



UNIVERSITY OF  
OXFORD

REFUGEE  
STUDIES  
CENTRE

RSC Research in Brief 1, October 2015

# Bottom-up Humanitarian Innovation



## Key points:

- Bottom-up innovation is creative problem-solving led by crisis-affected communities.
- International agencies should strive to complement rather than undermine local initiatives.
- Bottom-up innovation can lead to the provision of public goods and services.
- Many innovations are driven by the need to earn a living.
- Displacement can be a stimulus for innovation.
- Lack of funding for bottom-up innovation is a constraint.

## Recommendations:

- Recognise the capacity of crisis-affected communities to engage in innovation.
- Understand the specific opportunities and constraints to bottom-up innovation in each context.
- Support an enabling environment for innovation by crisis-affected communities.
- Use participatory approaches to facilitate bottom-up innovation.
- Build a humanitarian funding mechanism to support bottom-up innovation.

**Author: Louise Bloom**, Research Officer, Humanitarian Innovation Project, Refugee Studies Centre

Innovation is playing an increasingly transformative role across the humanitarian system. International organisations, NGOs, governments, business, military, and community-based organisations are drawing upon the language and methods of innovation to address the challenges and opportunities of a changing world.

At the Humanitarian Innovation Project, we are developing the concept of bottom-up innovation, in order to introduce an alternative way of thinking about the role of innovation in the humanitarian sector. Rather than only considering how innovation can help international aid agencies to be more adaptable and effective, a focus on bottom-up innovation aims to enable aid agencies to support the creativity and skills of affected populations. Bottom-up innovation can be defined as the way in which crisis-affected communities themselves engage in creative problem-solving, finding solutions to their own challenges.

This brief provides selected findings from our research in Uganda, Kenya, South Africa, Jordan, and the United States.

## Humanitarian innovation

With nearly 150 million people affected by conflict and natural disasters,<sup>1</sup> and more people forcibly displaced than at any time since the Second World War,<sup>2</sup> international humanitarianism is being pushed to its limits. Existing systems and mechanisms are no longer fit for purpose.

In order to try to address these new global demands, the debate on humanitarian innovation has grown in recent years. Early in these discussions, the term innovation was frequently used to label new products or projects that humanitarian organisations were creating. Innovation was seen simply as something new to the sector.

The definition of innovation has since evolved to include processes of

problem-solving, partnerships, and the scaling up of new ideas. One of the most simple definitions put forward by the UN Deputy High Commissioner for Refugees in 2014 was "Innovation can be thought of as dynamic problem-solving among friends."<sup>3</sup> An ALNAP study in 2009 drew out some key existing definitions of innovation from the private sector.<sup>4</sup> For example, innovation is not just about a new technology or product. Rather there are 4 P's of innovation: product innovation (changing items or services), process innovation (changing processes by which those products are created or delivered), positioning innovation (changing the context or way that you communicate), and paradigm innovation (changes in the underlying models of an organisation).

Also adapted from the literature in business management studies, at the Humanitarian Innovation Project we see innovation as a process that an individual or organisation carries out. The process may not be linear, but includes four stages: problem definition, finding a solution, testing and iterating that solution, and then scaling it up (see Figure 1). This process and how it is managed are dependent on the surrounding ecosystem of the individual or organisation, such as the political or socio-economic factors that may act as barriers or opportunities along the way.

Much of the humanitarian innovation debate so far has focused on improving organisational responses in humanitarian crises. The theme has been recognised at a global policy level, through events such as the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC),<sup>5</sup> and the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit.<sup>6</sup> There is, however, a growing recognition of the potential for bottom-up humanitarian innovation. A number of organisations such as UNICEF (the United Nations Children’s Fund) and UNHCR (the United Nations Refugee Agency) are gradually including innovation by affected communities within their innovation work;<sup>7</sup> and innovative funding initiatives such as the Humanitarian Innovation Fund are considering how better to disburse funding to communities themselves.

Although a critical topic of discussion, the role of innovation by crisis-affected communities themselves remains a neglected subject in the humanitarian uptake of innovation. Our research aims to bring empirical evidence to demonstrate how innovation takes place at this grassroots level. We ask questions such as: What does bottom-up innovation look like? What enables and constrains it? How can the voices of affected communities be adequately involved or represented?

