (2012) ‘About Us’, available online at <http://www.humanitarianinnovation.org/about> accessed 24 July 2012

initiatives and humanitarian response. Identifying best practices and analysing the sources and impacts of innovation across different sectors can make a practical contribution to ensure that the best information and most relevant analysis of what has been tried and what impact it has had is available to humanitarian actors. Addressing this gap, this project will seek to engage in systematic research and analysis of existing practices of humanitarian innovation and to make these insights openly available to humanitarian actors.

In addition to 'mapping out' these opportunities, the project will then focus on how these wider sources of innovation are being - or could be - applied to the refugee context. Reflecting the expertise of the Refugee Studies Centre, the project will explore how sources of humanitarian innovation might be adapted to the refugee context. Taking a 'bottom-up' perspective, it will examine how refugees' own skills, creativity and aspirations might be complemented by support from innovation, technology, and the private sector, whether derived from the local, national or global levels.

Today, over 6 million of the world's refugees are in so-called protracted refugee situations, having been in camps, settlements or urban areas for over 5 years, dependent mainly on donor state-provided humanitarian assistance, often with few opportunities for freedom of movement or livelihoods. Traditional state-led responses to such situations are often inadequate. Here, innovation and the private sector may provide an important 'missing link'. This is because innovation may create opportunities for refugees to engage with markets, incentives for the private sector to work with refugees, and incentives for host governments to recognise the social and economic contribution of refugees. The ultimate aim is to move beyond humanitarian dependency and to create a more sustainable, development-oriented approach to refugee protection.

The insights that the project will derive from 'looking outwards' to understand actual and potential sources of humanitarian innovation and from 'looking inwards' to understand the refugee context, will then be drawn together in order to inform the work that humanitarian organisations, governments, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and the private sector undertake in relation to humanitarianism in general and refugee protection in particular. Unlike many academic projects, the knowledge that the project seeks to generate will aim to offer empirical and conceptual insights that inform future policy, and to iteratively inform the development of practice, including through real-time evaluation.

## **Academic Contribution**

In addition to its practical contribution, the project aims to make an important academic contribution by understanding and conceptualising the changing nature of the relationship between states, markets and international organisations in the humanitarian field. Traditionally, humanitarianism has been understood as predominantly a 'public' realm, dominated by states or inter-state actors, and their implementing partners. It is in many ways the international analogue of the domestic welfare state. It serves to provide an important safety net of last resort. Literature abounds on the public international humanitarian response.

More neglected, however, has been the analysis of the potential and actual role of the private sector.

At the domestic level the role of the public sector is sometimes identified as ‘crowding out’ individual or social enterprise and innovation. At the international level, this theme has not been explored in relation to humanitarianism – despite vast literature on the dependency syndrome sometimes created by long-term humanitarian assistance. Yet, the question remains: under what conditions can markets – at the local, national and global level – potentially enhance, complement or substitute for the existing state-centric approach to humanitarian response in ways that build upon and enhance the agency and welfare of vulnerable populations. By answering these questions the project will contribute to the re-conceptualisation of the political economy and governance of humanitarianism. This conceptual work will in turn inform the practical work of the project through the insights it provides into understanding, for example, the incentives that drive private sector involvement in humanitarianism.

These insights will have general relevance to political science and particular relevance to work on the politics of refugee protection, which up to now has seen states and intergovernmental organisations as the most important actors engaged in refugee protection. Recognising the emerging and potential role of private actors - at the local, national, and global levels - is central to how re-thinking the most relevant politics and channels of influence through which humanitarian governance, policy and practice is made.

## **Research Focus**

In order to make both a practical and academic contribution, the project will engage in two simultaneous research tracks. It will, firstly, engage in systematic research of existing innovation activities relevant to humanitarianism (‘looking outwards’), and, secondly, engage in analysis of that data in order to explore its application and relevance to the refugee context (‘looking inwards’). These two tracks will be brought together in order to examine how ideas in other areas of humanitarian innovation might potentially relate to the refugee context.

### ***Research Track 1: “Looking Outwards”***

One of the core knowledge gaps that the project seeks to address is to ‘map out’ the range of actual and potential sources of humanitarian innovation, evaluate their impact and assess their potential relevance to the refugee context. This knowledge will inform the development of a humanitarian innovation database. The research will explore innovation ‘out there’ in three main areas in order to empirically understand what is happening in humanitarian innovation:

### 1) *Humanitarian Innovation Initiatives*

A range of partnerships have emerged from within the private sector, universities, and international organisations with a humanitarian innovation focus, working on areas relating to both product and process innovation. The project will systematically examine a range of past and current examples of humanitarian innovation projects to assess and understand their aims, organisation, innovations, and outcomes. For example, it is looking at UNICEF's experience of developing 'Innovation Labs' in field locations such as Kosovo, Uganda, and Zimbabwe.

