

Midterm Evaluation *of the* UNDP Accelerator Lab Network

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Accelerator Lab Network

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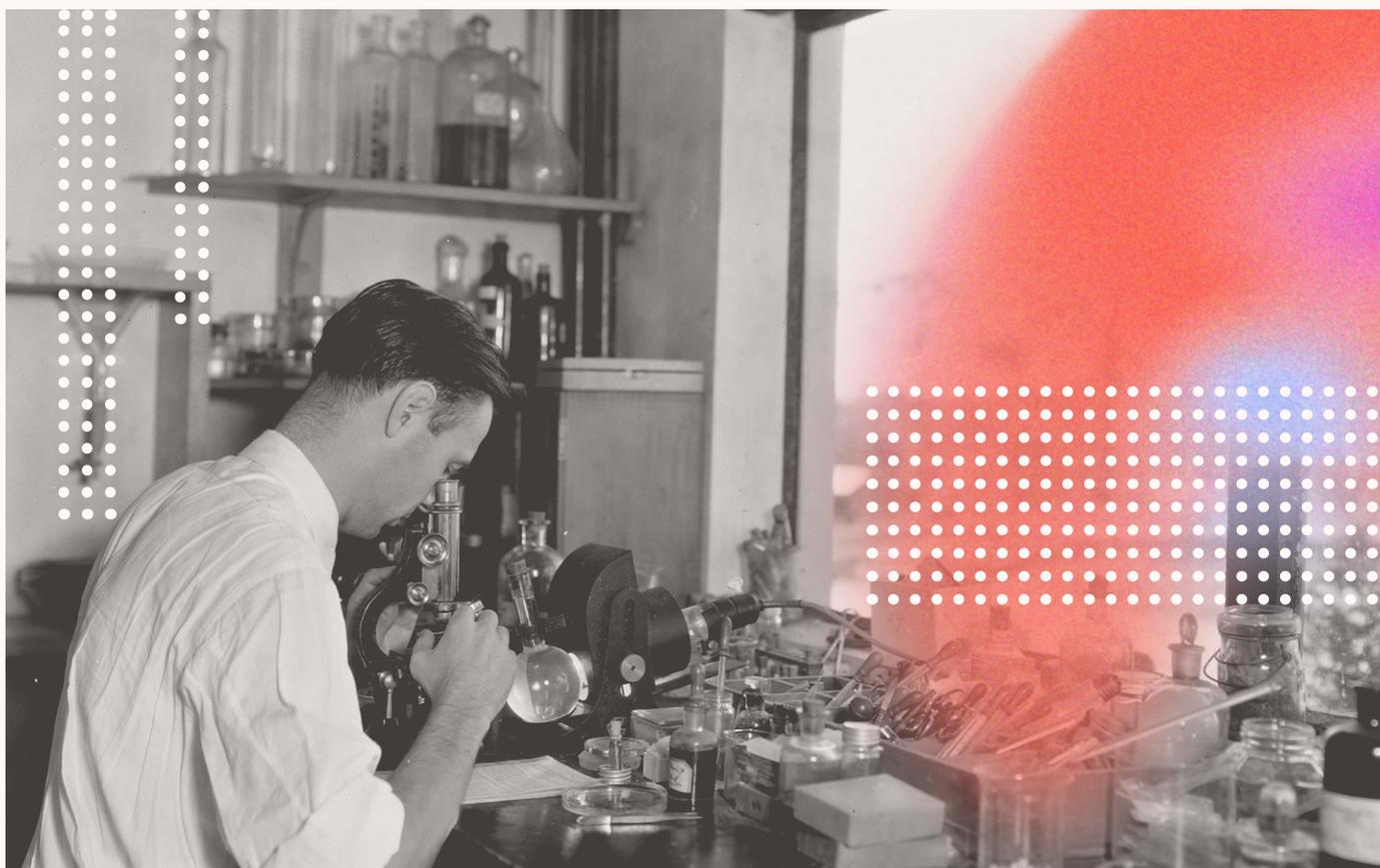
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01

Executive Summary



1.1 The scope of this evaluation

This midterm evaluation is an independent assessment designed to inform how the Accelerator Lab project can better support UNDP in “taking innovation from a boutique venture to a corporate reflex.”¹ It shares an overview of the project’s current outcomes as well as suggests improvements to its implementation. It will also provide reliable evidence of whether the approaches are having an impact, how and why.

To do this, interviews were conducted with members of the global team who run the project, as well as Accelerator Lab members across all Regional Bureaus. The evaluation is also based on conversations with donors, strategic leads at UNDP and Resident Representatives of Country Offices; all of whom are involved in the project. These conversations in combination with a thorough literature review and data analysis form the basis of this report.

1

UNDP. 2019, Multi-Country Project Document, internal. (2019)

1.2 Findings in brief

The Accelerator Lab Network is an ambitious experiment and is already a success. It was launched as a deliberate disruption to the usual way that UNDP operates, and to increase the credibility of UNDP as a partner of choice for 21st century sustainable development challenges. It is both a unique organizational intervention at a national level as well as one working at a global scale, learning across a network of development practitioners across the world.

Creating one successful Lab is difficult enough. It is extremely impressive that 91 labs in 115 countries (whether set up in 2019 or 2020) are actively contributing to innovation in UNDP and their host country. Many are even thriving. Most of these Labs are set in contexts with extreme social, ecological and economic challenges, and where governing institutions have difficulties meeting the demands of accelerated environmental and social change.

The objective of these Labs was to introduce new ways of working that can be part of enabling and embedding a shift in development practice and the organizational culture that supports it. Taking an innovative approach to capacity development, the Accelerator Lab Network shows signals of the potential value of development done differently. The Labs have shown how this new way of working is credible, which suggests changes of this nature are possible in organizations like the UN. In this sense, the Accelerator Lab Network is already a successful experiment. In particular, there is obvious scope and rationale to continue the initiative beyond the three years, given that the Accelerator Labs are a time-bound initiative to inject innovation into UNDP's organizational DNA.

It is worth exploring how to establish the Labs as a permanent R&D function within UNDP Country Offices around the world, to ensure continuous exploration and experimentation related to evolving sustainable development challenges. Components of UNDP's Accelerator Lab Network model show how a continuous renewal function could look and operate.



This can be illustrated through the practice of the Labs where there are significant shifts in:

- > **Approach:** Projects are becoming more user-oriented, iterative, learning-oriented and portfolio-driven, recognizing the complex and cross-cutting nature of development challenges, and building inroads for leading systems transformation efforts.
- > **Relationships:** There are entirely new ways for UNDP to connect with local communities and grassroots movements, sourcing solutions from the bottom up, collaborating with new and unusual partners and opening up new funding streams.
- > **Learning:** There is a rethinking and repurposing of traditional tools for reporting and action planning, a wide range of systematic ways of creating inspiration, support and knowledge sharing. Additionally, there are new spaces for reflection as well as new kinds of knowledge management and curation.
- > **Culture:** This is apparent both in terms of agile and experimental mindsets as part of responding to COVID-19 and within new ways of organizing the work, as well as shifts to move away from command and control towards increased mutual trust and collaboration.

These shifts should be seen in light of the fact that the UNDP Accelerator Lab Network is focusing on institutional innovation—furnishing a system with *renewal capability*—and that means engaging directly with the *mothership* within UNDP. This reflects a strategic intent for efforts within UNDP

to mainstream innovation learning and new capabilities into the organization. To quote some of its initiators this is “an initiative about making space for creativity in the face of problems that need new methods and new energy.

For us it also means disabusing ourselves of the notion that there are one-shot panaceas for the world’s development problems.”² As well as the

“...perhaps impossible, but arguably more long-lasting line of exploration: changing the rationale under which the organization organizes its project portfolio and learns from it (...) This lies at the heart of our promise of becoming 'the fastest learning network' in development. It is the renewal capability that we ultimately want to bring to governments and partners to accelerate impact.”³

This evaluation views the value of the Labs through their contribution to accelerating impact by their efforts to transform their organization’s “renewal capability” and continuous processes of discovery and practice-based learning.

2

Lucarelli. What does success look like for UNDP's Accelerator Labs? (2019)

3

Quaggiotto, Oprunenco, and Leurs. Accelerator Labs: the challenge of engaging the mothership. (2019)

1.3 Recommendations for this initiative

There are inherent tensions and challenges to deal with when embedding innovation labs in large public sector organizations—whether that’s dealing with one lab or a network of 91. To fully unleash the potential of the Accelerator Lab Network, this evaluation points to the importance of:

- > **Ensuring a continuous dialogue about how best to position the Labs** within the Country Office and national context—it will differ in different contexts
- > **Illustrating what successful integration can look like** to enable effective Country Office ownership and expectation management
- > **Articulating a clear journey of the Labs** as they go from small-scale experimentation to systems transformation.
- > **Leveraging the global network to advance learning** and transform knowledge management to be based on more generative and experimental methods.
- > **Evolving the approach to impact measurement** to rethink Lab value and create accountability for learning and improvement.
- > **Rethinking UNDP administrative systems** to create environments that adapt to digital and innovation needs, and to enable a learning culture.
- > **Deepening investment in innovation leadership development** across UNDP to create better strategic ownership within Country Offices.



02

Background & Context

“The Accelerator Labs are a multi-country and multi-year global initiative with a high level of ambition, driven by an innovative approach built on the best of current thinking.”⁴

4

UNDP, (2019) Multi-Country Project Document.

2.1 Development needs to be done differently

UNDP wants to position itself as a pioneer in the future of development, a sector that UNDP describes as having “a growing gap between the interconnected, structural, and increasingly unpredictable and complex challenges we are facing, and the way that government and development planning is carried out.”⁵

Those complex challenges range from acute disasters like the Beirut Explosion, the socio-economic fallout of COVID-19 and the full scope of the Sustainable Development Goals. UNDP sees the future of a sustainable development sector as one that needs to rapidly respond to complex global crises, in a manner that is both increasingly local and more able to adapt to the complexity of the challenges it faces. The Accelerator Labs were seen as an experiment to see what that future of development might look like and to map this back onto UNDP in practice.

5
UNDP. *The Great Transformation*. (2021)



2.2 The role of the Accelerator Labs

In 2019, UNDP launched the Accelerator Labs to build the “world’s largest and fastest learning network on sustainable development challenges.”⁶ The ambition was that teams of Labs in Country Offices around the world could “close the gap between the current practices of international development in an accelerated pace of change.”⁷ The Accelerator Lab Network is also part of UNDP’s evolving role in the UN system by expanding the way the organization invests in, thinks about and delivers development. At its inception it was described as:

6 & 7
UNDP Accelerator Labs. “About us”. (2019)

8
UNDP. *Multi-Country Project Document*. Internal document. (2019)

“...part of an ongoing transformation of how UNDP works. The Labs will create a country-based implementation modality for the country support platforms that incentivize the shift to open source development, bringing diverse knowledge, skill, perspectives, and capital around the table to co-create bigger and better integrated results. The Accelerator Labs are a time-bound initiative to inject innovation into organizational DNA, taking innovation from a boutique venture to a corporate reflex.”⁸



