



A Quick Guide to Development and Humanitarian Innovation

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What is Innovation?

There are numerous interpretations of what constitutes innovation. The World Bank has perhaps the easiest one to apply to the development sector. 'Simply put, innovation is finding and applying new approaches to address existing problems or serve unmet needs.'

Why is innovation important?

The issues facing those living in poverty and vulnerable to disasters and conflict are becoming ever more complicated. The finances to address these issues are insufficient. These problems are sometimes referred to as 'Wicked Problems.' However, there are also large technological and scientific advances that have the potential to find solutions for some of these wicked problems. This means that there is a need for organisations working in the fields of development and humanitarian action to continually see if there are better solutions to the problems they are working with local communities to address.

Types of Innovation

There are different types of innovation. The main ones are:

- **Product innovation:** changes in the things (products/services) which an organisation offers
- **Process innovation:** changes in the ways in which products/services are created or delivered
- **Position innovation:** changes in the context in which the products/services are frames and communicated
- **Paradigm innovation:** changes in the underlying mental models which shape what the organisation does.
- **Business model innovation:** changes in the very nature of what the organisation is and does.

Aspects

There are also different aspects of innovation. These range from at one end, incremental small changes you might make to a process, to at the other end, the invention of a technology that 'disrupts' the way a whole industry functions. Both ends of this spectrum are aspects of innovation because they are driving change.

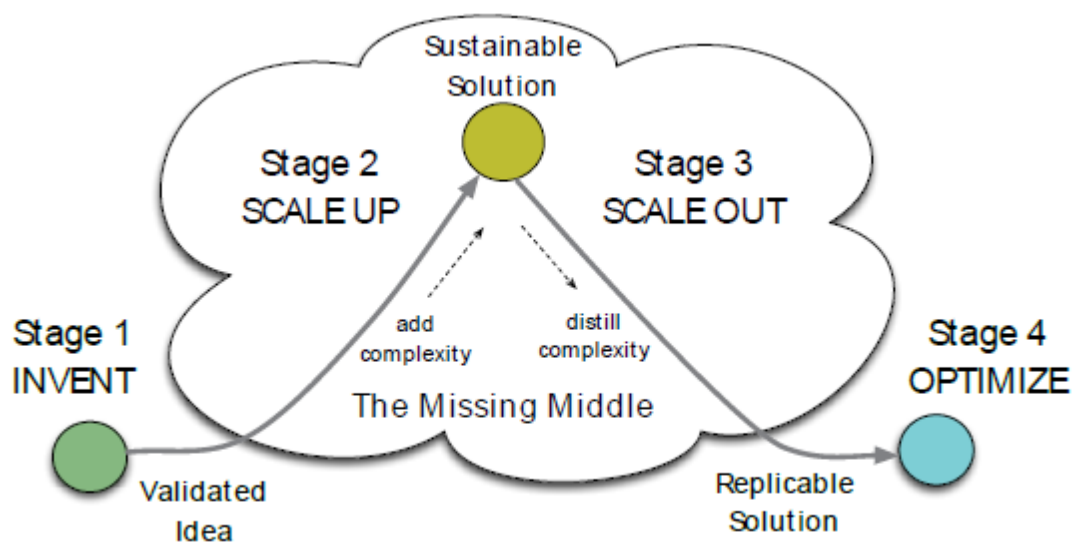
Stages

These aspects can often be part of the same journey for an innovation. McClure and Gray's '[Scaling: Innovation's Missing Middle](#)' model maps out this process in its attempt to highlight the scaling stage of innovation. This outlines 4 stages of an innovation process:

1. **Invent**, where ideas are being tested;
2. **Scale Up**, where an idea that has been piloted is developed into a sustainable solution that is expanded across a context or organisation.



3. **Scale Out** is how this innovation is spread and used sustainably across multiple contexts or organisations.
4. **Optimise** is where the innovation is stable, in wide use, and the changes that are now being applied to it are incremental.



How is Innovation Supported?

Innovation is supported through both financial and non-financial means.

Financially

There are a number of methodologies for supporting innovations financially in the aid sector such as:

1. Grants: A number of donors are now funding innovation through grants such as the Global Innovation Fund and the Humanitarian Innovation Fund.
2. Challenge Funds: These are big challenges, with often large funding. Examples of this are the Grand Challenges by USAID.
3. Open innovation Challenges: Using open (often online) tools to engage a wide group in solving a problem. An example of this is the DFID and open IDEO challenges.

Donors that strongly support innovation are; the Global Innovation Fund, USAID DIV, Australian DFAT-D InnovationXchange, Humanitarian Innovation Fund, Global Innovation Fund and the Rockefeller Foundation.

Non-Financial



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A number of the issues that NGOs and social entrepreneurs face are not just financial. These include, culture, know-how, tools, networks etc. In order to support innovators a number of organisations and networks are seeking to support innovation through other means. Examples of this are:

1. Incubators and innovation Labs – There are a number of types of incubators, but they are organisations and spaces that support individuals or small teams to develop their innovations in the early days.
2. Accelerators – These are similar to incubators but are designed to support innovations at later stages of development, particularly to support the scaling of innovations
3. Hackathons – These are particularly used for digital innovations and are when a group of software programmers are invited to work on a challenge in a short period of time.
4. Brokering services – this is where organisations or individuals connect innovation teams to potential partners, funders or users of an innovation.
5. Mentoring and training – This can often be bundled into incubators or accelerators, but even when it is on its own, it is invaluable to innovators, teams and organisations embarking on an innovation journey.

Some Key Principles

There has been the development of a number of principles and ethics to help guide innovation in the development and humanitarian space. The Stanford Social Innovation Review has the following short list:

Innovation is humanistic: solving big problems through human ingenuity, imagination and entrepreneurialism that can come from anywhere

Innovation is non-hierarchical: drawing ideas from many different sources and incubating small, agile teams to test and iterate on them with user feedback

Innovation is participatory: designing with (not for) real people.

Innovation is sustainable: building skills even if most individual endeavours will ultimately fail in their societal goals.



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About the author



Ian Gray has spent 15 years in the Humanitarian and Development Sectors, with the majority of that time in senior leadership positions. He has led Humanitarian, Policy, Innovation and Strategy groups. His consultancy supports clients in the private sector, government, UN, NGOs and the Red Cross Movement in the areas of Innovation, Strategy and Cross-Sector Partnerships.