



UNOPS



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**In partnership with others: Lessons learned on scaling-up
innovation to reach people in need**

Background paper prepared jointly by
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Introduction

1. Our rapidly evolving world is becoming increasingly complex and interlinked. The twenty-first century has seen unprecedented growth in population, technological innovation, mobility and interconnectivity. As a result, the United Nations system is seeking to improve the way it responds to global challenges through innovative approaches and novel partnerships.
2. In adapting to this growing complexity, the United Nations system needs dynamic solutions and embrace new ways of developing them. Some established methods are proving limited in response to uncertain humanitarian scenarios and/or the shifting development landscape.
3. Partnerships serve as key drivers of change. United Nations funds and programmes are looking to develop and bring together new partnerships with government, civil society, academia and the private sector. One promising area is innovative financing, and United Nations funds and programmes are exploring approaches to mobilizing and utilizing funding that maximize the impact and flexibility of limited resources.
4. Operating in an increasingly complex environment demands careful preparation and risk management. Innovation requires calculated risks, a willingness to fail and an ability to learn from that failure. For the United Nations system, organizational attitudes need to include a greater appetite for risk and the necessary lessons-learned.
5. Innovation should not be an end in itself, but rather integrated into programmes, policies and technical assistance from the beginning. Integration is particularly important in the processes of rapid testing, and then ability to take successes to scale. This will further facilitate the realization of human rights as outlined in the major international human rights instruments. In this sense, innovation can be seen as reinforcing a human rights approach to programming.
6. This background paper will outline key notions of innovating for impact and creating an environment for innovation. It aims to help Member States understand the challenges faced by United Nations funds and programmes, and provides a number of recommendations to reduce bottlenecks and increase organizational support for innovation. Additional information on country-specific innovation examples will be available on PaperSmart.

Innovating for impact

7. In broad terms, innovation is doing something new or different that adds value. Often this means that initial ideas and developments are introduced into a conducive, innovative environment for testing and fine-tuning. Recognizing that innovation may have an impact on

a number of interconnected areas, United Nations funds and programmes are looking to increase knowledge-sharing efforts. Particularly, existing data and dashboards can serve to reduce the costs of innovation and mitigate the risk of failure.

8. United Nations funds and programmes may need to develop a course of action or update conventional systems and organizational processes to establish new ways of working together. Innovation is thus a means of enhancing ‘value for money’ by improving how the United Nations system collaborates.
9. To be truly impactful, United Nations funds and programmes focus not only on innovation in programme but also the types of processes needed for successful ideas to generate results to scale. This means that initial ideas should be tested – prototyped or piloted – and rigorously monitored and measured. This type of iterative process, often used by the technology sector, is more likely to translate into successful outputs and results.
10. Partnerships can serve to maximize the platforms, resources and best practices available to United Nations funds and programmes. Innovation around common processes and approaches can serve to build a scaffolding for change. The United Nations system can benefit from collaboration with the private sector, the public sector and non-governmental organizations and research institutions, based on shared values and a defined set of innovation principles.¹ Technology, infrastructure and policy frameworks can serve as major enablers for developing, monitoring and reporting on results. Such enablers ensure results are sustainable, can be scaled up, and strengthen the space to create.
11. **Technology.** Technological innovations demonstrate the potential for shared high-impact cross-cutting gains. Data systems and dashboards are crucial for innovation because they enable more accurate, relevant and measurable programming, and improve transparency and accountability. Technology is particularly important for registry and statistic systems, which help to identify the most vulnerable so that they can be assisted in meaningful ways.
 - a. Data and platform sharing. Evidence is necessary in defining needs, setting goals, planning interventions and measuring impact. Data and platform-sharing tools allow United Nations funds and programmes to improve transparency and demonstrate the rationale behind investment choices. Multiple data sets and platform systems have already been developed by United Nations entities, governments and the private sector. Greater partnership on existing data sets and platforms can lead to more strategic and

¹ The Principles for Innovation and Technology in Development have been endorsed and adopted by EOSG Global Pulse, Gates Foundation, IKEA Foundation, UN Foundation, OCHA, SIDA, UNDP, UNFPA, UNHCR, UNICEF, USAID and WFP.

successful innovation. In learning from the private sector, where trend analysis and visualization identifying patterns in behaviour help to test ideas quickly, United Nations funds and programmes could develop more effective responses more efficiently.

