CREATING
HOPE
IN CONFLICT:
A HUMANITARIAN
GRAND CHALLENGE

POLITICAL AND SOCIAL BARRIERS TO SCALING HUMANITARIAN INNOVATION

OVERVIEW

Within the humanitarian innovation landscape, innovators often experience a myriad of barriers or challenges when embarking upon their journey to scale. Although existing literature highlights the challenges and barriers to scale in humanitarian innovation, social and political barriers in the sector - such as gender, racial inequity, and imbalances in power – add another layer of complexity to already defined barriers in innovation, and yet, have received less attention in the literature.

Acknowledging the gap of certain barriers in humanitarian innovation research, Creating Hope in Conflict: A Humanitarian Grand Challenge (HGC) conducted semi-structured interviews with four HGC-funded humanitarian innovators and generated a series of innovator profiles to outline the social and political factors that complicate scaling journeys in conflict-affected contexts.

This innovator profile showcases Humanity Data Systems' innovation, HOPE and HELP, and provides a summary of identified social and political barriers Humanity Data Systems have been facing along their journey to scale. These barriers have included funding access challenges for woman-led and locally led innovations, racial inequities within humanitarian decision-making spaces, challenges related to establishing networks of trust within conflict contexts and political dynamics that can complicate humanitarian access.

This innovator profile offers preliminary learning points for the broader humanitarian ecosystem of funders, humanitarian actors and innovators, to spark action on tackling some of the identified complex barriers in the humanitarian system.

INTRODUCTION

Barriers within the humanitarian innovation landscape have been researched from an operational and systemic standpoint. These barriers have included problems such as there being too few innovations that are designed to scale from the outset and there remains inadequate funding geared to fund scaling efforts in the sector.[1] Social and political barriers - such as gender, racial inequity and imbalances in power in the sector - have added another dimension of complexity and set of challenges to already defined barriers in innovation, and yet, have received less attention in the literature. A shift in focus towards better understanding social and political barriers unique to conflict contexts will help Creating Hope in Conflict: A Humanitarian Grand Challenge and the wider humanitarian community to better understand the diverse innovator experiences and be better equipped to respond to challenges and barriers that emerge in conflict affected and fragile settings.

Creating Hope in Conflict: A Humanitarian Grand Challenge identifies and supports ground-breaking solutions that draw from the experiences of affected communities and engages the private sector to enable innovators and local communities to respond more nimbly to complex emergencies and take steps to create better lives for themselves. The ultimate goal is increasing survival and/or improving the lives of populations affected by conflict. Our vision is to reduce gaps in humanitarian assistance while fostering systems change across the humanitarian sector.

Acknowledging the gap of certain barriers in humanitarian innovation research, *Creating Hope in Conflict: A Humanitarian Grand Challenge* analyzed social and political barriers to scaling humanitarian innovation. Findings will help us identify barriers that have received limited attention so we can better support current and future innovators in their journeys to scale. This analysis also will be used to spark broader discussions on complex barriers within the humanitarian system (including which to tackle, when and how), and this will require the engagement of multiple stakeholders. Through this analysis, we intend also to contribute to learnings and to mobilize collective action within the humanitarian ecosystem.

To inform our lesson learning exercise, we conducted the research through a desk-based document review of external reports, internal innovator progress reports, and semi-structured interviews with innovators. The data generated from the interviews and desk research will inform a series of innovator profiles to examine trends across the portfolio and identify a set of key learnings and recommendations to be shared with the broader humanitarian sector.

We also will invite research participants and the broader innovator cohort to take part in group consultations to unpack the emergent learnings of featured innovators, discuss the results, and collaboratively develop and/or validate key recommendations.

This innovator profile provides a brief overview of one of the innovators that we support, Humanity Data Systems, and a summary of the social and political barriers to scale they identified.

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[1] See Elrha. 2018. "Too Tough to Scale? Challenges to Scaling Innovation in The Humanitarian Sector". London: Elrha. https://www.elrha.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Elrha-TTTS-A4-FINAL.pdf. and McClure, Dan, Lesley Bourns, and Alice Obrecht. 2018. "Humanitarian Innovation: Untangling the Many Paths to Scale". London: GAHI. https://www.elrha.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Humanitarian-Innovation-Untangling-the-Many-Paths-to-Scale-GAHI.pdf.