### 2) *Humanitarian Innovation Practices*

In addition to formal humanitarian initiatives, a significant amount of humanitarian innovation takes place 'under the radar'. In a wide variety of international organisations, informal structures – such as e-mail groups – share information and ideas in ways that translate into new ideas for improving humanitarian response. Yet, they may or may not be captured in a systematic way. Similarly, in particular humanitarian crises, new innovative solutions are frequently piloted and applied by humanitarian organisations in order to address immediate problems for which alternative solutions may be absent. The Haitian earthquake, for instance, is widely recognized in humanitarian contexts for having led to a proliferation in new ideas and the prototyping of new product and process innovations. As well as attempting to document these innovations, the project will examine the conditions under which humanitarian innovations arise informally within humanitarian organisations and in particular humanitarian contexts.

### 3) *Private Sector Innovation in Relevant Sectors*

Finally, many of the most relevant sources of humanitarian innovation may not even be found in the humanitarian world. Humanitarian assistance is itself comprised of a range of sub-sectors, each of which transcends the humanitarian context. Documenting and analyzing the potential relevance of private sector innovation across these sub-sectors – shelter, water and sanitation, health, education, livelihoods, internet and communications technology, for example – has an important contribution to make in enhancing the knowledge base for humanitarian innovation. Such ideas might be found everywhere from Silicon Valley to Bangalore.

## ***Research Track 2: “Looking Inwards”***

The other research track of the project will examine the relevance of humanitarian innovation for the refugee context by conducting research in three areas relating to the actual and potential ways in which refugees are and could be engaging with innovation, technology and the private sector. Here the initial pilot focus for the project is on Uganda - looking at urban refugees in Kampala and rural refugees in a number of settlements, within which refugees have access to so-called self-reliance.

### 1) *Refugees' use of Innovation, Technology and Markets*

Central to the project's aims and its academic output is the research in the field which will look at how refugees use technology and markets in ways that enhance their own welfare and protection. Interviews and surveys will be conducted to assess how refugees' own initiative and innovation might be built upon at the local level. Alongside this, opportunities at the local level for market-based synergies involving the local community will be examined.

### 2) *Existing Institutional Processes for Innovation*

In order to understand how innovation currently works in the specific context of refugees, the project will examine how products and processes are currently selected and implemented by refugee organisations and their partners.

### 3) *The Impact of Existing Innovation Approaches on Refugees*

The project will engage in field research to assess the impact of existing approaches to innovation on refugee communities. For example, it will assess the impact of UNHCR's emerging attempts to use innovation in the Dolo Ado camps in Ethiopia.

## **Functions**

Overall, the project will fulfil five core functions:

### ***Function 1: Research capacity***

The project will undertake systematic research on the emergence and impact of humanitarian innovation in the three areas described above. On the basis of engaging in systematic data collection and evaluation of existing humanitarian practices, the project will consider the potential application of this information for particular humanitarian contexts, initially focusing on its application to the refugee context in order to inform the work of other humanitarian actors. In addition to data collection, it will play an analytical and conceptual role in identifying patterns in humanitarian innovation, and exploring the changing relationship between states, markets and international organisations in the humanitarian context.

### ***Function 2: Knowledge platform***

The project will serve as a knowledge platform for actors engaged in humanitarian innovation. As well as gathering, documenting, and analysing existing humanitarian innovation, the project will work to make its data and analysis available to a range of actors. It will publish accessible policy briefs, working papers, and newsletters to disseminate the latest work of the project.

### ***Function 3: Convening role***

The project will, where applicable, bring together a range of actors working on humanitarian innovation. Serving as a forum for dialogue, the project will occasionally bring together people from the private sector, governments, international organisations, NGOs, and universities to foster discussion on aspects of humanitarian innovation. It will play this role in order to provide a neutral venue for enhancing dialogue, sharing best practices, and facilitating new partnerships.

### ***Function 4: Network facilitation***

Through its research activities, the project will create and maintain a network of actors engaged in humanitarian innovation. It will draw together and connect people with expertise in different areas of humanitarianism and innovations. In doing so it will contribute to the creation of a network of private sector actors willing to contribute expertise and knowledge to the work of humanitarian organisations.

### ***Function 5: Process innovation***

Although not directly engaged in product innovation, the project will make a direct contribution to process innovation in the humanitarian context. Through analysing best practices of a range of institutional contexts in which humanitarian innovation takes place, the project will offer insights into ways of facilitating processes of problem identification and solution matching. Its conceptual and analytical work will contribute to identifying ways to reconceive the nature of humanitarian economics.