- b. Real-time information. Thanks to recent advances in technology, particularly cellular telephony, governments and United Nations funds and programmes can use real-time information in new ways: Utilizing text messaging to connect marginalized communities to crucial services, creating early-warning systems to address needs more quickly, and speeding up surveys to monitor implementation. These capacities are still new to the development world. Social media and technology companies are increasingly entering emerging markets where the United Nations system works to reach new users, disseminate new content and establish new networks. Short-cycle trend data can be made available between longer cycles of traditional large-scale surveys, thus empowering decision makers by improving their situational awareness.
- c. Identity, civil registration and vital statistics. For vulnerable populations, formal registration can be the difference between sickness and health, safety and danger, and even life and death. Registration and access to national identification systems help to guarantee that all populations, including the most vulnerable, are able to exercise their legal rights (e.g. participation in electoral processes) and access basic services such as health, social security and education. Often registration and formal status are crucial prerequisites to national land ownership, citizenship and legal protections. Technology is already being utilized to help identify and register the most vulnerable populations in various contexts.

12. Infrastructure. Lack of infrastructure remains a barrier to development, and is an obstacle to the expansion of market accessibility and capacity development.

- a. Transportation infrastructure. Developing infrastructure for transportation is crucial for providing consistent access to the most vulnerable communities and for expanding local capacities for mobility and market accessibility.
- b. Electricity and power. Providing reliable access to electricity and power is necessary for poverty reduction, and is especially important for reaching the most vulnerable populations. Whether in rural schools, local health centres or densely populated urban areas, most electronic devices and means of communication rely on electricity. Advances in solar-power technology, for instance, have led to an exponential decrease in costs and help support more sustainable ways of energy creation. Similarly, advances in financial packages and community-based production solutions allow for more equitable distribution of innovative power projects.

- c. Telecommunications. Information technology has changed the way people communicate. The nearly ubiquitous cellular phone signal can change the way development and humanitarian partnerships are created and implemented by ensuring they are closely tied to quickly changing local needs. The speed of innovation around mobile services and the ability for simple communication devices to reach even the most marginalized communities, and allow their voices to be heard and their needs acted upon, give United Nations funds and programmes new specificity and accuracy in designing collaborations and programmes.
- d. Digital financial services. Across emerging markets, the use of cellular phones for mobile payments has substantially improved the accessibility of financial services. The growing availability of mobile banking is one of the most promising developments in financial services in the developing world. More and more consumers are using mobile financial services for increasing savings, transferring money and accessing loans.

13. **Policy frameworks.** To enable innovation for social good, existing policy frameworks may need to be updated and adapted. United Nations funds and programmes, in collaboration with governments and the private sector, can play an important role in facilitating exchange of good practices. This includes legal frameworks on data protection and security; emerging forms of financing such as crowd-funding (equity and loan-based); broadband access and digital literacy training with a gender focus, among others.

14. These areas for collaboration all contribute to an increased capacity for scaling-up proven ideas and innovations that work. In some cases, the experience, expertise or capacity of one United Nations agency might help another United Nations entity to improve its efforts to scale up innovation. Accordingly, United Nations funds and programmes must improve efforts to identify comparative advantages that encourage new collaborations based on existing capacities and models.

Underpinning success: Creating an innovative environment

15. A number of supporting factors can influence the success of innovative ideas, procedures and products. Innovation benefits from a systemic approach that incorporates data and information flows, rules and regulations, and staff capacity.

16. The human factor of innovation cannot be ignored. Innovation comes from working together. Governments should therefore be encouraged to invest in the capacity and development of institutions, as well as individuals to serve as catalysts of innovation. This includes providing

incentives for United Nations funds and programmes to pursue innovation and the creation of a stable framework to maximize the chances of success in innovation.