METHODOLOGY

This analysis involves a combination of desk-based review and semi-structured interviews with innovators funded by *Creating Hope in Conflict: A Humanitarian Grand Challenge,* to seek to understand the social and political factors that have the potential to inhibit pathways to scaling humanitarian innovations. The data generated from the interviews and desk review will inform a series of innovator profiles, which will, at a later stage, be compiled into a larger piece of innovator profile analysis to examine trends across the portfolio and identify a set of recommendations and learnings to be shared with the broader humanitarian sector.

The project leads of selected innovations will, on a voluntary basis, take part in a semi-structured interview, and the data collected will be validated and supplemented by data collected through innovator progress reports submitted to the Humanitarian Grand Challenge, as well as a review of publicly accessible and thematically relevant articles and reports. When possible, semi-structured interviews will be recorded, and innovators have the option to be anonymized.

The following key questions/themes will be explored with selected innovators:
1. What are some of the social and political barriers innovators have faced when attempting to scale humanitarian innovations?
   a. Are any of these barriers particularly prominent or unique to specific countries of implementation?
   b. Have you been able to resolve or overcome such challenges/barriers? How?
2. Do innovators anticipate any future barriers/challenges that may impact their ability to scale humanitarian innovations?
3. Is there potential for Humanitarian Grand Challenge to support innovators to overcome such barriers?
4. Is there potential for the broader humanitarian system to help eliminate or remedy any of the identified barriers?
5. What are some lessons from the broader humanitarian and development sectors that we can look towards to effectively support humanitarian innovators in their journeys to scale?
6. Have innovators identified any other aspects related to barriers to innovation in humanitarian contexts and/or ways to address such barriers?

INNOVATOR PROFILE SELECTION

Innovator profiles were identified and selected based on the following criteria:

- Innovator teams that are either locally owned[2] or led,[3] and/or
- Innovator teams that are woman-led.[4]
- Innovator teams that are implementing in one of the Humanitarian Grand Challenge's top five conflict-affected countries of implementation. The top five countries of implementation within the portfolio include: Democratic Republic of the Congo, Syria, South Sudan, Yemen, and Uganda.

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[2] A locally owned innovation is defined as an innovator team whose leadership and/or governance teams are comprised of a majority of individuals who self-identify as being part of a conflict-affected community.

[3] A locally led innovation is defined as an innovator team whose project lead self-identifies as being part of a conflict-affected community,

[4] A woman-led innovator team is defined as an innovator team whose project lead self-identifies as a woman.

- Representation from both Transition to Scale (TTS) and Seed level grantees.
- Innovator teams that are willing to participate in the interview.

Creating Hope in Conflict: A Humanitarian Grand Challenge is committed to supporting and advancing woman-led solutions, and so when selecting innovator profiles to examine, we focused on woman-led innovator teams and the scaling challenges and barriers they identified. It is estimated that over 40% of the half a million humanitarian workers who provide frontline care during emergencies, conflicts, and disasters, are women. Women are at the forefront of improving health, access to safe water, providing life-saving information and more for conflict-affected populations through service delivery, education and capacity strengthening, advocacy and research. Women are also disproportionately affected by conflict and humanitarian emergencies, but their voices are largely missing from efforts to treat the problems they face. To reach the hardest-to-reach people affected by conflict, we must collectively alleviate barriers to ensure women are at the forefront of that conversation and process. Women, especially women from affected communities, must be leaders in transforming and improving the humanitarian system.

A second area of focus that informed innovator profile selection included a focus on the scaling barriers of locally led and locally owned solutions. International aid agencies face challenges in delivering humanitarian aid in conflict-affected contexts, including denied access, damaged infrastructure, political interference, aid diversion, corruption, cultural challenges, poor coordination, and threats of violence. Local responders are often better placed to reach affected people in insecure settings, but they often lack the funding, resources, or the capacity to provide aid in hard-to-reach places. Innovator profiles aim to further examine locally led innovators' barriers and challenges across different conflict contexts, with a view to alleviate social and political barriers that have the potential to stunt scaling pathways and enable more locally led solutions to achieve scale and sustainability.

INNOVATOR PROFILE:

HUMANITY DATA SYSTEMS – HOPE and HELP

Humanity Data Systems (HDS) is a woman-led start-up dedicated to leveraging data analytics, machine learning and artificial intelligence to help humanitarian actors, especially local organizations, to respond better and more quickly to the needs of marginalized populations in conflict zones. To aid HDS towards this goal, Creating Hope in Conflict: A Humanitarian Grand Challenge (HGC) have supported two of their technology solutions: Humanitarian Operations Planning Environment (HOPE) and Humanitarian Enterprise Logistics and Provisioning (HELP).