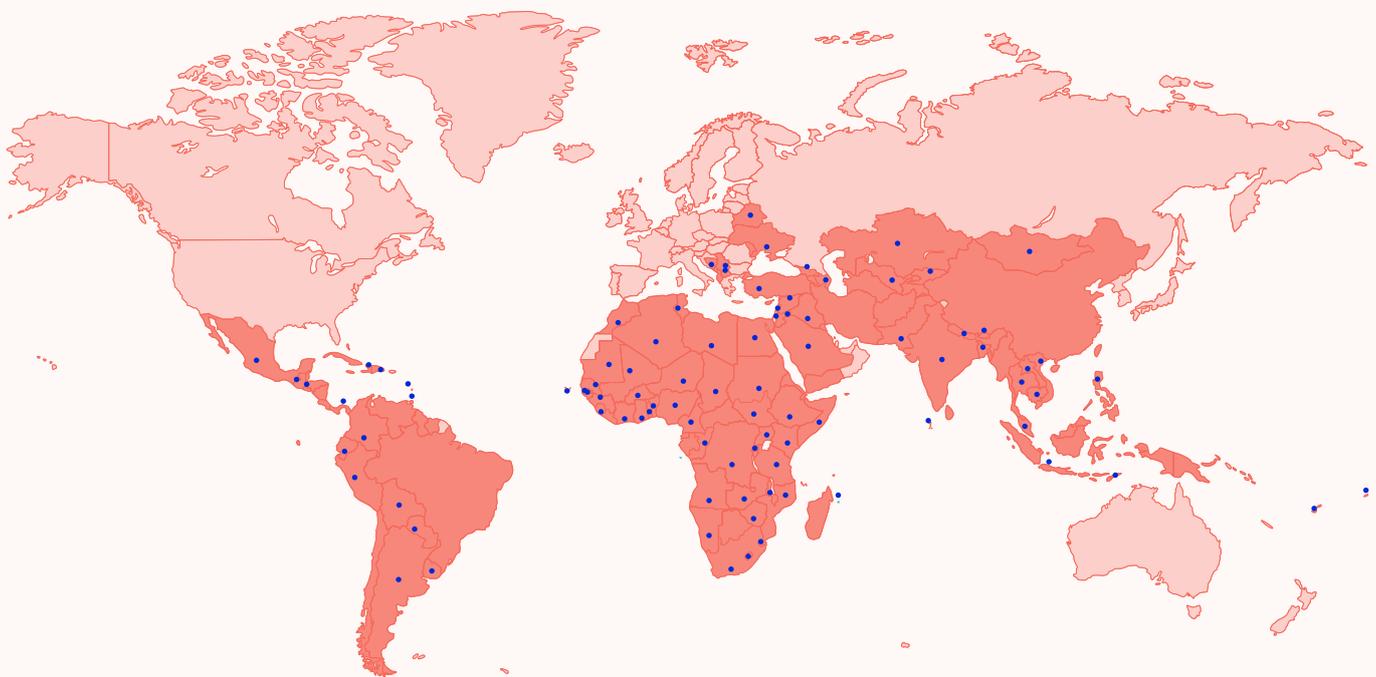
2.3 What the Accelerator Labs are

The Labs are teams of three people working inside UNDP Country Offices, usually working closely with either a Resident Representative or Deputy Resident Representative. Each team is made up of three distinct roles: a Head of Exploration, Head of Experimentation and Head of Solutions Mapping. The Accelerator Lab initiative began with a core global team of eight who are responsible for running and leading the project. That team recruited and onboarded 180 people into 60 Labs covering 78 countries, from all UNDP Regional Bureaus. By 2021 the global team has grown to 13 and there are now a total of 270 ‘Labbers’ in 91 Labs across 115 countries. ^{fig.1}

⁹
UNDP Accelerator Labs. *The Fast and The Curious: Our Story So Far. Annual Report. (2020)*

“Our ambition and our action needs to match the scale of the issues that we face. That’s why we’re launching 60 Labs at once.”

—Achim Steiner, UNDP Administrator⁹



●
91 Accelerator Labs

■
UNDP Network

fig.1
The spread of the Accelerator Lab Network in UNDP Country Offices around the world

2.4 How the Accelerator Labs are funded

The project has received \$71 million¹⁰ in funding for three years from the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development of Germany and the Qatar Fund for Development, with further support from Italy and UNDP core donors. For context, UNDP’s annual budget is \$5 billion over 170 countries.¹¹

¹⁰ UNDP. Multi-Country Project Document. Internal document. (2019)

¹¹ UNDP. Annual report. (2020)



03

This Report in Full

3.1 The scope of this evaluation

This evaluation comes approximately halfway through the intended duration of the Accelerator Labs project. Its scope is to gather lessons learned and challenges faced by the initiative covering the period from July 2019 to October 2020. This independent assessment will inform and provide recommendations for the second phase of the initial 60 Accelerator Labs, as well as the expansion of the Accelerator Lab Network to a total of 91. This midterm evaluation will:

- 01 **Offer an independent assessment** that builds a narrative around current project outcomes as well as improve its implementation and make necessary course corrections in the vision for transforming UNDP into a learning network.
- 02 **Provide tangible knowledge**, examples and reliable evidence of whether these innovative approaches are having an impact, how and why.
- 03 **Provide input to new models** for tracking results that can better take into account nonlinear progress, ripple effects and unintended consequences.

Some of this is contained within this report, and some aspects are to follow in later pieces of work. The findings and recommendations of the evaluation will inform the following key stakeholders:

- > UNDP Executive Office
- > Bureau of Policy and Programme Support
- > Regional Bureaus and Country Offices
- > Critical partners at the global level
- > Partners working alongside the Labs at the country level, from the public, private and academic sectors.

3.2 The evaluation approach

The Accelerator Labs project was set up with a defined set of assumptions to be tested. This report combines a narrow focus on testing the validity of those assumptions with a developmental evaluation approach to explore what fell outside the original hypotheses of the project.

3.2.1 The three core assumptions of the project

At the outset of this experiment, there were three overall assumptions for what success for the project would look like. Much of this has been captured by an extensive results framework.¹²

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UNDP. Multi-Country Project Document. Internal document (2019)

-
- 01 UNDP Country Offices and partners will have **increased capability for scanning, sense-making and experimentation** for sustainable development solutions in 60 developing countries.

 - 02 New sustainable development **solutions will be scaled** at country level as part of UNDP's country programme and operations, national policy and/or markets.

 - 03 A core global level result will be that a **global learning and scaling network** is established and functioning.

3.2.2 Taking an explorative, qualitative approach

This evaluation explored what might be missed by the existing quantitative results framework. It also looks both at, and beyond, the scope of the original design assumptions. This has given colour to the previous results framework and helped identify patterns that this other data missed.

The evaluation data is based on interviewing Lab teams from across the world, both one-on-one and in workshop formats. It also draws on interviews with global team members, Resident Representatives, Regional Coordinators, donors of the project and UNDP's strategic innovation team members. A range that covers a broad spectrum of those involved, from a UNDP perspective in the Accelerator Labs, but as with all qualitative work, might not be generalisable across all of the 91 Labs. There were 23 people interviewed in total and I held workshops with participation from 48 Labs.





Before this evaluation, there already existed a substantial amount of data on the evolution of the Lab network: in reports, blogs and social media. Given the volume of information (and the number of Labs), this evaluation follows leads towards good practice. Our interviews and workshops primarily focused both on what seemed to be working, to understand where the programme works well, and to deduce why, under what conditions and what enablers there are to support this promising practice. As well as also focusing on what barriers and challenges are faced on different levels of governance within the ecosystem of the Accelerator Lab Network.

3.2.3 Cross-cutting issues

This evaluation also identified and analysed the extent to which this project has addressed the cross-cutting issues of gender equality, human rights and marginalization of groups by responding to the following questions: to what extent have marginalized groups benefited from the work of UNDP in the country? To what extent have gender equality and the empowerment of women been addressed in the design, implementation and monitoring of the project? To what extent has the project promoted positive changes in gender equality and the empowerment of women?



3.2.4 Research activities

Interviews

Interviews were conducted over a two month period. Relevant UNDP staff and stakeholders advised on the selection of interviewees.

- > 5 in-depth interviews with a selected cross-section of Labs from different Regional Bureaus
- > 6 interviews with Lab teams or individuals to inform case studies.
- > 3 interviews with Country Office Resident Representatives
- > 2 interviews with Accelerator Labs Regional Representatives
- > 2 formal interviews with global team on top of weekly informal conversations
- > 2 interviews with UNDP Strategic Innovation Unit team members
- > 2 interviews with the executive team
- > 1 interview and analysis of key information on founding investors

Workshops

Three generative workshops designed for this report were open to all Accelerator Lab teams with members from 48 different Labs.

Synthesis of existing data resources

There has been a wide array of data gathering and surveys already carried out on the Accelerator Labs by the global team, so this was synthesised to make clear what is important, and what needs to happen next.

Participation in UNDP activities

A number of working sessions were joined, with wider participation from the Lab network, Country Office Resident Representatives and the broader UNDP ecosystem.



04

Findings

The results of researching
the Accelerator Labs' three
core assumptions.

4.1 Improved UNDP capabilities



Could the Accelerator Lab Network influence the capabilities, ways of working and culture of UNDP Country Offices to illustrate how development can be done differently?

Beyond increasing the capabilities of UNDP Country Offices and partners to scan horizons, make sense of and experiment with potential new sustainable development solutions, the evaluation has found that the Accelerator Lab Network is improving the capabilities, capacity and culture of UNDP to deal more effectively with complex challenges and help achieve the 2030 Agenda by:

- > **Exploring** non-obvious ways of dealing with development challenges by expanding partnerships and data sources
- > **Influencing** ways of working in Country Offices and beyond by introducing new methods and new approaches to unfold across many different contexts.
- > **Illustrating** new ways for UNDP to connect and engage with local communities and grassroots movements, surfacing solutions from the bottom up and collaborating with new and unusual partners.
- > **Shifting** the organizational cultural approach to development illustrated most obviously in terms of agile and experimental mindsets as part of responding to COVID-19.

What this looks like in more depth:

01 The Labs are influencing ways of working in UNDP Country Offices.

The Accelerator Labs are introducing new methods like experimentation, solution mapping and collective intelligence. For example, the Labs play a role internally to the Country Offices as conveners and facilitators, most recently to support the Country Programme Document (CPD) planning process.¹³ They are designing processes for inclusive participation across the whole office, and inventing new ways to connect and create alignment between operational and programmatic staff. The Labs are bringing in foresight methodology and a portfolio approach to the long-term programmatic planning of Country Offices.

13

Nabbale, Naatujuna, Mugema, Ejolu, Mubangizi and Prigent. Drafting Uganda's Country Programme with Accelerator Lab methodology at heart. (2021)

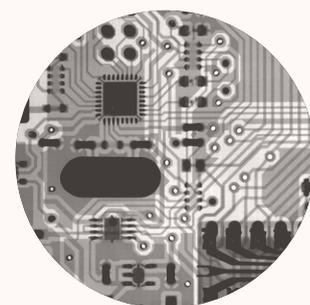
02 The Labs are illustrating alternative ways of doing development by drawing in new and unusual data sources.

From drone and satellite data, to financial transaction data to ethnography as well citizen generated data, the Accelerator Lab Network is drawing on a broad range of data sources to diversify and expand their understanding of the issues they are working on.

“Thanks to the Accelerator Lab, we were able to do surveys and collect information when nobody could.”

—Carole Flore, Resident Representative, UNDP Côte d'Ivoire¹⁴

Drawing on action plans from 2020,¹⁵ on average, Labs used seven new data sources ensuring a wide range of perspectives on issues relevant to the Country Office. This marked a move towards real-time intelligence on sustainable development.



14

UNDP. Innovation in an Uncertain World. Annual Report (2021)

15

UNDP. Innovation in an Uncertain World. Annual Report (2021)

03 Convening unusual suspects to gain a full systems view on development problems

Labs convene unusual partners such as start ups, private entrepreneurs and grassroots innovators to expand how they understand problems and explore possible solutions. They also get key stakeholders in the room to better understand the nature of challenges in their local environments.

On a deforestation project in Uganda this included bringing NGO and Forest Ministry officials together with illegal loggers, firewood sellers, housewives and school officials.¹⁶ This ensures actionable and collective intelligence is identified from a broader set of perspectives, creating opportunities for learning and leveraging multiple points within a systems issue (such as deforestation).

A survey consultation with UNDP senior management¹⁷ found that bringing on board new and unusual partners such as start ups, grassroots innovators and engaging in deeper work with universities is one of the key perceived added values of the Labs. The respondents mentioned it is not only about partnerships (of which a total of 520 were registered in 2020, engaging with a wide range of sectors, stakeholders and unusual partners including start ups, grassroots innovators and universities), but also about the importance of more participatory bottom-up relationships and the possibility of tapping into new networks as part of coalitions for development action.

16

From interview with Uganda Accelerator Lab, May 2021.