**Themes and human stories of bottom-up innovation**

We have collected qualitative case studies of bottom-up innovation among refugee communities living in Uganda, Kenya, South Africa, Jordan and the United States. From this research we have seen some broad trends in the way bottom-up innovation plays a role in humanitarian action. Each theme below is illustrated with case studies from our research.

**The way in which the international community engages with innovation can be problematic**

The innovation process that has occurred to get new products or projects to refugees has often made generalised assumptions about what the problems really are, without detailed understanding of the pre-existing capacities within a community or without adapting design to context. Further, humanitarian agencies often have a limited presence in urban contexts, which frequently leaves affected communities to fill gaps in protection and assistance. More work is therefore needed to better understand how international agencies influence the innovation capacities of affected communities, and how they can complement rather than undermine local initiatives. One Syrian entrepreneur told us that he wished to tell the international community that “we want to be respected and not looked at from high.”

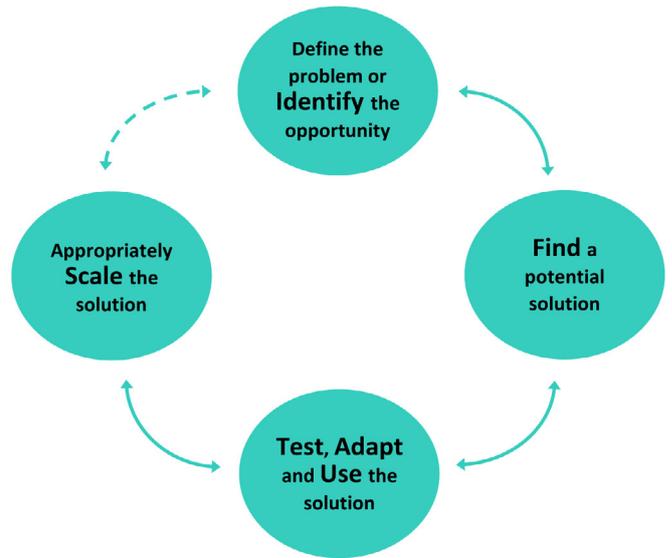


Figure 1. Process stages of innovation

**Displacement can be a stimulus for innovation**

In Za’atari refugee camp, Jordan, where nearly 83,000 Syrians reside, the mobility of materials and creativity around shelter illustrate community-led innovation based on social preferences. ‘Caravans’ donated to Syrian families were originally placed on a plot of land in the camp. However, they did not stay in one place for long. Due to a desire to live close to family or friends, groups of Syrian welders took fence posts from the camp walls to use as large axles and attached wheels to them, creating a carting device to push the caravans around the camp. These ‘removal men’ had creatively responded to a demand to recreate, as best as possible, the social lives of the displaced Syrians in the camp.

One humanitarian worker told us that in many ways “organisations are trying to keep up with the refugees”.

Another international aid worker commented: “People will always find creative ways to use the resources available to them, to beat the system and to change the system to address their own priorities. It might be against our assumptions, but we have to embrace it, and acknowledge it.”

In many homes there was a clear sense of the way in which material innovations contributed to attempts to reconstruct social and physical norms from Syria. One refugee explained: “People bring with them traditions...and try to keep their traditions here in the camp. We consider the caravans as houses and make many developments to them.”

**Bottom-up innovation can lead to the provision of public goods and services**

In most of our research sites, refugees can be found providing public services, filling gaps left by the government, international humanitarian community or local markets. Two examples illustrate this.

In Johannesburg, South Africa, William is a Zimbabwean and a founder and president of The Albert Street School, initiated

for and by refugees in the inner city. Now obtaining 100% pass rates in the Cambridge International Examinations, the school is one of the highest achieving in the area, despite minimal resources. The school is reliant on donations and the small amount it receives from fees. It has even managed to open a small library for its nearly 400 students.