ALNAP's 2010 survey notes that the most difficult challenge recognized by the humanitarian system is "*poorly coordinated response efforts/lack of effective leadership.*" [5] This is largely due to information flow impediments, which limit coordination and impede decision-making. Better use of local community data sources is necessary to strengthen humanitarian responses.

HOPE and HELP provides the ability to model and simulate conflict environments to understand how to improve the impact of humanitarian assistance. Real-time modeling and simulation allow for stakeholders to prepare for the ever-more complex humanitarian crises. It simplifies the process of collecting large-scale community feedback, acting as a shared, interoperable solution for stakeholders. Open-source tools, combining existing and evolving data sources, especially from local actors, with analysis of available capabilities can improve the impact of humanitarian responses. The target audiences include local organizations, resource planners, and distribution groups.

The vision is that HOPE and HELP operate from an online platform that collects feedback from communities to inform humanitarian action. There are only a handful of similar approaches in this space, and these are typically top-down initiatives led by large organizations. HDS provides, in contrast, a community-driven independent approach and so is a much-needed complement to traditional approaches of larger entities.

Leveraging private sector expertise and developing a path to sustainability through revenue generation are critical parts of HDS' scale up plans. Through the development of key partnerships, HDS initially planned to scale testing in Iraq, Niger, Syria and Afghanistan, with matched funding coming from paying clients in the technology industry. To date, HDS has engaged with strategic partners, including tech companies, humanitarian agencies and local implementers. Early in their scaling journey, HDS also recognized the importance of working in close collaboration with local responders to pilot the innovation, rather than through large-scale humanitarian agencies, and so they are currently developing HOPE and HELP in partnership with Yemen Relief and Reconstruction Foundation (YRRF), another innovator supported by Humanitarian Grand Challenge.

We spoke with Bonnie Chiu, Humanity Data Systems Co-founder and CEO, to understand the types of social and political scaling challenges and learnings that have emerged along HDS's scaling pathway.

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[5] Harvey, Paul, Abby Stoddard, Adele Harmer, and Glyn Taylor. 2010. "The State of The Humanitarian System - Assessing Performance and Progress. ALNAP Pilot Study". London: ALNAP. https://www.alnap.org/help-library/the-state-of-the-humanitarian-system-assessing-performance-and-progress-alnap-pilot.

KEY BARRIERS IDENTIFIED

FUNDING RESOURCES WITHIN THE TECHNOLOGY-BASED INNOVATION LANDSCAPE ARE OFTEN LIMITED AND INACCESSIBLE TO WOMEN.

According to Bonnie Chiu, there are many challenges related to access to investment capital. She believes the entrenched gendered dynamics of the tech industry are a significant hurdle for women-led tech start-up ventures. An article in Forbes states that *"it is a well documented fact that the tech industry has a serious gender imbalance."[6]*

Bonnie explains that, for women innovators, while philanthropic funding is more easily accessible than venture capital, venture capital funding is generally characterized by larger funding pots, which is critical for capital-intensive innovations, as is having an appropriate level of risk tolerance to invest in fragile and/or volatile humanitarian settings. Bonnie found that raising investment capital for tech-based products, especially those geared for the humanitarian sector, was primarily male-dominated because both domains of private investment and the humanitarian sector are typically led by men. In Bonnie's words, *"Raising investment is scary because it is often/always has been a male-dominated space. This is particularly true in humanitarian or conflict zones because high-risk environments typically attract male investors who are willing to take risks."* The knock-on effect of this also means that when women are largely absent from humanitarian response efforts, it creates a tendency to overlook the needs of women and girls in conflict affected communities.[7]

Crunchbase, a leading industry support platform for business innovation, finds that only 3% of start-up venture capital goes to women.[8] The male-dominated culture of private investment not only creates an unwelcoming and/or intimidating application process for women, but it can also create specific barriers to managing investment capital, which disproportionately affect women.[9] *"In addition to blatant discrimination and harassment, women struggle to overcome the <u>confidence gap</u>, a lack of support from their peers, and the challenge of building a career while raising a family." [10]* In this context, Bonnie believes expectations around performance targets and project delivery milestones set by investors in this space are often unreasonable, and therefore unachievable as many investors fail to account for personal responsibilities, such as childcare and work-life balance: *"I might want a family...if I raise half a million and have investors breathing down my neck and if I have a child...I'm scared of that prospect."*