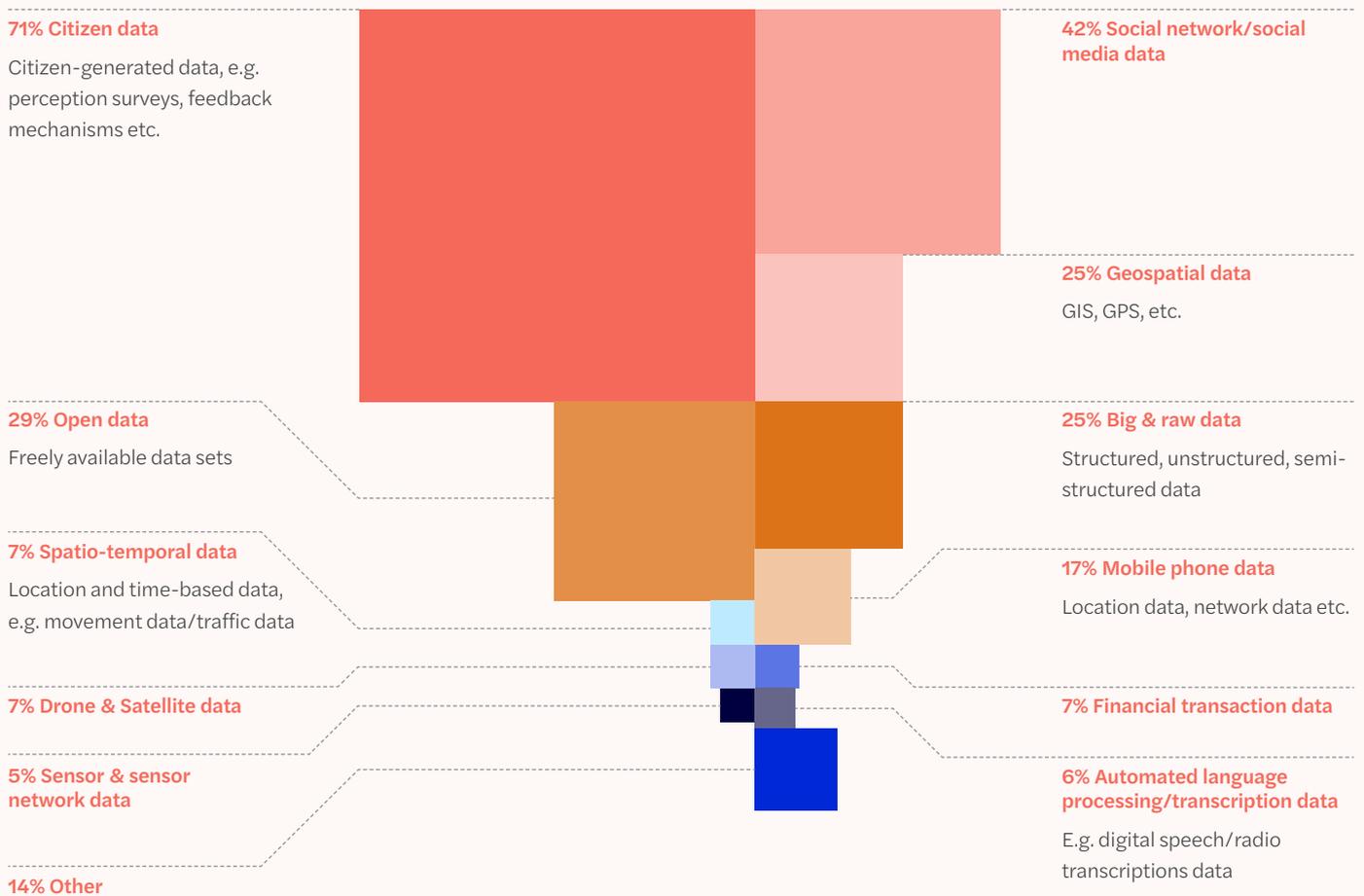
17

Gustale. Internal evaluation survey. (2020).



04 The Labs are illustrating alternative ways of doing development by deploying multi-method approaches to scan for and test solutions

Across the network the Labs have introduced and modelled a sophisticated and broad set of tools and methods. Labs draw on over 48 innovation methods, from asset mapping to participatory design and hackathons. Importantly, Labs are not following a blueprint—rather they are critically applying a diverse set of methods across diverse contexts and challenge spaces. There is no one-size fits all approach and by drawing on their range of expertise across the network novel approaches are being introduced.



05 The Labs were able to quickly adapt during the COVID-19 pandemic

Their ability to respond quickly to support local communities was consistently recognized by both internal and external partners.¹⁸ For example, they mobilised the digitisation of the informal economy to connect informal workers to an online income.¹⁹ The Labs model new ways of working for national partners to deal differently with socio-economic challenges surfacing in their context.

06 The Labs had the flexibility to seize opportunities

Flexibility and autonomy allowed the Accelerator Labs to spot and make the most of opportunities to add value. The Labs, working in learning cycles, can operate with agility and start or end what they are working on as they explore and experiment. A core enabling factor of their impact is that they do not work to deliver a long-term fixed plan. Over the course of the health and socio-economic impact of the pandemic, there was value in being able to pivot and adapt quickly in a rapidly changing environment modelling options for implementation by the Country Offices. Labs were able, in a matter of weeks, to develop new affordable PPE in Colombia²⁰ by working across supply chains, business, academia and government.

07 New skills and capabilities

The Accelerator Labs have showcased the need for and value of new skill sets to drive development activities in the current context. 75 percent of Labs members are new to the UN system, bringing in an impressive and diverse range of new technical and soft skills.²¹ Of this wide range of skills, *agile* and *digital* stood out more prominently. These new skill sets were particularly visible when dealing with complex uncertainties like COVID-19, where the ability to work with agility to drive rapid, experimental learning and sense-making, as well as shifting to work with digital platforms and tools became imperative. The latter has also supported the implementation of UNDP's new digital strategy. More broadly, bringing in these new skills enabled other innovation initiatives to get more traction and support. For example, around driving forward new portfolio and sensemaking approaches within 'Deep Demonstration' activities— UNDP's experimental initiative to drive systems transformation in highly complex problem areas.²²

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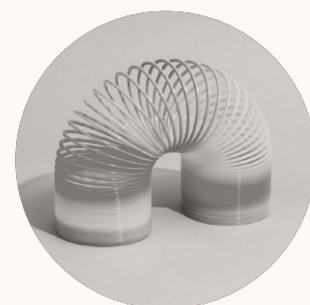
Christiansen. Accelerator Labs: Responding to the socio-economic impact of COVID-19. (2021)

19

Nabbale, Naatujuna and Mugema. UNDP and Jumia transform informal enterprises in Uganda through inclusive e-commerce: Early lessons learned. (2020)

20

From an interview with Colombia Accelerator Lab.



21

Leurs. De-mystifying the Acc Labs - internal presentation. (2021).

22

Begovic, Haldrup. Deep demonstrations: the journey begins. (2020)



4.2 Scaling solutions for development



Could the Accelerator Lab Network shift approaches to the exploration, development and scaling of solutions?

Beyond seeing new sustainable development solutions with a potential for scaling at country level, the Accelerator Lab Network is shifting the approach to the exploration, development and scaling of solutions to deliver better outcomes with:

- > **Projects that are becoming more user-oriented**, iterative, and learning-oriented recognizing the complex and cross-cutting nature of development challenges
- > **Projects that are becoming part of a portfolio-driven logic**, beginning to build inroads for leading systems transformation efforts.
- > **Reinforcement locally sourced solutions** and making good use of local assets and actionable intelligence to develop, adapt and scale outcomes with national partners.
- > **Action as a convener** by bringing together other actors of UNDP, the UN, traditional and non-traditional partners to identify, test and improve local solutions.
- > **Inspiration drawn from solutions**—both generated locally and those identified by the network—to legitimize new investments in innovation.

What this looks like in more depth:

01 Spreading innovation methods across UNDP and government partners

The methods of the Labs have spread in two ways. In some Labs, their approaches have been fundamental to the development of the CPD process in Country Offices. Colombia's Accelerator Lab team introduced futures focused ideation and collaboration tools into the country's CPD process.²³

The Labs are also adopting new skills across the Country Office. In Uganda, the Accelerator Lab team conducted a bootcamp to refine their sensemaking skills, other Country Office staff joined this workshop and have since used these skills on other projects.

There are ripple effects from the Lab's value outside of UNDP. There are over 25 government innovation initiatives who have either been influenced or set up as a result of the Accelerator Labs' capability.²⁴ This is the Accelerator Lab Network scaling beyond UNDP into national and local governments—transferring and expanding the approaches of sensemaking, scanning and experimentation into government functions.

02 Expanding the range of partnerships while reinforcing local solutions

Labs are increasing the likelihood of successful implementation and scaling of solutions by working across a range of partnerships and prioritising local actors and solutions. The Labs' ability to prioritise local relationships with unusual subjects over the usual big players in the development sector is positively shifting practice towards grassroots local solutions and ownership. In Nepal, the Lab connected local partners during the COVID-19 response, drawing on the existing robotics community and connecting them with hospitals resulting in a pilot robot successfully delivering food and non-urgent supplies to patients to encourage physical distancing in hospitals.²⁵

23

From an interview with Colombia Accelerator Lab.

24

Learning action plans and internal evaluation by the global team.



25

Bajracharya. Using Machines to Fight the Crowned Virus. (2020)



03 Labs are attracting investment for new approaches and solutions

Of the initial cohort of Labs, 50 percent²⁶ were identified by senior Country Office management as bringing new funding and non-monetary support into the Country Office. The Colombia Accelerator Lab brought in \$9.8 million in investment from USAID for a COVID-19 response as a result of earlier successful efforts to put together a value chain of stakeholders to research, design and mass produce protective gear.²⁷ This initial investment was further supported by a further \$14 million from the Bogotá Environment Secretariat and Colombian mayor's offices. This indicates a growing capacity for Labs to legitimize and grow emerging solutions and experimental approaches in the form of service lines both within UNDP and among a wide range of external partners.

26

Gustale. UNDP Accelerator Labs Management and Partnerships Overview - Internal document. (2021)

27

From an interview with the Colombia Accelerator Lab.

04 UNDP regulations are blocking promising community solutions

A wide range of promising prototypes and solutions have been developed in partnership with grassroots organizations and local entrepreneurs across the network. According to the Ugandan Lab a surprising but significant barrier to fully realizing the potential of these locally based partnerships is the UNDP procurement processes and IP regulations.



05 Promising solutions reveal potential to revisit IP policies and procurement regulations

The Labs are identifying specific pain points that have emerged in the course of working with new partners, managing digital assets and tapping into grassroots innovators where there is a power and knowledge imbalance.

They report that the significant timeframes required for processing or procurement slowed down exploratory projects, limiting their ability to “accelerate” in learning cycles.

Restrictive requirements prevented developing partnership models, being biased towards established players over upstarts. It has also proved a deterrent for new partners in the development ecosystem when UNDP owns the IP. In Uganda, solutions to deforestation from grassroots or community organizations couldn't be built on and larger partners had to be found.



Signs of different ways of going to scale

"Going to scale" in the development sector is often synonymous with copying the same idea or solution from one context and replicating it into another.²⁸ The Accelerator Lab Network approaches scaling with more nuance. Inspired by leading innovation practitioners,²⁹ the global team has instead framed it for:

- > **Scaling up** to shift laws and policies of systems
- > **Scaling out** to grow or to replicate solutions to other areas
- > **Scaling deep** to transform sociocultural levels of mindsets and habits
- > **Considering impact at scale** rather than mainly focusing on scaling solutions

Within these wider definitions of scale there are early signals of change: the UNDP Uganda Accelerator Lab is influencing policy-making on e-commerce; the UNDP Viet Nam Accelerator Lab is working with the government around new agendas for a circular economy; the UNDP Argentina Accelerator Lab is mapping out and advocating for new policies on air pollution. There are concepts that have scaled out and spread across borders. In Morocco, Timor Leste, and Cabo Verde, Labs have taken up the work from India on gamified approaches to counter COVID-19 misinformation.³⁰ Labs' have been "scaling deep", where working with an agile and experimental mindset has impacted many Country Offices across the global network, influencing them to adopt a more responsive approach to crisis response and solution development. Labs are also creating impact at scale. In Pakistan, ringtone messages dealing with COVID-19 reached 113 million people.³¹

One cross-cutting insight from this evaluation is that there is a need to influence the overall scaling 'logic', going away from strictly focusing on solutions to legitimising a portfolio of interventions. This would require moving the goal post of scaling. It should move from growing one solution towards balancing and partnering with multiple actors in a diversified portfolio angled at systems change. However, their ability to influence this level within the Country Office is very limited and that it relates to an operating model dominated by project-based business models.