William's dedication to the school and to education was ignited when he himself was being housed as a refugee at the Methodist church in Johannesburg in 2007. It was his job to register new arrivals and he was shocked by the number of children arriving. By July 2008, William and several others started to use a church building to bring the children together each day for informal lessons. Gradually the school has grown. It now engages with the Department of Education and enrolls all students to sit secondary examinations. Several of the students have gone on to continue their studies at university.

In Kenya, a Burundian refugee and local mechanic in Kakuma refugee camp has created a large generator (with cooling system) to provide electricity to surrounding refugee homes. This is another example of innovation filling vital gaps in the local market. The mechanic is also in many ways a catalyst of other businesses in the camp, as he repairs refrigerators, fans, and creates mechanical solutions to everyday challenges.

### Bottom-up innovation for income generation

Many innovations are driven by the need to earn a living. Different people go about this in different ways. The most striking examples of creativity and innovation are those where people are motivated to use their existing skills, open to learning new things, and also take risks.

A young Zimbabwean told us that starting his film-making business was a big risk:

*"Lots of people don't think they can do it, but success is not being afraid of what you can achieve. When you are not sure of the journey you are taking, it can prevent you from starting out. I took the risk because it is what I love, and I wanted to make a success of it. There was more risk here as a Zimbabwean, for example when rent is difficult to pay - the landlord won't take any excuses. You don't have people to shield you, but this pushes me to work extra hard. It is all about adapting to survive."*

In Uganda, refugees living in rural refugee settlements have made the most of the material resources they have, and taught themselves new skills to earn an income through their innovations.<sup>8</sup> Abdi is a Somali businessman who runs a computer-games shop in Nakivale refugee settlement. He has collected second-hand television monitors and games consoles to create a popular entertainment parlour. Abdi is responding creatively to a market demand for entertainment and has learnt to maintain the equipment to make it last as long as possible. He told us that *"instead of waiting around for donors, I wanted to make a living."*

### Bottom-up innovation supports the social well-being of others

We have found that bottom-up innovation is more commonly supported by opportunities in the local market or by other refugees, than by the international community.



Photo: Syrian 'removal men' moving a caravan, Za'atari refugee camp.  
Credit: N. Weaver.

For example, one inspiring Zimbabwean refugee, named Godfrey, is an activist for migrants' rights in Johannesburg. He is incredibly dedicated to creating networks of people, giving them advice and encouragement to forge ahead with their own creative solutions, such as starting schools for refugee children, or carrying out fundraising dinners to attract funders from the businesses in the city.

YARID, a refugee-led youth organisation based in Kampala that we have come to know well, is another example. YARID was inspired by the fact that young refugees in Kampala did not have jobs, so they began holding weekly football matches to bring people together. From there they learnt about the challenges people face in finding work in the city. Language is a key problem. They now run English classes, social media training, business training, and a women's centre, among other projects – all run by refugee volunteers. We found testimonies to what YARID is achieving. We met one innovator who had been able to start his own photo shop only because he had learnt English and received encouragement from YARID. We were also told that when new refugees come to this part of the city, the organisation is their first port of call to help them navigate the city and access the networks and support that YARID offers.

### Funding for bottom-up innovation is a constraint

Almost all of the innovators we have interviewed mentioned their struggle to find funding to establish businesses, or start new social initiatives. Many refugees around the world are excluded from obtaining formal bank accounts and loans. In the case of Jordan, Syrian refugees explained how any savings they had were now gone nearly five years into the crisis, despite support from humanitarian agencies.

International funds, such as the Humanitarian Innovation Fund, struggle to allocate funding to grassroots initiatives that are less visible at the international level of the humanitarian system. One initiative trying to speak to this issue is the Amplify project, funded by DFID in partnership with a design company, IDEO. DFID recognised that it is hard for small and community-based organisations to access their funding. They are therefore using an approach whereby they go to

meet these organisations to build personal relationships and support the work they are doing. A competition is opened-up around a specific theme, such as ‘education for refugees’, and the community-based organisations are invited to submit their project ideas. The winners then get funding to support their project, and IDEO help them to develop the project further using their design expertise.