Bonnie's account of gender inequities throughout the process of raising venture capital within the humanitarian system is not unique. Through engagement with our innovator support community, she also has been able to make connections with other women-led teams that have faced related challenges. Together, several of the innovators have sparked meaningful conversations about collective actions that

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[6] Rodriguez, Ania. 2015. "Gender Inequality is Hurting the Tech Industry -- What Can You Do About It?". Forbes. https://www.forbes.com/sites/yec/2015/09/08/gender-inequality-is-hurting-the-tech-industry-what-can-you-do-about-it/#156051213318.

[7] Ruparel, Sonya, Clare Bleasdale. 2017. "How can Humanitarian Organisations Encourage More Women in Surge?". ActionAid International. https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/action_aid_aw_v4_-_final.pdf

[8] Sheppard, Rachel. 2020. "Only 3% Of Business Investment Goes to Women, And That's a Problem for Everyone". Crunchbase. https://about.crunchbase.com/blog/business-investment-to-women/.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Rodriguez, Ania. 2015. "Gender Inequality is Hurting the Tech Industry -- What Can You Do About It?". Forbes. https://www.forbes.com/sites/yec/2015/09/08/gender-inequality-is-hurting-the-tech-industry-what-can-you-do-about-it/#156051213318.

would make the tech and humanitarian innovation funding spaces more accessible to women and provide ways to better amplify their voices within the sector. Bonnie believes in the value of creating networks of support and trust among women innovators; she would like to see Creating Hope in Conflict strengthen its support of women-led teams and catalyze elevating women innovators, their voices, and their achievements through the platform, increasing their ability to attract additional investors and influence the sector.

HUMANITARIAN DECISION-MAKING SPACES ARE PRIMARILY WHITE-DOMINATED, AND RACIAL INEQUITIES CREATE SPECIFIC CHALLENGES.

"In early February 2020, I went to Geneva for the Humanitarian Networks and Partnerships Week…I was so shocked because it was the whitest room I've seen in a very long time…It was 1,000 people and it was 95% white…I felt that I had to silence myself. I couldn't bring forth issues around white privilege, I couldn't confront people about race because I know the backlash that would follow." The situation Bonnie found herself in prompted her to consider who, in fact, is making decisions regarding the lives of people in the most fragile states: is it those most visible in decision-making spaces or those who are directly affected by conflict?

White supremacy and systemic racism in the humanitarian system are prevalent and deeply ingrained in the historical roots of humanitarian assistance and international development.[11] Such inequities also exist for those with other intersecting identities, such LGBTQI+ and persons with disabilities.[12] In recent years, several international organizations, including Women Deliver[13] and Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF),[14] have faced allegations of oppressive and racist practices.[15]

The overwhelming majority of senior leadership positions in international organizations are held by white men.[16] Even among international feminist organizations, "white women occupy the majority of leadership and decision-making roles,"[17] which can disempower racialized women striving to climb organizational

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[11] Anonymous. 2020. "The Aid Sector Must Do More to Tackle Its White Supremacy Problem". 2020. The Guardian. https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/jun/15/the-aid-sector-must-do-more-to-tackle-its-white-supremacy-problem. Slim, Hugo. 2020. "Is Racism Part Of Our Reluctance To Localise Humanitarian Action? - Humanitarian Practice Network". Humanitarian Practice Network. https://odihpn.org/blog/is-racism-part-of-our-reluctance-to-localise-humanitarian-action/.

[12] Blyth, Jen, Karen Alexander, and Lana Woolf. 2020. "Out of The Margins: An Intersectional Analysis of Disability and Diverse Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, Expression & Sex Characteristics in Humanitarian and Development Contexts". Canberra: Edge Effect. https://www.edgeeffect.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Out-of-the-Margins_Full-Report_June-2020.pdf.

[13] Lieberman, Amy. 2020. "Women Deliver Launches Investigation Following Staffers' Allegations Of Racism". https://www.devex.com/news/women-deliver-launches-investigation-following-staffers-allegations-of-racism-97509.

[14] Elks, Sonia. 2020. "Exclusive: Aid Groups Face Calls to Open Up on Racism as Survey Finds Data Holes". Reuters. https://www.reuters.com/article/us-global-racism-humanitarian-exclusive-idUSKCN24F0CB.