28

Tulloch. *Problematizing Scale in the Social Sector*. (2018).

29

McLean, Gargani and Lomofsky. *Scaling what works doesn't work: we need to scale impact instead*. (2020)

30

Singh, Antoine and Ong. *The Learning Network Effect: Gamification to counter COVID-19 Misinformation* (2021)

31

Masood and Taj, *Innovative ringtone messages positively impacts knowledge, perceptions and behaviours related to COVID-19 in Pakistan*, (2020)



4.3 Accelerating learning about what works



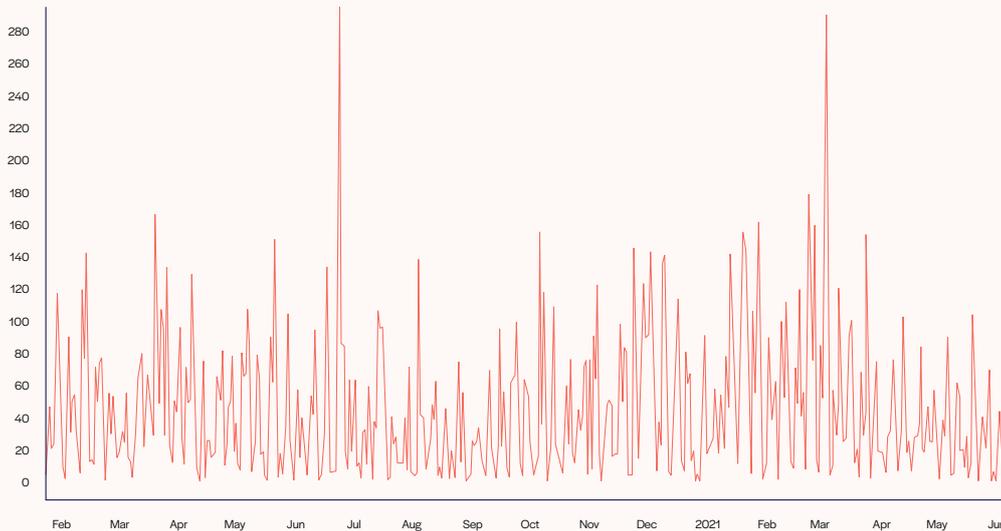
Can the Accelerator Lab Network accelerate learning about what works and what doesn't?

The Accelerator Labs Network have established a global learning network and is accelerating learning about what works and what doesn't in sustainable development by:

- > **Working with and learning** across a network of development practitioners around the world.
- > **Testing and sharing** new methods and data to generate a better understanding of what is working, where and why.
- > **Sharing actionable learning** with other Labs on a daily basis for real-time collaboration.
- > **Creating new spaces** for reflection, as well as new kinds of knowledge management and curation
- > **Enabling a move away from "command and control"** towards an informal network of mutual trust and collaboration across teams.

What this looks like in more depth:

01 A learning network that is active and thriving



The Labs are sharing actionable learning on a daily basis. Sometimes openly on platforms that are public, as well as on closed ones that are for private messaging. They use mediums they are comfortable with—three active Whatsapp groups started after one Lab member pinned their name and number on a noticeboard for others to get in touch.³² That Whatsapp group now has up to 300 messages a day of people sharing, asking for help or simply chatting.

As well as Whatsapp, members use Microsoft Teams to share updates, blog posts, weekly reflections and thematic questions to the network. And on the blogging platform Medium,³³ the Accelerator Lab members post articles and models the "working out loud" practice so necessary for a learning network. There are huge numbers of interactions, with over 800 blog posts so far.³⁴ If there is any complaint, it is that there is almost too much information for any one Lab to keep on top of.³⁵

fig.2

Number of daily messages on Accelerator Labs Network WhatsApp channels (three main channels).

Boy. Social listening work (2021)

32

Lucarelli. How do we learn from a network of ecosystems to reinvent knowledge management? (2021)

33

UNDP Accelerator Labs. On Medium (2019 - ongoing)

34

UNDP Accelerator Labs. Our Blogs: A window to Our Continuous Learning (2019 - ongoing)

35

Both the Colombia and Lebanon Labs brought this up in an interview.

02 Regular rituals of connection

The global team hosts weekly calls for the entire network to meet and exchange ideas. These evolved from an initial "chalk and talk" design in the style of a lecture or lesson, to something closer to an informal hang out and check-in space. The fact that Labs are willing to dial-in to these calls at very early and late times of day is testament to how valued these relationships and exchanges of knowledge are.

“The weekly drop-in calls! I feel terrible if I miss one because I know how much I would learn.”

—Lab member from one of this report’s workshops

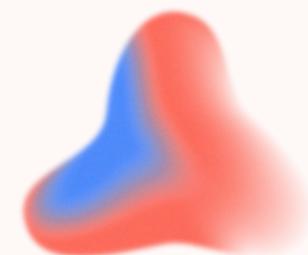


03 A self-organizing network taking the lead

There is a steady rhythm of activity across the network with much of it led by the Labs themselves, with the different roles creating their own events. The Heads of Exploration organized an annual summit, to learn from each other and welcome the second cohort of Labs. Interestingly, this seems to have been prompted by two things: a desire for community that wasn’t found in their local UNDP Country Offices and the ambiguity of the roles themselves.³⁶ This proactive approach is a sign of a healthy community, one that feels empowered to lead and take ownership of an issue.

36

Ong. Explorers, assemble! (2021)



04 A learning network to activate a more diverse range of knowledge, resources and experiences into operational improvements

The Accelerator Labs are consistently sharing new methods and approaches across the network. For example, 85 percent of WhatsApp conversations between January–September 2020³⁷ were about methods and approaches. This gives The Accelerator Labs access to more diverse perspectives and options, enabling them to reach non-obvious approaches and solutions. The UNDP Uganda Accelerator Lab was able to get the correct paperwork in less than seven weeks for their COVID-19 mobile money solution, thanks to help from colleagues in the network. The alternative could have taken many months.³⁸ Without support from the network, that project may not have gotten off the ground as quickly as it did.

37

Boy. Social listening work (2021)

38

Naatujuna, Nabbale, Mugema. Connecting informal market vendors to e-commerce to reach consumers in the wake of Covid-19 and beyond. (2020)

05 The Labs show a high degree of trust necessary for learning

The sharing and learning as a global network is built upon strong foundations of trust across a diverse and distanced group. Psychological safety is required for risk taking, experimentation and innovation practice.³⁹ Having a trusted safe space to develop confidence in new methods, fail, and ask questions of peers is pivotal to the success of the Labs.

For example, the weekly reflection blogs posted into the Microsoft Teams channel exhibit a high degree of honest reflection, personal interrogation and vulnerability, as individuals and teams grapple with their context, their position within the Country Office and their relationship with local communities.

06 The Labs as a peer support network

The Labs generate and receive value in the network as a peer support network. These Labs were set up to intentionally challenge business as usual, and because going against the grain can be hard, sometimes exhausting work, having a community of peers is important to maintain resilience:

“Sometimes it feels that I don't belong, but every time I touch base with some colleagues [in the network] it's amazing the feeling, the connections and the insights.”

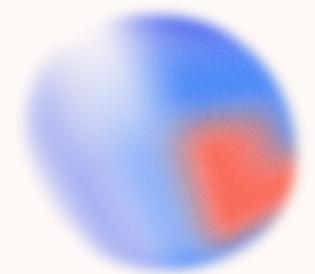
—From an interview with an anonymous Lab member

07 Developing a knowledge management system

Making the most of working at this global scale requires an infrastructure to maintain it. The global team and the Labs collect a range of both codified insights and tacit understanding across teams.⁴⁰ This takes the form of social listening tools to scan both blog posts and WhatsApp conversations, as well as through Wikis, with some of this new knowledge funneled into reports.⁴¹ The question remains: how to make this knowledge both timely and easily accessible to busy people.

39

Edmondson. *Psychological Safety and Learning Behavior in Work Teams* (1999)



40

Lucarelli. *How do we learn from a network of ecosystems to reinvent knowledge management?* (2021)

41

Peach, Berditchevskaia, Lucarelli, Ebelshaeuser. *Collective Intelligence for Sustainable Development: 13 Stories from the UNDP Accelerator Labs.* (2021)

4.4 Cross-cutting issues

This section assesses the extent to which the Accelerator Lab Network project addresses gender inclusion and incorporates UNDP's commitment to the human rights-based approach and gender mainstreaming, and other relevant cross-cutting issues.

01 Gender inclusion, equality, and empowerment.

Monthly, Lab members have published blogs reflecting on their work. Thirty-five percent of blogs explicitly address SDG 5, Gender Equality. These publications constitute a valuable asset that reflects and shares learning on projects that are targeting gender equality. One example is the blog series by the UNDP Paraguay Accelerator Lab about the findings of their community innovation challenge which was aimed to support female rural innovators and entrepreneurs.⁴²

The Solutions Mapping platform compiles all the grassroots solutions mapped by the Accelerator Lab Network. The platform provides a filter by gender tags and a new feature to identify women-led solutions. Some of the solutions observed were a mentoring network led by women in Uganda, a women's taxi cooperative in Ecuador, or a WhatsApp hotline for gender-based violence in South Africa.

When reviewing documented learning challenges worked during 2020, we found a significant number addressing gender equality. In Ecuador, the Accelerator Lab tackled the lack of social protection schemes for female youth workers; in India, the game CoronaChampion helps women and girls in poor communities obtain accurate information about COVID-19 in a fun way. Although these actions are promising, they still constitute a minority of the activities. The network should review Country Office selection processes for frontier challenges in order to better live up to this programming principle.

42

Genit, Parra, Ríos, Sarquis and Setrini. *Semillas Nativas: an ancient practice, preserved by brave women.* (2021)

Giménez, McKinnon, Parra, Ríos and Setrini. *Moirũ: what we learned integrating community participation and social innovation.* (2021)



02 Human Rights

The Accelerator Lab Network has strongly prioritized and contributed to the frontier field of Collective Intelligence, which as a principle recognizes the need to draw on diverse views and perspectives to come to better decisions and the need to be mindful of biases and power relations. It also means acknowledging the importance of data empowerment—enabling people to use data to advocate for their rights, take collective action, or hold governments to account.⁴³

One of the use cases identified for Collective Intelligence relates to new forms of governance in accountability. In collaboration with GIZ Data Lab, the Accelerator Lab Mexico combines open data about urban infrastructure (such as public transport) with closed government datasets to better understand the urban characteristics of gender-based violence in public spaces across Mexico City.

43

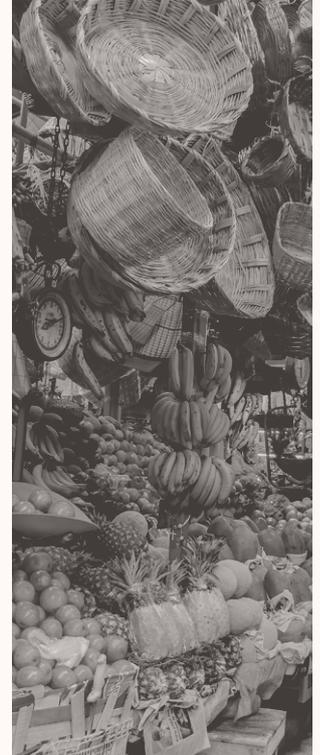
Peach, Berditchevskaia, Mulgan, Lucarelli, Ebelshaeuser. *Collective Intelligence for Sustainable Development: Getting Smarter Together.* (2021)



03 Marginalized Groups

One of the central values of the project observed both in the core design of the projects and talking to different stakeholders is elevating the knowledge and participation of marginalized groups by engaging with unusual partnerships, new networks, and vulnerable communities. For example, the Zimbabwe Accelerator Lab partnered with trade associations and vendors of the local market in Harare. The Lab was able to make visible the contributions of 20,000 informal workers in the food production value chain from all across the country. Reports indicate that in 2020 the Accelerator Labs partnered with 520 different organizations, and many of these partnerships focused on increasing the participation of marginalized groups.

Solution Mappers of the Accelerator Labs are mapping, connecting and amplifying locally-led solutions to inform the design and delivery of new approaches as part of UNDP's work. Additionally, the Accelerator Labs aim to contribute to their field through their partnership with the Honey Bee Network to develop and showcase the importance of bottom-of-the-pyramid solutions and grassroots innovation.

