

CREATING HOPE IN CONFLICT:

A HUMANITARIAN
GRAND CHALLENGE

HOW DO GREAT IDEAS SCALE? LEARNING FROM SCALING SUCCESSES IN HUMANITARIAN INNOVATION: KEY TAKEAWAYS

Submitted to Grand Challenges Canada by
The Research People
November 2021



Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the
Netherlands



WITH SUPPORT FROM
Grand Challenges Canada®
Grands Défis Canada

KEY TAKEAWAYS

OVERVIEW

Scaling innovations in the humanitarian sector is notoriously difficult, and existing research highlights the many barriers and challenges to scaling humanitarian innovations. This study sought to fill an important gap in the literature by identifying and outlining key lessons from humanitarian innovations that have successfully scaled.

The research focused on five case studies of innovations that have, each in their own way, fostered new ways of working within the humanitarian sector. We explore the drivers of their success, the strategies deployed by innovators, and the lessons learned along the way. In doing so, we offer learning points for donors and innovators seeking to scale innovations in the humanitarian sector and to foster a more supportive ecosystem for scaling innovation.

The research was commissioned and funded by Creating Hope in Conflict: A Humanitarian Grand Challenge, but focused on identifying lessons learned from innovations beyond its portfolio. The five case studies include:

1. [Cash Learning Partnership \(CaLP\)](#), a member network organisation that promotes the use of cash and voucher assistance in the humanitarian sector
2. [Humanitarian OpenStreetMap Team \(HOT\)](#), a global team of volunteer crisis mappers who use OpenStreetMap to provide information that is used to inform disaster response
3. Micronutrient Powders, called 'Sprinkles', developed to combat childhood malnutrition
4. Telemedicine, an online platform through which doctors can access medical advice from a network of specialists, scaled within [Médecins Sans Frontières \(MSF\)](#), and
5. [Wave](#), a mobile money business using smartphone technology.

These case studies were selected because each has helped to transform established ways of working, whether within one organisation or across the wider sector. They also work across different areas, including health, cash transfers, mobile money, nutrition, and access to information.

Each case study was constructed through two key informant interviews and a review of relevant documents, including published reports, blogs, podcasts, and news articles. In one case study, only one interview was possible, supplemented by a review of additional documents.



KEY FINDINGS

Findings emerged around five key themes:



The innovators: all case studies include determination, persistence and commitment by the founders and early team in the face of both failure and resistance. Some made significant personal sacrifices, including working on the innovation without pay for a long period of time. Also important was that most founders either had past experience of scaling an innovation or were mentored by people who had. Some also had significant personal experience of the problem they were trying to address, which was foundational in shaping their solution. Most also had relatively easy access to international humanitarian organisations and were able to share their ideas with key actors who would become users, funders, or distributors.



The innovation: there was a clear and demonstrable need for each of the innovations, coupled with demand from end-users. Innovators invested in understanding and demonstrating this demand. At the same time, demand needs to be considered from multiple angles, and the case studies show how demand from potential end-users can be impeded or accelerated by gatekeepers. In one case, for example, there was demand from potential users but resistance from headquarters that had to be overcome.



Context: several contextual factors contributed to scaling success. Timing and wider trends were important in four of the five cases. In at least three, the spread of the internet, uptake of mobile phone usage and increased use of social media platforms played a key role in scaling success. In another case, the convergence of need, opportunity and people willing to drive change in the aftermath of the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami helped propel the innovation forwards.



People and partnerships: in every case, scaling has depended on identifying the right 'home' for the innovation and/or empowering the right people to drive it forwards. This may not be the same as the original innovator or founding team. Strategies deployed here have included distributing responsibility across a wider network and supporting local entities in scaling locations to take ownership of the innovation.



Managing and resourcing scaling: innovators emphasised the limitations of planning their scaling process – their journeys were rocky and unpredictable. All had access to and an audience with decision-makers, either for resources or for potential uptake of the innovation. Access to financial resources was critical to support scaling in each case, and interviewees have developed systems focused on sourcing funds. Yet, the quality and terms of funding are important: unpredictable and short-term funding makes it hard to retain key staff, and flexibility is crucial given the limitations to planning.

While determination and persistence were key factors in each scaling journey, we can view them as necessary, but not sufficient. All innovators in these five case studies were from and based in the global north; they had access to decision-makers and funders and were able to get an audience in international organisations to showcase their ideas. The same opportunities are clearly not available to everyone with a potentially transformative idea. The humanitarian innovation ecosystem reflects the humanitarian system itself: it is highly unequal, with power and funding still concentrated in the global north, and innovators from the global south face greater barriers to scaling an innovation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The report makes the following recommendations, discussed in more detail in the final section:

To funders:



Provide more tailored support to local innovators,¹ including:

Ear-marking funding that only targets innovations that have been developed and are run by individuals or organisations in the global south.

Partnering with local networks to create awareness about such funding opportunities.

Providing support to local innovators that apply for funding by providing feedback on how they can strengthen their applications.



Provide flexible and longer-term funding: donors should provide funding with the aim of promoting learning that can inform the innovation which can eventually lead to scale.



Facilitate mentoring and networking opportunities: donors should leverage their own expertise and connections to facilitate mentorship and networking opportunities for innovators, helping them to access tailored advice, build connections, and showcase their successes to relevant stakeholders.



Promote experience sharing among innovators: the funding sector should foster a culture that encourages innovators to share their successes, challenges, and failures.



Support sustainability of innovations: donors can support innovators by connecting them to actors in other arenas such as the private sector.

To innovators:



Invest in evidence: innovators often put more emphasis on implementation and rely on anecdotal evidence to highlight the impact of their innovation. When innovators do provide evidence, it is usually donor driven, mainly through end line evaluations. Innovators should develop mechanisms from the ideation phase that generate evidence on impact, successes, failures, and learnings, to inform the innovation and promote uptake.



Engage in experience sharing among innovators: the humanitarian system is competitive and so innovators are not forthcoming with information particularly on their failures. Innovators should create platforms that share information and learning on their scaling journeys.



Develop business models for sustainability: all the innovators we spoke to are highly dependent on grant funding which is fraught with challenges. Innovators need to start looking elsewhere for more sustainable funding sources. One source could be the private sector; however, innovators need to build a commercial business case that goes beyond corporate social responsibility, and to prove to the private sector that profit can be generated from their partnership. Alternatively, innovators could trial various business models such as cross subsidisation, pay-per-use and consumer subscription² in an effort to identify a model(s) that can provide sustainability especially during periods without grant funding.

¹ Our definition of a local innovator is someone from the disaster affected area with lived experience.

² More information on business models for innovations can be found in, Gray, Ian, Catherine Komuhangi, Dan McClure, and Lydia Tanner. n.d. “Business Models for Innovators Working in Crisis Response and Resilience Building,” 68.