[15] Anonymous. 2020. "The Aid Sector Must Do More to Tackle Its White Supremacy Problem". The Guardian. https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/jun/15/the-aid-sector-must-do-more-to-tackle-its-white-supremacy-problem.

[16] Adelman, Lori. 2020. "I've Seen First-Hand the Toxic Racism in International Women's Rights Groups". The Guardian. https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/aug/17/ive-seen-first-hand-the-toxic-racism-in-international-womens-rights-groups.

[17] Bruce-Raeburn, Angela. 2020. "Opinion: International Development Has A Race Problem". Devex. https://www.devex.com/news/opinion-international-development-has-a-race-problem-94840.

leadership ladders. According to Bonnie Chiu, many racialized humanitarian innovators fear reprisal for critiquing these powerful institutions and structures or acknowledging and speaking out against systemic racism present in the humanitarian system since it could result in tangible consequences such as job losses and funding request rejections.

Additionally, the prevalence of racial inequities in the system often leads to the people least affected by humanitarian situations making decisions regarding the lives of people in the most fragile states. With respect to the broader humanitarian and development sector, Angela Bruce-Raeburn, Regional Advocacy Director for Africa at the Global Health Advocacy Incubator, argues that *"inherent in the very concept of aid is race and racism because only in this system can majority white societies with ample resources determine what poor black and brown people need, how much they need, set up the parameters for delivery of what they need, and of course create an elaborate mechanism for monitoring how well they have managed the donated funds to meet their needs."* [18]

According to Bonnie, a growing number of organizations and people in positions of power are actively discussing the concept of decolonization in humanitarian response - in other words, the process of disentangling humanitarian aid from its historical roots in colonial empires and dismantling processes, structures, systems, and powers that perpetuate unequal power dynamics.[19] Bonnie argues that while these conversations are happening more frequently, they are not leading to meaningful action: *"We must confront our own white privilege otherwise any changes will be purely cosmetic changes.*

LOCAL ORGANIZATIONS BASED IN CONFLICT-AFFECTED COUNTRIES EXPERIENCE CHALLENGES RELATED TO ACCESSING AND/OR ENGAGING WITH INNOVATION FUNDS AND INITIATIVES.

At the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016, the Grand Bargain set out an ambitious commitment to ensure that by 2020, 25% of humanitarian financing would be directed to local and national responders. The United Nations Secretary-General called for *"humanitarian action [to]...be as local as possible, as international as necessary*."[20] This call is recognized as having provided the impetus for recent debate within the humanitarian community on how to foster a more local humanitarian response.[21] Despite this call and extensive debate within humanitarian circles in the Global North, the humanitarian system continues to grapple with a multitude of challenges, inactions, and barriers to essential reforms that should be addressed in order to fully realize localization commitments.[22]

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[18] Currion, Paul. 2020. "Decolonising Aid, Again". The New Humanitarian. https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/opinion/2020/07/13/decolonisation-aid-humanitarian-development-racism-black-lives-matter.
[19] Barbelet, Veronique. 2018. "As Local as Possible, As International as Necessary: Understanding Capacity and Complementarity in Humanitarian Action". London: Overseas Development Institute. https://cdn.odi.org/media/documents/As_local_as_possible_as_international_as_necessary_understanding_capacity_and_comp.pdf.
[20] Barbelet, Veronique. 2018. "As Local as Possible, As International as Necessary: Understanding Capacity and Complementarity in Humanitarian Action". London: Overseas Development Institute. https://cdn.odi.org/media/documents/As_local_as_possible_as_international_as_necessary_understanding_capacity_and_comp.pdf.
[21] Ibid.
[22] Development Initiatives. 2020. "Global Humanitarian Assistance Report 2020". London: Development Initiatives. https://devinit.org/resources/global-humanitarian-assistance-report-2020/.

In 2019, only 2.1% of total humanitarian funding was provided to local and national entities,[23] which makes it no surprise that local organizations often struggle with limited capacities and resources. The overarching funding disparity has likely fostered an environment that makes it very challenging for local organizations to directly access funding, which has knock-on effects on their capacity to engage with new and innovative ideas and deliver solutions. Bonnie feels that the systemic issue of disproportionate resource allocations between local and international actors was one of the factors that challenged her ability to maintain the engagement of local organizations based in conflict-affected contexts. However, she also recognized that the topic of localization of humanitarian response was a broad and multifaceted debate that warranted further inquiry and debate.