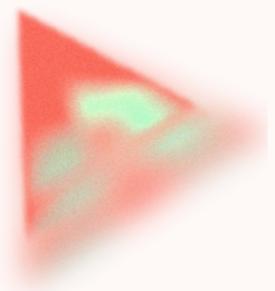


04 Other Cross cutting issues: South-South Cooperation, Knowledge Management, and United Nations Reform.

The Accelerator Lab project is contributing positively and actively to other cross-cutting issues like South-South Cooperation by fostering cross-country partnerships; knowledge management by re-imagining how knowledge is being created and shared in the network of Labs;⁴⁴ UN Reform, by having 75 percent of the learning challenges conducted in partnership with another United Nations entity.

44

Lucarelli. How do we learn from a network of ecosystems to reinvent knowledge management? (2021)



05

Signals of future potential

The Accelerator Lab Network already shows strong signs of success against its three initial design assumptions. There are also plenty of other interesting practices from the Accelerator Labs project that sit outside of the original scope that are important to the wider UNDP and its progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals.

This good practice is catalogued here, divided into early signals of possible future potential that could one day (soon) be part of UNDP's organizational DNA and assist the Accelerator Lab Network in going from a temporary explorative space to a permanent R&D function and capability. To make the most of this potential there are both critical questions in need of answering, and some further specific recommendations to take on board.

Signals

Current positive practice seen

- > **New ways of working** are visible within project delivery that challenge business as usual. Applying new sets of innovation methods like solution mapping and collective intelligence, adopting more experimental and learning-oriented processes and tools, partnering with new actors, and injecting fresh energy and expertise into the Country Offices.
- > **Influencing government priorities** to shift policy and be involved in new kinds of projects and processes where new ways of working have to be prioritized.
- > **Testing the organizational readiness** for innovation, bottom-up approaches, and new ways of partnering. Illustrating the limits of UNDP's administrative and legal systems to systematically learn how best to structurally support new ways of working.
- > **Surfacing solutions from the bottom up** through better knowledge about local contexts fuelled by continuous, multiple and simultaneous explorations, new kinds of engagement, and methods like solution mapping and collective intelligence tools.
- > **Connecting with unusual partners** to enable new kinds of relations and collaboration with citizens, local communities, and grassroots movements. This also contributes to a shift in the narrative and brand of UNDP towards a more inclusive and people-centred organization.

Potential

That with strategic support could be realized

- > **Doing development differently** fuelled by a new experimental development practice focused on systems transformation within the SDG framework. It would be a result of cultural and structural changes that enables the strategic positioning of innovation portfolios supported by a more permissive administrative environment within the Country Office and UNDP.
- > **Making government part of the shift** driven by shared intent around doing development differently and creating mutually beneficial capacity building strategies and programmes.
- > **Creating permissive systems** and processes that create a cultural environment that allow for agile ways of working, flexible partnering, co-creation and rapid learning cycles. This also requires reinventing how impact measurement is being done.
- > **Reversing programme logic** to enable systematic solution development from the bottom-up and continuous partnering with national and local governments to drive bottom-up policy development (getting away from one-off project delivery).
- > **Ceding power** and shifting relationships and roles between institutions and local communities, empowering and supporting initiative within their own context and redistributing power relationships to create more horizontal ways of collaborating around development agendas.

Signals

Current positive practice seen

- > **Agile and experimental mindsets**, most significantly as part of responding to COVID-19 but increasingly also within regular programme work, and formal processes (shifts in TOR, reorganization of Country Office processes, etc.).
- > **Mutual trust and support** are being taken to an entirely new level within the Accelerator Lab Network. People are comfortable with vulnerability and openly sharing what they are uncertain about, ideas that still need work and questions they are sitting with.
- > **Pockets of innovation leadership** that showcase the power of leaders taking productive ownership and illustrate how to create the conditions for strategic use of the lab's expertise and unique capability.
- > **Increased scaling awareness** illustrated by projects becoming more iterative, learning-oriented and portfolio-driven, recognizing the complex and cross-cutting nature of development challenges—although a more nuanced understanding of scaling is needed.
- > **A radical shift in how learning is happening.** Particularly across the Lab network where a range of ways to create inspiration, support and knowledge-sharing are taking shape; including new spaces for sharing ideas and experiences, collective reflection and stock-taking.

Potential

That with strategic support could be realized

- > **Becoming an experimental culture** where agile and iterative development processes capable of dealing with fundamental uncertainty and rapid crisis response become the new business as usual and a part of everyone's job description.
- > **A more horizontal organization** with a high level of collaborative energy, psychological safety and mutual trust maintained by frequent and cross-cutting exchanges, network activity and dedicated spaces for learning, reflection and emotional safety.
- > **Organizational innovation capacity** driven forward by leadership at levels capable of taking ownership of experimental portfolios, strategically leverage innovation approaches and create the space and conditions to drive innovation.
- > **Systems transformation approach** being part of business as usual driven by a portfolio approach for dealing with the SDGs embedded within the organization where different kinds of scaling approaches are inherent part of new business as usual.
- > **An organizational learning culture** where learning replaces reporting as the main accountability format. Learning is socialized more systematically and embedded more broadly and is organized within formal exchanges within and between Country Offices as well as between all levels of UNDP.

Signals

Current positive practice seen

- > **A new agenda for knowledge management** is starting to take form. One where knowledge becomes available, “just in time” across the network. This builds on case content, social interaction and reflections across the network being systematically collected, analysed and curated into actionable datasets and insights.
- > **Away from command and control** towards more recognition of the power of context. While it is meaningful to work at a global scale in a highly decentralized organization like UNDP, local contexts are still so diverse and unique that much attention has to be given to effectively balancing country-specific and global-level intent (as seen when onboarding and supporting the labs).
- > **Temporary lab network** enabling an experimental and boundary-pushing space where new approaches to project delivery, learning and partnering are being developed and tested.

Potential

That with strategic support could be realized

- > **A dynamic organizational intelligence** can become the result of continued reinvention of how to capture and process data and make it useful and available for the organization and wider sector. It does require that the network becomes more inclusive with and embedded in the rest of the organization.
- > **Taking on distributed governance** as a way of strengthening and sustaining a horizontal organization. Allowing for diversity of perspectives, collaborations and approaches with overall outcomes in mind. Enabling collective ownership of development through self-organizing units based on trust and commitment to the overall cause.
- > **Permanent R&D functions** as a result of embedded innovation experience and expertise, creating the capacity to continuously learn about, discover and renew how best to address global development challenges.

06

Unleashing the potential of the Accelerator Labs

There is plenty of potential, and this section explores how that potential can become reality. Here follows considerations and recommendations for the wider UNDP of possible immediate actions to be taken that embed this promising practice. It also explores how to make use of existing inroads while taking seriously the challenges and barriers that UNDP faces.

6.1 The challenge for innovation labs

There's no perfect way to run a lab. Specific contexts and the pressures they face are different. The challenge for most labs is to carve out their niche—their mission and purpose—in an often hostile bureaucratic environment. From the start, many public sector innovation labs are hamstrung; few resources, little internal legitimacy, or weighed down under the same bureaucratic accountability that prevented innovation in the first place.

Compared to the roll-out of a new technology or digital agenda, labs are often in the business of intangibles. It's harder to point to their specific outputs precisely because they are set to work in an explorative, boundary-pushing space. At the same time, they need to work to prove their political and strategic value too. They need one foot in the future and one in the now.

This experience of public sector innovation labs suggests taking a pragmatic approach to the challenges facing the Accelerator Labs. The Wheel of Trade-offs model shown to the right [fig.3](#) is used as a strategic dialogue tool to identify the most important areas for labs to focus on. It is applied here as an organizing framework for developing and categorizing the recommendations for this project.

The format of trade-offs can offer support in shifting strategy and making the sorts of choices that will create alignment between the Labs' potential and what's achievable. The core questions are: what characterizes the overall "pathway to change" when it comes to the positioning, mission and purpose of the Accelerator Labs? And what key trade-offs are connected to the strategy and tactics in the day-to-day decisions in running the Labs?



fig.3
'Wheel of Trade-offs' model
(see page 42)



6.2 Pathway to change: the paradox of disruptive integration

Challenges

The Accelerator Lab Network was launched as a challenge to business as usual, as well as becoming a new version of it. Shifting the practice of learning, project and programme approaches, partnering, and organizational culture is a high ambition. For the project, there is balance to be found in being both (productively) disruptive as well as integrating enough to embed that new way of working.

In this case, the design intent of the Accelerator Labs is carried out with a fair amount of space for serendipity. There is no strict formula for action since a network of labs at this scale has never been done before. From the outside, it resembles a “skunkwork” model⁴⁵, illustrating and testing a potential future way of working for international development, within a temporarily protected space. The onus—and tension—on the Lab is to figure out how to integrate it outside that protected space.

Innovation labs around the world face a similar tension, and they, like the Accelerator Labs, face two overall challenges:

01 There is a challenge to understand the strategic value-add of the Labs.

Key stakeholders in many Country Offices struggle to understand and integrate the work of the Accelerator Labs in their strategic operations (including core programmes). They are uncertain about how best to make use of the Labs' areas, as well as to what extent the Labs' contributions should be embedded into programmes or work outside them.

02 There is a challenge in the diverse and ambiguous nature of Lab contributions.

This is especially relevant in the relationship between the incremental and potentially transformative contributions of the Labs. On the one hand, there is a narrative attached to the work of the Labs around the radical redesign of development practice focused on systems transformations that deal more effectively with global challenges and the SDGs. On the other hand, many Labs are working on what is considered to be small-scale experiments focused on incremental innovations with limited strategic relevance.

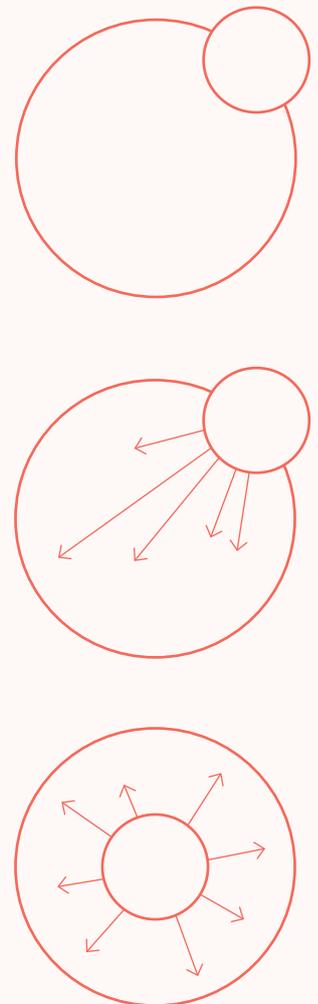


fig. 4

Giulio Quaggiotto, Alexandru Oprunenco & Bas Leurs

45

Skunkworks project. Wikipedia (2021)

Considerations

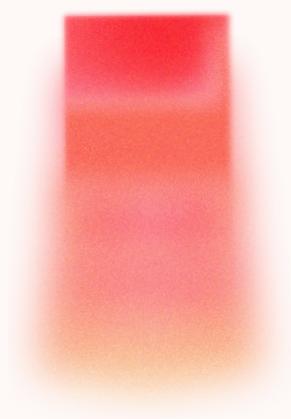
Where labs work best, they are a reflection of their environment—whether disruptive or pragmatic. The success of the Accelerator Lab Network rests on the readiness of the broader organization to make the most of this opportunity. There have been signs of a lack of organizational readiness within UNDP Country Offices including:

- > **The Accelerator Labs are being seen as a temporary project** rather than a lasting investment into the operating and cultural environment of UNDP, and are continuing to be considered a “nice to have” rather than subject to strategic investment.
- > **Uncertainties about longer-term objectives and future accountabilities**, which can increase tension and result in poor collaboration and ongoing negotiations over what the Labs are meant to be doing.
- > **The Labs risk becoming too pragmatic to ensure their survival** within the Country Office context—potentially getting caught up doing work that is too incremental, compromising the distinct features they were meant to influence the environment with.

As a response to these risks, the following section will describe ways of addressing them and support a pathway to change through disruptive integration.

