



Adopting humanitarian innovation: Key lessons from an Adoption Challenge

Executive Summary



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Acknowledgements

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This report analyses key learnings from Elrha's Humanitarian Innovation Fund (HIF) Adoption Challenge, which supported six humanitarian organisations in adopting and scaling innovations across water, sanitation, hygiene, menstrual health, nutrition and mental health sectors.

Executive Summary

The humanitarian sector faces increasingly complex challenges amid growing needs and resource constraints, making innovation vital for improving outcomes for those affected by crises. However, many promising innovations struggle to progress beyond the pilot stage to achieve broader adoption and impact. This report analyses key learnings from a new type of funding call that was launched by Elrha's Humanitarian Innovation Fund (HIF), which supported six humanitarian organisations to adopt a previously HIF-funded innovation across water, sanitation, hygiene, menstrual health, nutrition and mental health.

Adoption Challenges

A significant portion of HIF-funded innovations are early-stage pilots, and progressing beyond this initial stage to achieve broader adoption and impact is challenging. To address this bottleneck, HIF designed and launched two Adoption Challenges from 2023 to 2024 to support humanitarian actors in testing the adoption of a previously HIF-funded and well-evidenced innovation within their current operations. These adopted innovations spanned water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH), or were specifically aimed to be tested within a high-severity context. The purpose was to build the evidence base and assess the effectiveness, best practices and challenges of adopting a new innovation within a new humanitarian setting.

Through document reviews, interviews and workshops with the six HIF grantees implementing projects in multiple countries – including Niger, Somalia, Bangladesh, Haiti and Yemen – this evaluation provided key insights to inform future funding calls on the adoption of innovation.

Key findings

Many projects were still in the early stages of adoption. Rather than purely focusing on adoption, organisations found themselves needing to conduct additional testing, make substantial design modifications and build foundational systems for their innovations. This suggests a need to more carefully assess innovation readiness before moving into adoption.

The evaluation found that successful adoption required alignment across multiple dimensions. Technical effectiveness alone was insufficient – innovations needed to demonstrate clear value propositions, cultural appropriateness and operational feasibility within complex humanitarian contexts. Organisations that achieved the best results successfully balanced these various requirements through strong local partnerships and sustained community engagement.

Security challenges emerged as a major factor affecting implementation across multiple projects. However, grantees demonstrated remarkable adaptability in response to these challenges. Innovation adoption in humanitarian contexts requires robust risk management strategies and the ability to rapidly adjust implementation approaches.

Language barriers and cultural considerations significantly impacted project timelines and effectiveness. Several grantees found that insufficient planning for translation needs and cultural

adaptation created unexpected challenges. Those who succeeded did so by working closely with locally embedded organisational partners who understood both the technical requirements and cultural context of their work.

Resource allocation emerged as another critical factor. Many projects found themselves overextending staff across multiple commitments, leading to implementation delays and operational stress. Organisations that dedicated specific staff to adopting an innovation within their operations generally achieved more consistent progress.

The evaluation also revealed gaps in monitoring and evaluation approaches. While grantees tracked basic implementation metrics, many struggled to measure innovation adoption outcomes effectively. This was particularly challenging given the lack of clear, standardised definitions for what constitutes successful adoption in humanitarian contexts.

Perhaps most importantly, the evaluation found that sustainable adoption required more than just technical implementation; it needed robust systems for ongoing support, maintenance and adaptation. Projects that invested in building these systems from the start, even at the cost of slower initial progress, showed more promising signs of long-term sustainability.

These findings highlight the complexity of innovation adoption in humanitarian settings and the need for comprehensive, well-resourced approaches that can accommodate the unique challenges of working in crisis contexts. They also emphasise the importance of viewing adoption not as a single step, but as a complex process requiring careful attention to multiple interconnected factors.

Recommendations

A core set of recommendations emerged from the evaluation to inform action from different humanitarian stakeholders wanting to test the adoption of an innovation within their existing operations.



For innovation funders:

Key recommendations include revamping grant structures to better support different innovation stages, explicitly funding organisations to adapt their innovations to a new context, and strengthening partnership management approaches. There is also added value in creating clearer innovation criteria and developing frameworks to better assess adoption success.



For humanitarian innovators:

Key recommendations include thorough planning and design work, explicitly considering the adaptation needs of specific innovations, and comprehensive stakeholder mapping. Building strong partnerships, especially with government entities, and maintaining cultural sensitivity are critical success factors.



For humanitarian adopters:

Key recommendations include the provision of detailed guidance on scaling an innovation, ethical frameworks, community engagement strategies, and managing practical challenges like logistics and security concerns. Special attention is given to ensuring sustainability through diverse funding streams and strong local partnerships.

Call to action

By implementing these recommendations and working together more effectively, stakeholders can help ensure that promising innovations achieve their full potential in improving humanitarian outcomes. The sector must move beyond viewing adoption as a simple handoff point and instead treat it as a critical phase requiring dedicated attention, resources and expertise.

The future of humanitarian innovation depends on our ability to learn from these experiences and build better systems for supporting the journey from initial idea to widespread impact. This report provides a roadmap for that journey, but it will take the combined efforts of funders, innovators and adopters to turn these insights into real-world change. The time to act is now – the growing scale and complexity of humanitarian needs demand nothing less than our full commitment to making innovation adoption work better for everyone involved.

With escalating humanitarian crises worldwide, it is imperative that we improve the innovation process to enable successful adoption at scale.

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