In Bonnie's case of an innovator aiming to achieve a proof of concept, access barriers created early challenges related to securing viable local partnerships to pilot her team's innovation. She noted that there was a reluctance from local partners, likely stemming - in part - from limited capacity to engage, to collaborate in the absence of evidence that the innovation actually worked. Bonnie reflected that local organizations are often grappling with competing priorities amidst highly volatile contexts, limited financial resources and therefore, limited capacity to engage or experiment with new, unproven initiatives.

Considering this challenge, Bonnie's team decided to pivot their approach by focusing resources on building and piloting a more responsive and adaptive tool based on extensive consultations with one local responder, rather than developing a tech-based product with a limited track record in the expectation that partners would subscribe afterwards. Through this modified approach, Bonnie's team has learned about the importance of developing a rapport, trust, and a use-case with their first client, building and fostering that relationship to ensure success, and only afterwards focusing on scaling what has been developed to additional clients.

Despite not being able to connect to many local organizations, Bonnie and the team have focused on working with one local partner, Yemen Relief and Reconstruction Foundation (YRRF). We facilitated initial conversations between Bonnie and key YRRF staff, and according to Dr. Aisha Jumaan, the President of YRRF,

> "WE MUST CONFRONT OUR OWN WHITE PRIVILEGE, OTHERWISE ANY CHANGES WILL BE PURELY COSMETIC CHANGES."

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[23] Spencer, Alexandra. 2020. "Covid-19 And Local Humanitarian Action: Five Emerging Trends". Overseas Development Institute. https://odi.org/en/insights/covid-19-and-local-humanitarian-action-five-emerging-trends/.

"HGC connected us to a trusted organization within their network, and they [HDS] were able to offer a service that was useful to our work [in Yemen]." According to Bonnie, ensuring local partners trust your organization, see the value in your product or service and have the capacity to engage are critical factors.

REMOTE WORK ENVIRONMENTS CREATE CHALLENGES FOR INTERNATIONAL HUMANITARIAN INNOVATORS TRYING TO ENGAGE LOCAL ORGANIZATIONS BASED IN CONFLICT-AFFECTED COUNTRIES.

In highly insecure or volatile contexts, it is common for international actors to work remotely - either from safer regions in the affected country or safer countries altogether. For innovators based outside of the affected country, working remotely makes it harder to connect with or meaningfully engage local partners. This challenge likely has been amplified by the COVID-19 pandemic, since many international humanitarian innovators are unable to travel to implementation countries and must resort to remote working environments, which impedes the direct engagement with conflict-affected communities and local organizations.

Being embedded within a network of trust inside conflict zones proved to be critical, and this was not a challenge the HDS team foresaw at the onset of their implementation period. When Bonnie made attempts to reach out to contacts based in conflict-affected countries, she discovered there were many gatekeepers and brokers that appeared to bar direct access to local partners based in such countries. Rather than directly working with local responders, she was surprised to find herself being connected with relevant organizations in large, metropolitan cities such as Brussels and London. Bonnie suggests that the individuals were reluctant to put her in contact with responders on the ground out of concerns for the safety and security of their colleagues in the field. This illustrates, not only the need for more locally led innovations to be directly funded or championed, but also the importance of building relationships within the context innovators seek to operate within, and the time and resource investments needed to foster those relationships.

Despite such challenges, it is important also to recognize the potential opportunity that COVID-19 may bring in light of international travel restrictions. According to preliminary data collected by the Overseas Development Institute (ODI), COVID-19 may be *"an opportunity for the humanitarian system to move forward on commitments to enable local humanitarian action."*[24] As international organizations and staff have faced travel restrictions and been unable to physically access affected communities, local humanitarian responders have had to provide further leadership in local response efforts, which builds a case for increased *"funding, support and recognition for national humanitarian responders."*[25] Certainly, local humanitarian responders led response efforts on the ground well before the COVID-19 pandemic; however, increased travel restrictions have amplified the critical role of local responders in the wider humanitarian system and reinforced the need to bridge the funding gap they face.

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[24] Spencer, Alexandra. 2020. "Covid-19 And Local Humanitarian Action: Five Emerging Trends". Overseas Development Institute. https://odi.org/en/insights/covid-19-and-local-humanitarian-action-five-emerging-trends/.
[25] Ibid.