Recommendations

To increase organizational readiness—as well as strengthen efforts to ensure sustainable and impactful integration of the Accelerator Lab Network—it would be useful to prioritize the four tactical trade-offs and recommendation detailed in the next section.



6.3 Tactical trade-offs and recommendations



fig.3
'Wheel of Trade-offs' model

Creating mandate

- Communication & brand
- Positioning & narrative
- Ownership & funding
- Governance & decision-making

Supporting actions & decisions

- Impact assessment & evaluation
- Learning & documentation
- Strategic focus & accountability
- Expertise & resources

Managing activities

- Project criteria & election
- Collaboration & networks
- Activity portfolio
- Roles & responsibilities

Setting up the team

- Process & organization
- Attitude & skills
- Tools & methods
- Space & environment

This section describes the tactical trade-offs and recommendations linked to fully unleashing the potential of the Accelerator Lab Network. These trade-offs are fairly common when it comes to embedding innovation labs in large organizations —whether we are dealing with one lab or a network of 91 Labs. Although "disruptive integration" sounds like a paradox, there is a pathway to change that unleashes the potential of the Accelerator Lab Network. This suggests that further support and investment should particularly consider:

- > Ensuring continuous dialogue about the strategic positioning of the Labs.
- > More clearly describing patterns of what successful integration looks like to strengthen Country Office ownership.
- > Showing the possible legitimate trajectories of the Labs.
- > Rethinking administrative systems and evolving the approach to impact measurement.
- > Investing in innovation leadership .

01 Creating mandate

Creating strategic ownership of the Labs' role, contributions and development by their Country Offices

There have already been attempts to create awareness and engage with Country Offices on how best to take ownership of the labs. This ownership seems crucial to the labs being seen as a valuable asset and not "just another project." This depends on the proactive support of leadership as well as a collaborative approach across the Country Office.

There are great examples of strategic ownership and integrations across the Accelerator Lab Network. There are equally some experiences among the Country Office staff of the labs "being forced upon them"⁴⁶ and uncertainty of how to interpret the reasoning behind the initiative. Some take the initiative to be a response to a perceived lack of internal expertise. This can potentially cause resistance.

These challenges are very typical when introducing labs in organizations. Moreover, some of the resistance can also be linked to the rapid process of launching the Accelerator Labs and the limited timeframe to prepare onboarding and an enabling environment, making it difficult for everyone involved to figure out their roles and responsibilities.

Trade-off

There is a trade-off between putting emphasis on the design intent of the Accelerator Lab Network and implementing the initiative through co-ownership with Country Offices. The former risks a low level of local ownership, the latter risks varied quality in the Lab outputs and distance from the original design intent. The former requires a limited level of engagement, is more rapid and easier to manage while the latter requires a high level of engagement, is time-intensive and harder to manage. What is the most useful trade-off?

46

From an interview with a
Regional Innovation Team Lead.



Recommendations

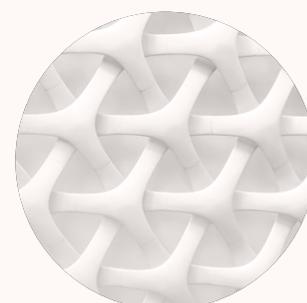
Consider what successful integration looks like and to what extent the initiative can be open to being shaped further by the Country Offices to create their local ownership. This will include:

- > **Ensuring a continuous dialogue** about how best to strategically position the Labs within the Country Office and national context. This will differ in different contexts. Managing expectations of the Country Office executives by continuously and collaboratively refining the Lab's role, contributions and accountabilities given that the purpose of the Lab is contextual and subject to change.
- > **Increasing psychological safety.** While spaces such as the Resident Representative (RR) and Deputy Resident Representative (DRR) sessions have been set up for sharing professional vulnerabilities and uncertainties around their role and practice,⁴⁷ there seems to still be a need for honest and psychologically safe conversations between UNDP executives, the global team and Country Office Resident Representatives.
- > **Describing successful integration.** Begin to capture what successful integration can look like to build a shared vision for the future function of the Lab. This would help manage the expectations of what's possible. In particular how they can unleash the potential of a Lab functioning as a R&D team within the Country Office. Describe how the Labs are meant to be a boundary-pushing space which keeps a distinct methodology and approach while integrating it into the Country Offices environment.
- > **Celebrating useful examples.** Encourage more Labs to develop new programme functions and ways of organizing the work to help position the Labs' contributions more strategically (for example around scoping programmes like in Bosnia and Herzegovina).



47

UNDP Accelerator Labs. RR/ DRR Sessions - internal presentations (2021)



02 Supporting actions and decisions

Rethink UNDP administrative systems to create an enabling environment to support an effective learning culture and new ways of working.

Launching the Accelerator Labs as "the world's largest and fastest learning network on sustainable development"⁴⁸ has been a bold approach. This intent has already been realized with Labs working experimentally, applying new formats, procedures and processes of learning support, knowledge management and impact assessment.

This also means that the Labs have a range of accountabilities between the Country Office and the global team. These accountabilities can pull the Labs between different priorities.

The value of the network as a learning and peer support resource for a community of disruptors looks different to one that is designed to integrate functions. In order to spread and scale solutions, embed new ways of working, and convert the lessons learned beyond the network itself, there is still some way to go. Currently, applying their own tools and processes, network learning is working well for the Labs, although translating network learning into value for others has been difficult. However the recent development of a network learning prototype is encouraging.⁴⁹

A similar point can be made in relation to other administrative systems like procurement and IP. The Labs are illustrating what is possible when partnering with new partners, but are held back by current management procedures built for a different time.⁵⁰ This works against potential collaborations with private sector entrepreneurs and grassroots organizations. This can be seen in the three pain points presented in 2020 to "the LAB of Labs" project board:⁵¹

- > **Partnership default** is rigid and does not allow for collaboration in an experimental setting.
- > **Intellectual Property** is acquired by UNDP through the Standard Basic Assistance Agreement with no corporate position on global public goods or a robust licensing practice.
- > **UNDP engagement facilities** may not make investments or provide seed funding outside of commercial contracts. Nor can it give the private sector grants.

48

UNDP Accelerator Labs. "About us". (2019)

49

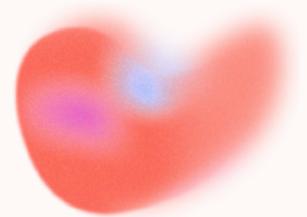
Lucarelli. How do we learn from a network of ecosystems to reinvent knowledge management? (2021)

50

From an interview with Uganda Lab

51

Candotti. UNDP Accelerator Lab Project Board Minutes from April 30th. (2020)



The bigger point here is that there is a need to rethink the administrative systems of UNDP to support new ways of working with partners, as well as to support new kinds of learning processes.

Trade-off

It's sometimes unclear who the Labs are for. If they are for everyone, they are also for no-one in particular. Is the network about incremental change or societal transformation? Development done differently requires structural transformation. Without real and significant investment into shifting accountabilities and administrative systems, "development done differently" is likely to remain a combination of small-scale experiments and a hopeful narrative.

Recommendations

Change administrative systems to create a better environment for new ways of working. This means:

- > **Creating new ways of partnering** enabled by procurement and IP systems, not hindered by them.
- > **Developing learning systems** socialized through shared formats and procedures for knowledge management and collective sense-making.
- > **Redesigning evaluation and impact assessment** to support learning through experimental processes of testing hunches and ideas rather than reporting on projected activities.

It is encouraging that UNDP created a new position for legal innovation,⁵² currently working with the Labs on IP research and alternative modeling, and the Accelerator Labs are currently working on a desk review on alternative IP models within this focus area.⁵³ Specifically in relation to the Accelerator Labs, it is important to:

- > **Evolve the approach to impact measurement** based on lessons learned about the actual value-creation of the Labs. This includes what can be expected in different contexts and at different levels of maturity and turn it into practical frameworks and tools for supporting the everyday work of the Labs. This should evolve into a set of accountabilities. A measurement framework shared between UNDP Headquarters and Country Offices could be developed that recognizes the diverse and in-direct nature of the value-add of the Labs.



52
UNDP. Legal Innovation Adviser (2021)

53
UNDP. Intellectual Property Models for Sustainable Development. Internal Document. (2021)

-
- > **Leverage the global network to advance learning.** As the Accelerator Lab Network matures, invest in the ability of the Accelerator Labs as a global network to create knowledge and enable learning through their activities. The possibility is to transform knowledge management based on more generative and experimental methods. The emphasis should bring together external research, evidence based on ethnographic methods and results of Lab experiments.



03 Managing activities

Developing a clearer articulation of the learning journey of the Labs and what can be expected along the way.

In most Country Offices, there is uncertainty about what sort of projects the Accelerator Labs should work on. Sometimes projects can appear random and unrelated to core programmes or the national or local government agenda. For Country Office employees (including Lab members), this results in uncertainty on what is or isn't a legitimate project, whether it relates to any strategy or if it has the potential to scale. More fundamentally, is it okay to do smaller experiments with incremental value?

As the Labs mature these choices need to be made. What these choices are and what they lead to needs to be clearly articulated with compelling stories. This is linked to the Labs' capacity advancement and maturation over time.

Trade-off

There is a binary logic among many of the people involved who consider the Lab activities to be inside or outside of strategic priorities. The trade-off here is to leave it open for a diverse set of judgements or invest in developing a more nuanced understanding of the Lab's learning journey. The former risks resulting in inconsistent diversity with little possibility for quality assurance. The latter risks creating a more prescriptive approach, specifying the journey of the Lab and what is needed at different stages of it.

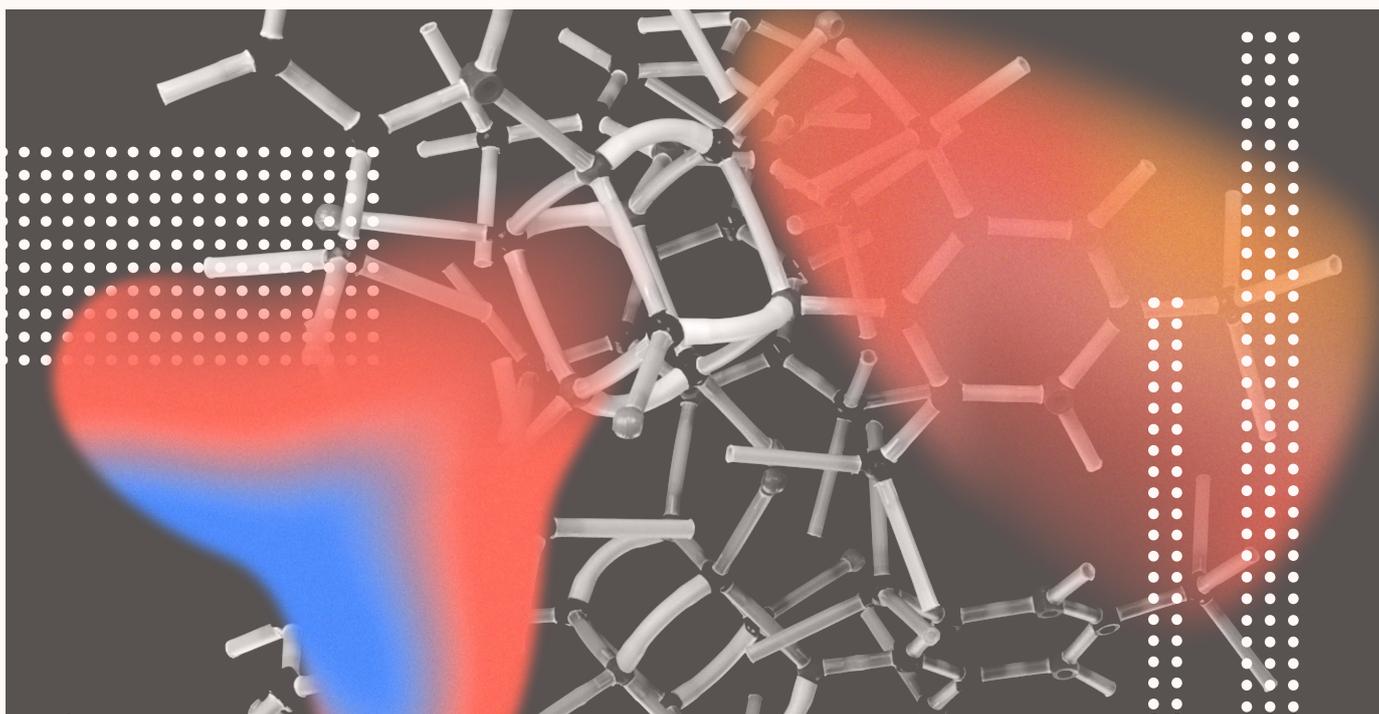


Recommendations

Resident Representatives and Lab employees should challenge the binary logic of the Lab's activities being either strategic (within an existing formal strategy) or not important (fringe). Develop a set of scenarios of what feasible trajectories can be expected for the life cycle of the Accelerator Labs based on lessons learned and experience from innovation labs around the world.