17. Data and information dashboards are powerful building blocks for developing, testing and reporting on innovation. Governments, private entities and social actors can facilitate the flow of information, data and knowledge, which helps United Nations funds and programmes to be more strategic and informed in their decision-making.
18. Working to create innovative environments will be crucial to ensuring that United Nations organizations, governments and private-sector stakeholders work together to develop innovative ideas that will serve beneficiaries. The development of innovation networks and geographic ‘innovation hubs’ may foster the creation of communities that transcend the public and private sectors.
19. The complexity of global challenges can be better tackled through open and collaborative means of working. Flexible approaches will be most effective when pooling resources, developing talent and accelerating reporting on projects – across government, public and private sectors, and research institutions. Temporary interdisciplinary teams and joint piloting of projects may be useful for incubating innovations in development.
20. Innovation entails calculated risk-taking to identify the ‘best fit’ solutions generating the biggest impact. United Nations funds and programmes need the space to design and test, with end-users, solutions that have a possibility of failing. Such failures need to be shared among United Nations funds and programmes, as well as partners. This will accelerate learning and help to build upon evidence-based approaches. It is important that all stakeholders, including host and donor governments, provide enough room for risk-taking to take place, while United Nations funds and programmes pursue a ‘do no harm’ approach in their innovation processes and methods.

Challenges

21. The United Nations faces a number of challenges in developing and scaling-up innovative ideas, processes and products. Many of the challenges surrounding innovation are a result of real and perceived risks of failure. There are a number of challenges to risk propensity, including structural, regulatory and cultural barriers. Sometimes new initiatives do not readily show a clear end result. However, expecting too much in too short a timeframe can result in failure and may lead to risk aversion.
22. Short-term risk aversion reinforces a culture of ‘business as usual’ rather than promoting new ways of working through risk-taking. The lack of support structures and appropriate

timeframes for innovation may lead to inflexibility in organizations, where a low appetite for risk leads to inaction. However, failure to act can itself bear major risks, diminishing the ability to adequately address emerging challenges.

23. Implementing supporting measures, such as stronger project management of innovation and appropriate oversight mechanisms, will help to mitigate associated risks of failure. The United Nations system is looking for ways to update its rules and procedures to better support, not hinder, innovative processes.
24. The current financial regulations and practices may hinder financing for the initiation, piloting and scaling-up of innovative approaches. There is a need for greater understanding within the United Nations system, including among the governing bodies of the United Nations funds and programmes, that the failure of certain innovative ideas should not be seen as a broader sign of managerial or organizational failure.
25. To date, United Nations funds and programmes do not have much access to designated financial channels for innovation. Innovation often receives sporadic financing, limiting the ability of United Nations organizations to develop optimal approaches or to test the scalability of projects through piloting. Securing financing for the most impactful innovative ideas has proven to be a challenge.

Going forward

26. The challenges outlined above require a systemic response that focuses on the people, rules and processes that govern innovative approaches. A response will involve improving institutional systems so that they incorporate and promote structures for innovation, and provide models for scaling-up innovative ideas, processes and products.
27. The Executive Boards of the United Nations funds and programmes can play a significant role in enabling innovation, particularly by encouraging the notion that innovation needs a new mind set and an expanded 'space'. Possible areas for further action are:
 - a. Partnerships. Assist in shifting the paradigm of partnerships beyond projects and sectors to portfolios and market segments, and recognizing that innovation partnerships are inherently based on shared values;
 - b. Risk-taking. Acknowledge that innovation requires taking some risk. The Executive Boards can help support the creation of institutional structures that allow for a 'safe space' for experimentation with new approaches and learning from that experience. This would allow for the scaling-up of what works, while maintaining sufficient overall risk awareness and mitigation.

- c. Financing and prioritization. Recognize that greater flexibility of funding is necessary for innovation and encouraging the prioritization of innovation projects that can deliver the greatest impact.
- d. Measuring results. Collaboration with United Nations funds and programmes in measuring performance of innovation in order to ensure that solid evidence can be built upon to help organizations learn from past experience.