HUMANITARIAN ACCESS TO AND ASSOCIATED DATA REGARDING AFFECTED COMMUNITIES IS COMPLICATED BY LOCAL, REGIONAL, AND INTERNATIONAL POLITICAL DYNAMICS.

In some contexts, humanitarian actors are only authorized to work through "legitimate" actors, such as the government or local authorities, which can make it difficult to access certain communities living within contested or inaccessible regions of a conflict-affected country. Local organizations working with strong political and community access across frontlines and fragile geographies are rare but can prove to be very useful in reaching exceptionally marginalized and/or hard-to reach communities.

It was not until Bonnie leveraged a partnership with YRRF that she was able to connect with an organization that had access to a war-torn community in Yemen. According to Dr. Aisha Jumaan, the President of YRRF, "We decided to work with HDS because HGC introduced them to us, helping establish the first step in building trust between the two organizations. After several calls and discussions, it was also clear that they offered a service that meets one of YRRF's needs." Collaborating on a pilot study with YRRF allowed guided access to and engagement with local populations. Also, YRRF's presence and expertise across Yemen meant that the access was mindful of and sensitive to various political tensions, conflict drivers, and triggers in the community. This type of access enabled Bonnie to engage with communities that are difficult to reach due to geographical or security concerns and to access related data that she could use to inform YRRF's operations, and so help pilot her innovation. The advantages of this partnership approach allowed Bonnie to truly embody the spirit of neutrality in humanitarian response by being able to support conflict-affected communities, irrespective of regional control dynamics and/or political complexities that otherwise would bar access to certain populations.

Another early roadblock that surfaced as Bonnie's team began to define their scaling journey was when her team began to engage with large-scale international humanitarian aid organizations, such as UN agencies. During preliminary consultations, it became apparent that complex political dynamics would make it difficult to access primary, or even reliable, data that could be vital in scaling her humanitarian innovation across volatile regional contexts. When attempting to collaborate with large international aid organizations, Bonnie experienced a great deal of resistance to data sharing for various reasons. Notably, Bonnie found it difficult to partner with certain UN agencies due to the nature of their mandate, which required them to work in consultation with local governments, resulting in the reliance on data solely provided by local government sources. This creates particular challenges in complex, volatile conflict contexts because local government actors may be parties to the conflict or perceived as lacking neutrality, thus potentially compromising the reliability, transparency, and neutrality of the provided data. This complex and inherently political dynamic prevented Bonnie from working closely with UN agencies in contested regions, let alone accessing reliable data sources, which in turn, prevented her from pursuing potential scaling pathways through UN channels.

Woman works on the WARP water purification system set up by Yemen Relief and Reconstruction Foundation. Photo Credit: Yemen Relief and Reconstruction Foundation.

EMERGENT LEARNINGS

By identifying and exploring the social and political barriers Humanity Data Systems faced, we identified and hope to explore further several emergent opportunities or possible learnings for the humanitarian system that could contribute to addressing some of the social and political scaling challenges that are unique to conflict-affected contexts. These findings are emergent, and we also intend to conduct a more thorough analysis across a selection of innovator profiles to capture key lessons and trends across the portfolio.

THERE ARE OPPORTUNITIES FOR HUMANITARIAN INNOVATION FUNDS TO STRENGTHEN SUPPORT FOR WOMEN-LED INNOVATOR TEAMS.

Women experience unique and gendered barriers to funding opportunities and humanitarian innovation funders can help women-led innovator teams amplify their voices, profile achievements, as well as take part in the development of collective actions to ensure the humanitarian funding space becomes more accessible to women. These approaches may include tracking and championing women led innovators and being mindful of gender balance on selection committees. Innovator support services should also be designed in a manner that enables women-led innovators to actively and meaningfully engage and project milestones and targets should be as realistic and achievable as possible to ensure innovators are set up to succeed amidst challenging operating contexts.

Humanitarian Grand Challenge recognizes the importance of supporting women-led innovators to excel in the humanitarian innovation space, and so we consciously focus on developing a strong pipeline of women-led innovators and gender-focused partners. We place an emphasis on the incorporation of gender considerations throughout the investment process, as well as set annual targets to ensure we fund an appropriate number of women-led innovations. HGC also ensures that funded innovations are provided with support services such as access to a gender equity and inclusion advisor to enable innovators to strengthen their gender equity outcome potential. Areas we intend to improve include making efforts to source and fund more women-led innovations who are from conflict affected communities.