This will include:

- > **Illustrating what it would take** to make these different life cycles happen in practice—including testing how the Labs can integrate as R&D functions in the Country Office.
- > **Adopting a more nuanced approach** where a wide range of activities can be seen to serve the purpose of the Lab's development and to create a set of alternative project criteria and accountabilities.
- > **Creating legitimacy** by seeing value in terms of longer-term strategy, potentially linked to the UNDP strategic plan. This includes allowing for and prioritizing activities that align systems transformation approaches with the current focus of the Accelerator Labs—as is being done with the Deep Demonstrations in Bolivia, Zimbabwe, Vietnam and other UNDP Country Offices.



04 Setting up the team

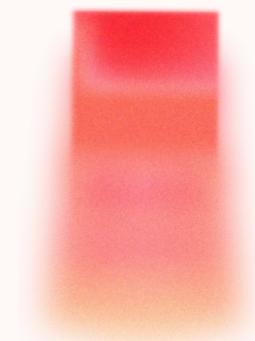
Invest in innovation leadership and team development across UNDP to create better strategic management of the Labs within Country Offices.

Given their small size and the limited resources available, many Labs have exceeded what can be expected of them. The importance of supportive leadership has been highlighted across the entire Accelerator Lab Network. Country Office leadership needs to be able to position the Lab's role to strategically connect to programme work in new ways while proactively managing potential resistance to new ways of working. That could be through framing issues that bridge silos (like in Uganda on deforestation) or by reorganizing programme processes to enable collaborative and explorative scoping of all programme work (like in Bosnia and Herzegovina).

The evaluation findings reveal has learned that the leadership required for supporting shifts in practice is often characterized by the ability to see the strategic value of applying new methods and being able to organize ways for the Labs to create value for the Country Offices. This leadership is characterized by humility, experimentation and a learning-orientation which manifests in how they take ownership of and collaborate around the strategic positioning of the Lab, how they manage people, knowledge and data, and ultimately drive behavioural change to do project and programme delivery differently.

Trade-off

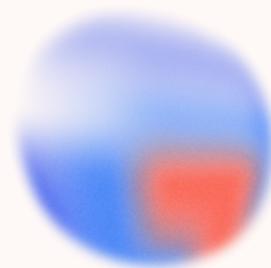
There is a significant difference in the value contribution of Labs with leadership having previous experience with innovation compared to ones where leadership has little or no experience or training in innovation. A trade-off here is keeping the status quo or attempting to maximize the Lab's value contributions through significant investment in developing innovation leadership capacity among current Country Office executive management.



Recommendations

It is important to use the executive function to deepen investment in innovation leadership development across UNDP Country Offices. This involves:

- > **Seeing future investments in leadership as a core part of the longer-term sustainability of the Accelerator Lab Network**—both through training, capacity building and recruitment priorities. (in particular if there is strategic commitment to see the Labs integrating as permanent R&D functions).
- > **Enabling and supporting better collaboration and teamwork** within the Country Office environment through engagement with leadership around effective ways of setting up the Lab team and organizing work flows.
- > **Clarifying roles and responsibilities of the Labs** and describing the specific requirements for supporting collaborative experimentation. This is seen especially in convening and facilitating the collaborative process beyond any specific method.
- > **Adapting job descriptions** to expand work already ongoing within the new cohort of Labs where job descriptions are reflecting better alignment between “exploration” and “solutions mapping.”
- > **Reviewing methodologies and expertise** to deal with difficulties within the Country Offices in understanding the value of the current methods applied. This is particularly important in light of accounts of Lab contributions more frequently coming in the shape of convening and facilitating the collaborative process across stakeholders and unusual partners than through specific methodological contributions. This evaluation does not judge whether these accounts are reflected in the actual value created, but it does recognize the need to effectively socialize these methods to support new ways of working.



6.4 Looking ahead: a roadmap for success

There is obvious scope and rationale to continue the initiative beyond the three-year timeframe. Given that the Accelerator Labs are a time-bound initiative to inject innovation into UNDP's organizational DNA, it is worth exploring how to establish the labs as a permanent R&D function within UNDP Country Offices around the world to ensure continuous exploration and experimentation related to evolving sustainable development challenges. This function could be central to UNDP's innovation capacity. Not as a one-off project or programme, but as an institutional innovation: a way of continuously exploring and experimenting with new ways of dealing with the SDGs. One that shifts UNDP's:

- > **Approach**—towards more user-oriented, iterative, learning-oriented and portfolio-driven methods and processes.
- > **Relationships**—towards better ways of connecting with local communities and sourcing solutions from the bottom up.
- > **Learning**—towards better ways of supporting project work and new kinds of knowledge management and curation.
- > **Culture**—towards increased mutual trust and collaboration and widespread agile and experimental culture.

There are components of UNDP's Accelerator Lab Network that model what a continuous R&D function could look like.

Considering lessons learned, observed signals of an emerging new practice, and the potential created by the Accelerator Lab Network, this evaluation puts forward various sets of considerations and recommendations that, taken as a whole, would increase the likelihood of a successful trajectory for making the most of the initiative. In their nature, they are interconnected and should be considered holistically, in relation to each other rather than as separate steps. They overlap with existing initiatives and priorities already taken by the global team to support the initiative—efforts that, in this light, only should be strengthened further.

This evaluation has put together a suggested roadmap for the shorter term that lays out recommended actions and priorities. To fully unleash the potential of the Accelerator Lab Network, further support and investment should make use of the roadmap on the following pages.



01 Short-term actions

Ensure continuous dialogue about strategic positioning

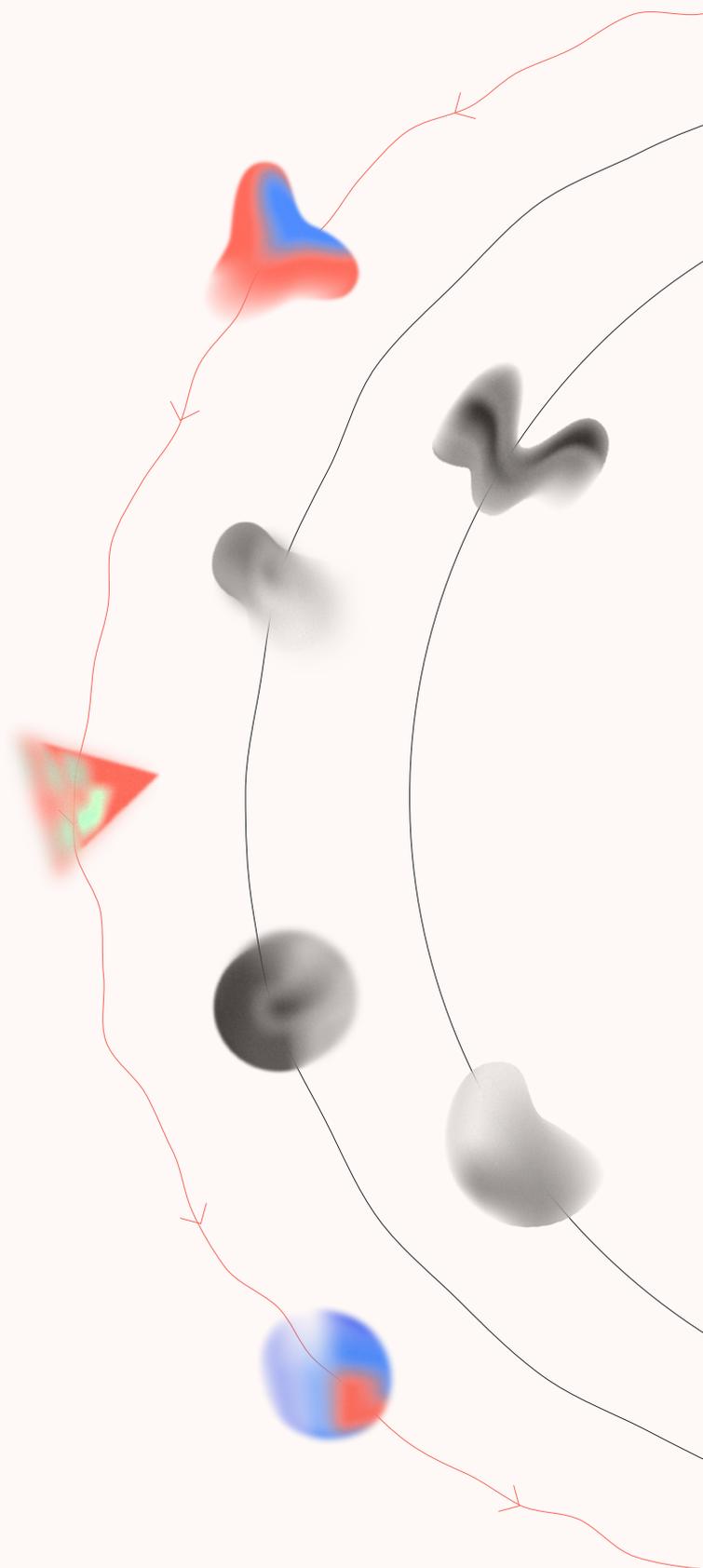
- > Explore and illustrate how to best position the labs within the Country Offices and national context. This will differ country by country.
- > Manage expectations by creating concrete ways of continuously refining the strategy and the lab's role, contributions and accountabilities given that the purpose of the lab is contextual and subject to change.

Describe patterns of successful integration

- > Begin to capture and describe what successful integration can look like in different circumstances to manage expectations.
- > Have a sensitivity to keeping a distinct methodology and approach given that the labs are meant to be on an explorative, boundary-pushing and frontier space which is at odds to usual narratives of integration.

Show possible trajectories of the labs

- > Update the story of what the labs can (or should) achieve as they mature from small-scale experimentation to systems transformation.
- > Develop a set of possible trajectories for the life cycle of the Accelerator Labs.
- > Illustrate the possible learning journeys that need to be enabled and supported to make these different life cycles happen.