## Recommendations

From our most recent research on Refugee Innovation,<sup>9</sup> we draw five key recommendations for taking bottom-up innovation forward in the humanitarian sector. These are:

**1) Recognise the capacity of crisis-affected communities to engage in innovation.** Recognising existing innovation, including social innovation, offers opportunities for more efficient and sustainable solutions within an increasingly resource-limited humanitarian system. At the moment, there remains a lack of recognition that crisis-affected communities have the skills, capacities, and talents to innovate, and that they do so every day in crisis situations. This recognition is critical in order to increase support for, and to inform, funding and programming by humanitarian organisations.

**2) Understand the specific opportunities and constraints to bottom-up innovation in each context.** Any humanitarian response, whether within the framework of humanitarian innovation or not, should include an assessment of existing constraints and opportunities for bottom-up innovation. These will vary from context to context. Understanding the ideas, skills and demands of a crisis-affected population requires humanitarian organisations to have a research and learning capacity that is adapted to recognising and understanding bottom-up innovation.

**3) Support an enabling environment for innovation by crisis-affected communities.** The capacity to innovate is shaped by the enabling environment. Access to a number of resources can contribute here, such as the internet, mobile phones, electricity, capital, natural resources, money transfer, and a regulatory framework that allows the right to work and to engage in economic activity. Governments and the international community can help to minimise barriers to bottom-up innovation by considering how they can best support the institutions that surround refugees and affected communities.

**4) Use participatory approaches to facilitate and support bottom-up innovation.** Recognising bottom-up innovation does not mean complete non-interference, but it should mean that interventions support community-based preferences and are based on participatory methods. Facilitation of bottom-up innovation may be provided from different levels – the international community, national services or governments, or local actors. However, there is also immense potential for refugees’ own institutions to be better recognised as a source of facilitation for within-community innovation. Facilitation by these institutions can take a range of forms such as education, skills transfer, and mentorship, or community-based innovation spaces.



Photo: YARID Director and a member at their hub in Kampala. Credit: D. Nibbs

**5) Build a humanitarian funding mechanism to support bottom-up innovation.** There is a lack of humanitarian funding available to support initiatives by affected communities. Funding that is channelled to ‘local’ partners tends to go through NGOs that may have little representative relationship to crisis-affected communities. Funding requirements and accounting and auditing standards need to be adjusted to enable affected communities to access seed funding.

Our research will continue to explore bottom-up innovation in humanitarian practice, and contribute an empirical repository of data and evidence on the topic. We hope that refugees and crisis-affected communities will in turn be recognised as a formidable source of innovation to transform the ideas and practices of humanitarian response.

For further information on the Humanitarian Innovation Project, visit the project website: [www.oxhip.org](http://www.oxhip.org)

### Further reading

- Betts, A. and Bloom, L. (2014) Humanitarian Innovation: The State of the Art, Occasional Policy Series, UN OCHA.
- Bloom, L. (2014) UNHCR Ideas: Open innovation inspiring collaboration and new ideas within the UN, Humanitarian Innovation Project, RSC.
- Betts, A. and Bloom, L. (2013) The two worlds of humanitarian innovation, RSC Working Paper No. 94.

### Endnotes

- 1 UN OCHA. 2014. World Humanitarian Data Trends 2014, United Nations.
- 2 UNHCR Statistics 2015.
- 3 Aleinikoff, A. (2014) Humanitarian Innovation Conference 2014, Opening address, University of Oxford.
- 4 Ramalingam, B., Scriven, K., and Foley, C. (2009) ‘Innovations in international humanitarian action’. In ALNAP 8th Review of Humanitarian Action.
- 5 Innovation featured in core discussions in the 2013 ECOSOC Humanitarian Affairs Segment.
- 6 ‘Transformation through innovation’ is one of four thematic areas for the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016.
- 7 See Bloom, L. and Faulkner, R. (2015) Innovation Spaces: Transforming humanitarian practice in the United Nations, RSC Working Paper No. 107.
- 8 Betts, A. et al. (2014) Refugee Economies: Rethinking Popular Assumptions, Humanitarian Innovation Project, RSC.
- 9 Betts, A., Bloom, L., and Weaver, N. (2015) Refugee Innovation: Humanitarian Innovation that Starts with Communities, Humanitarian Innovation Project, RSC.

Cover photo: Birds and pets, Za’atari refugee camp. Credit: L. Bloom