HUMANITARIAN ACTORS COULD STRENGTHEN OPPORTUNITIES FOR LOCAL, GLOBAL SOUTH, RACIALIZED, AND OTHER MARGINALIZED GROUPS OF INNOVATORS TO SHARE THEIR CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS EXPERIENCED IN THE HUMANITARIAN SYSTEM.

For example, humanitarian actors can facilitate collaborative dialogues, convene forums, and showcase local, racialized, and marginalized innovator achievements to amplify their voices, incorporate learnings and recommendations, and disseminate learnings to the broader humanitarian network, seeking to alleviate barriers related to systemic racism and power imbalances in the humanitarian system.

HGC is committed to driving the sector forward by encouraging meaningful changes to ensure that the views of people most affected by conflict are being amplified and dismantling inequitable power imbalances in the humanitarian system to create safer, more inclusive spaces where those most affected by conflict are at the forefront of decision-making. To this aim, we have hosted a series of innovator "townhalls" to invite innovators to share and unpack systemic challenges with the purpose of better understanding and addressing these unique barriers. We also intend to generate additional innovator profiles to explore and collectively respond to other social and political barriers to scale. We aim to provide

a safe space for innovators - especially innovators based in the Global South - to share their challenges and suggestions for improvements, as well as continue to advocate for and work towards alleviating systemic racism and power imbalances within the humanitarian system.

HUMANITARIAN ACTORS COULD FACILITATE DEEPER ENGAGEMENTS WITH LOCAL INNOVATORS IN CONFLICT-AFFECTED CONTEXTS TO IDENTIFY FURTHER BARRIERS TO DIRECTLY ACCESSING OR ENGAGING WITH HUMANITARIAN INNOVATION FUNDS AND INITIATIVES.

Humanitarian actors should ensure their innovation selection processes and support platforms encourage and are accessible to local organizations based in conflict-affected countries that are seeking funding. By facilitating deeper engagements with local innovators in conflict-affected contexts, barriers accessing or engaging with humanitarian innovation funds and initiatives will be identified.

Some lessons we have learned along the way include the importance of giving preference to local innovators to apply to funding calls, implementing regionally based and targeted communications strategies to promote funding opportunities, translating requests for proposals into languages relevant to our key geographies of interest, setting meaningful targets for funded locally led innovations, and ensuring conflict-affected community members are sufficiently represented on program advisory committees. Through real-time learning and iteration, we are committed to continuously improving our processes to enable meaningful inclusion of conflict affected community voices.

"RAISING INVESTMENT IS SCARY BECAUSE IT IS OFTEN/ ALWAYS HAS BEEN A MALE-DOMINATED SPACE.

THIS IS PARTICULARLY TRUE IN HUMANITARIAN OR CONFLICT ZONES BECAUSE HIGH-RISK ENVIRONMENTS TYPICALLY ATTRACT MALE INVESTORS WHO ARE WILLING TO TAKE RISKS."

HUMANITARIAN ACTORS COULD EXPLORE FURTHER OPPORTUNITIES TO DIRECTLY FUND LOCAL ORGANIZATIONS AND/OR LEVERAGE THE EXPERTISE OF LOCALLY BASED ORGANIZATIONS WITH UNIQUE POLITICAL ACCESS TO BETTER SUPPORT INNOVATORS FROM THE GLOBAL NORTH NAVIGATE COMPLEX LANDSCAPES AND RELATIONSHIPS IN CONFLICT ZONES.

Humanitarian access in conflict-affected settings is inherently complex and deeply political, making access particularly challenging for innovators based in the Global North. Humanitarian actors can explore opportunities to broker and/or strengthen partnerships across networks and foster meaningful working relationships between affected communities and innovators based in both the Global North and Global South. This may both enable access to improved data regarding inaccessible communities and bridge access challenges to contested or highly volatile regions to reach exceptionally marginalized communities.

Creating Hope in Conflict: A Humanitarian Grand Challenge is committed to making the humanitarian system more inclusive and ensuring innovation funds are accessible to those who need it most. We recognize we are one of many stakeholders who can contribute towards this aim, and we commit to reviewing our processes and policies and developing an action plan to respond to the challenges raised through this research.

"HUMANITARIAN ACTION SHOULD BE AS LOCAL AS POSSIBLE, AS INTERNATIONAL AS NECESSARY."

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