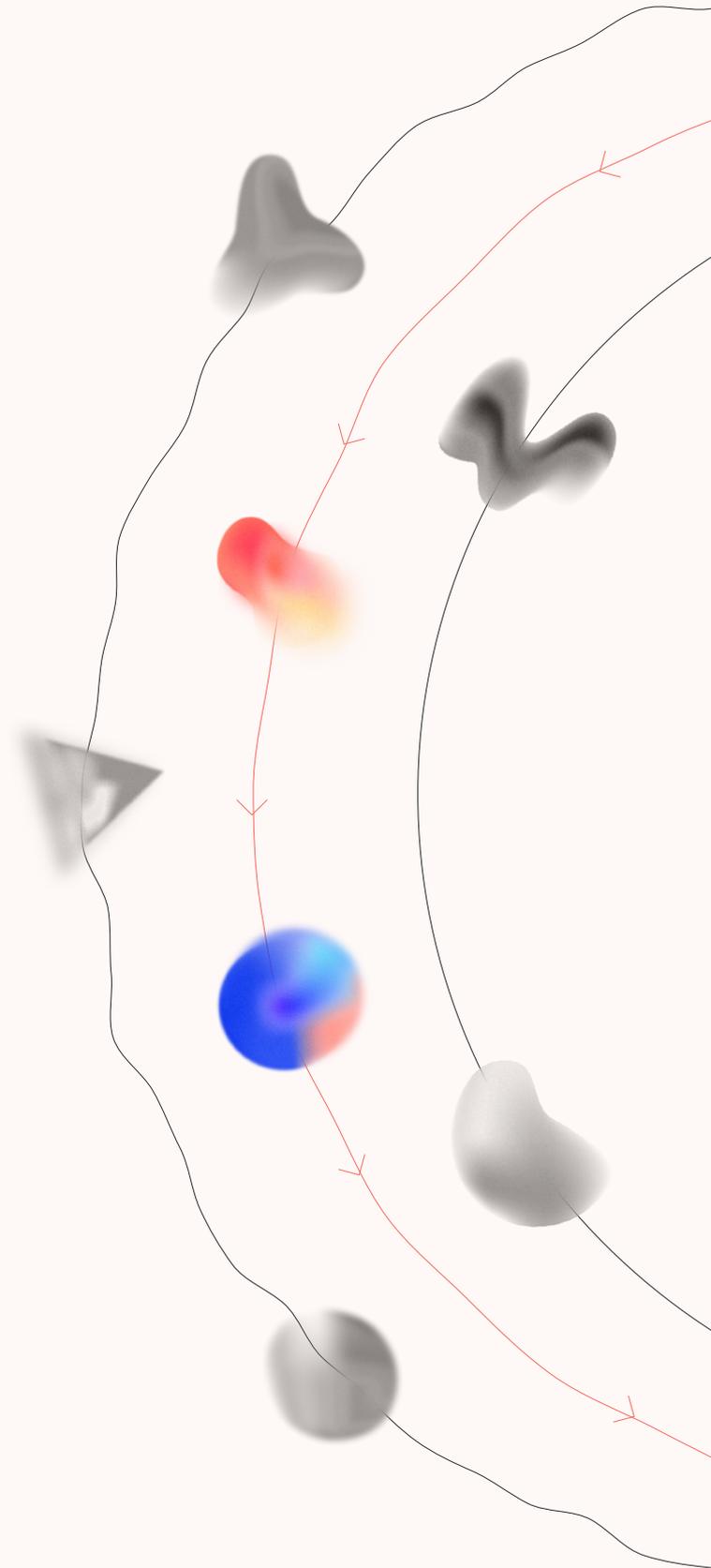
02 Medium-term investment

Leverage the global network to advance learning

- > As the Lab network matures, invest in the ability of the Accelerator Labs as a global network to automatically generate knowledge and advance learning through action.
- > Transform knowledge management to be based on more generative and experimental methods.
- > Bring together external research, evidence based on ethnographic methods and results of Lab experiments.

Evolve the approach to impact measurement

- > Expand the impact measurement based on lessons learned about the actual value creation of the Labs and what can be expected in different contexts and at different levels of maturity.
- > Supplement current results frameworks to create space for accountability for learning and improvement, supporting experimental processes of testing assumptions and ideas
- > Experiment with and embed developmental evaluation logics within project delivery.



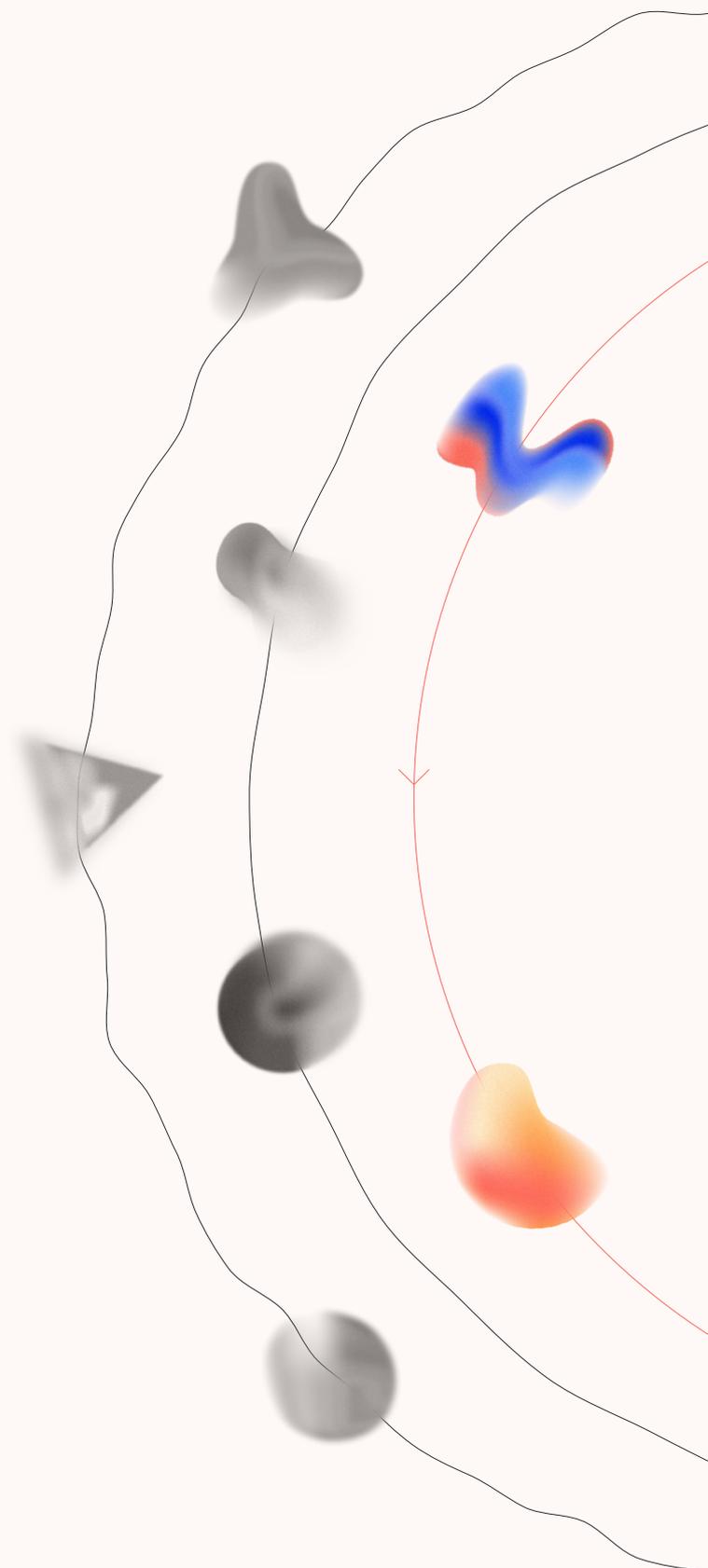
03 Longer-term organizational strategy recommendations

Rethinking UNDP administrative systems

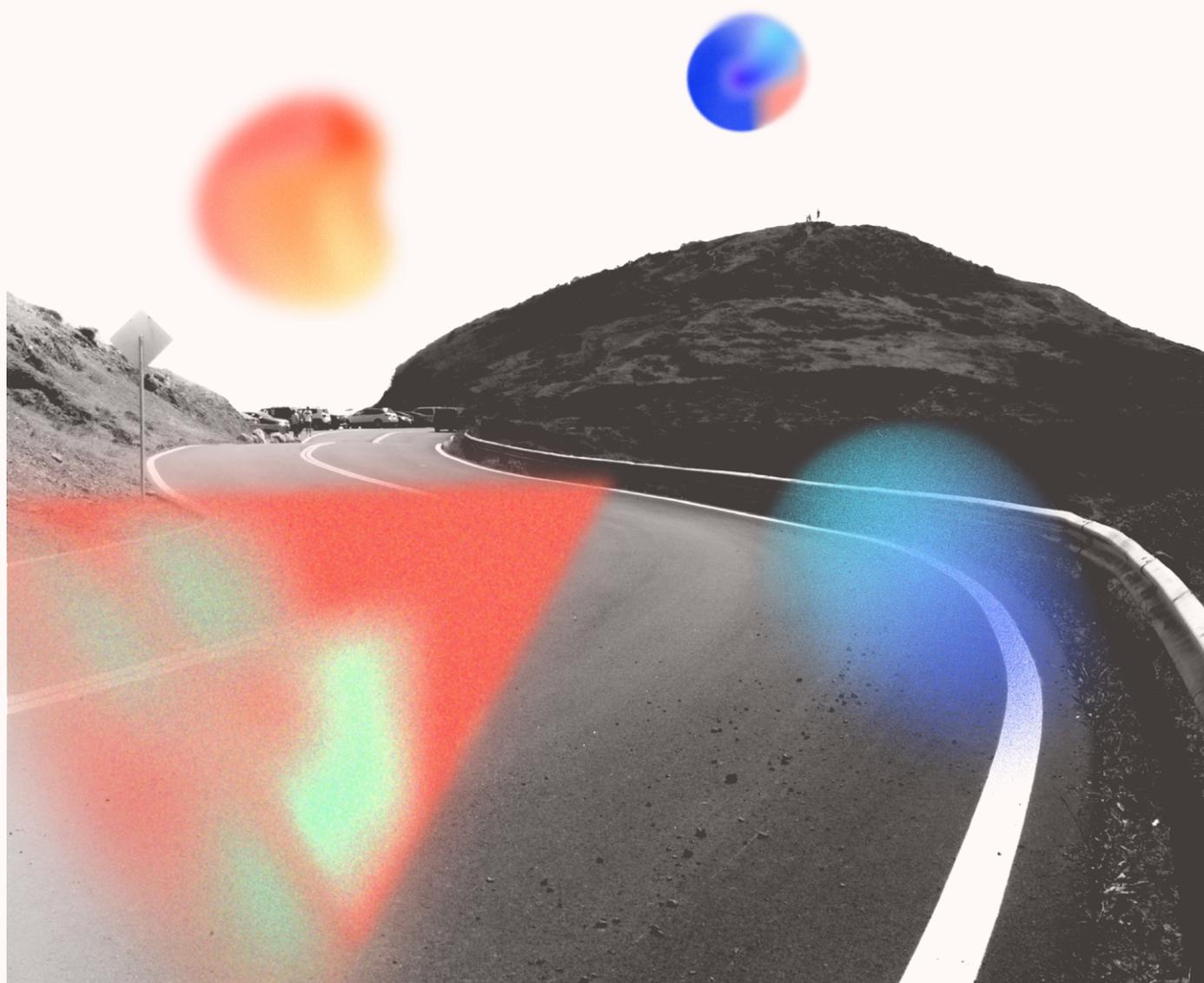
- > Create an enabling environment for new ways of working and partnering—including procurement, IP, reporting and evaluation systems.
- > Create environments that adapt to digital and innovation needs, support effective project delivery and enable learning cultures.
- > Build on efforts already initiated around legal innovation and alternative modelling in IP and procurement areas.

Investing in innovation leadership

- > Use the executive function to deepen investment in innovation leadership development across UNDP to create better strategic ownership within Country Offices.
- > Prioritize leadership investment as part of future investments in the longer-term sustainability of the Accelerator Lab Network—both through training, capacity building and recruitment priorities.
- > Revisit the overall Country Office team setup with a focus on improving collaboration and teamwork.



It is essential to recognize that any roadmap for making the most of the Accelerator Labs involves a collective learning journey on all levels: in the labs, within the Country Offices and at the global level within UNDP. Instead of basing decisions on existing knowledge, adopting an experimental approach should allow for exploring and testing how new interventions can function together. It also allows understanding of what different levels of governance are required to create desired sustainable effects. This experimental approach has to be accompanied by ongoing organizational dialogue about how things are working and what is needed in terms of support.



07

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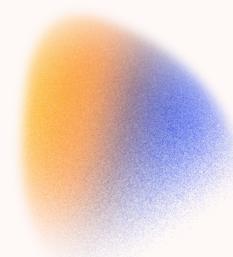
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7.2 Interviews

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- > **Carole Flores**, Côte d'Ivoire's Resident Representative.
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Beyond the mentioned interviewees, a huge thanks to everyone else who has engaged with and provided input to the research process - in sessions, workshops and conversations. There are too many to mention here, but your support is much appreciated.

7.3 Materials we were given access to

- > **The results framework**—the global team undertook a data gathering exercise to report on the three outputs, including a number of surveys and assessments of the Labs' activities and progress.
- > **Labs' weekly reflections**—each Lab posts a short reflection report at the end of week sharing their activities, learning and processes.
- > **Labs' action plans**—each Lab sets an action plan to document their project cycles, showing key assumptions, partnerships, methods and approaches used.
- > **Social listening & Wiki**—the global team have created a social listening tool to gather trends in WhatsApp conversations among the Labs and generate insights into a shared Wiki page.

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