



15 Innovation Lessons Learned

Lessons learned by the Dutch Coalition for Humanitarian Innovation – September 2016

Matchmaking – engaging the right partners on the right challenges

1. To create the energy and interest needed to kick-off the innovation projects, the match between the challenges of the humanitarian field on the one hand, and the thematic interests of corporates on the other, is key. To be successful in focusing their energy on the right challenges, we need to understand their respective needs and interests from the beginning.
2. There are differences between the different types of partners within DCHI, that come from humanitarian organisations, companies, government, and academia. Even more so, humanitarian organisations differ from another, just like companies, government institutions and universities do. We need to acknowledge and document the different capacities and needs different partners have, to find the right matches between them.

Commitment

3. Commitment and ownership of all partners is critical for success. For a project to succeed, the least that is needed is that all partners are willing to dedicate time and resources. This implies that organisations need to give the required priority to innovation activities at all levels. High level commitment is key to ensure that the people involved from the respective organisations are given the support, time and mandate needed to dedicate themselves to the relevant projects.
4. Commitment to innovation projects is strongest when the focus of the activities is perceived to be in line with the priorities and interests of all partners involved. If the perceived 'win' that can be gained from the engagement with a project is not strong enough, the commitment may be too weak to add value.
5. Joint commitment of partners requires trust between them. This trust can only develop if there is a mutual understanding within a project of partners' respective intentions and perceived win.
6. In the initial stages, it is important that the commitment of partners is not based on a promise for funding; to ensure partners will really make an effort to find their win within the project itself. However, once actual prototypes may be developed or need to be implemented, a more formal commitment of partners is desirable, and access to sufficient financial resources may be needed to move forward.

Innovation process

7. While innovation projects differ from one another, they do roughly follow the same steps. By keeping this process in mind as we plan for our projects, we can foresee which steps to take at which moments, the needs that will arise in the various stages, and the milestones that will have to be reached to go through the entire process successfully. Thus, a clear planning with milestones and decision-making moments is required to be able to quickly see results or 'fail fast'.
8. In planning the process, we should distinguish between the 'minimal viable product' and the 'definition of awesome'. Divide the project in smaller components which by themselves add value. This will allow to engage particular partners more actively per component. We should not let ourselves be limited by barriers in the process, but rather ask ourselves, what do we need to succeed? This is different in each phase, but we can engage the right partners and take the right action in each phase to reach success.
9. Having partners with very different backgrounds collaborate effectively does not happen without an effort to bring them together on the same page. Organizational support is necessary to accelerate quickly; projects without an actively lead to take on the project management role will not reach far.



Dare to get started

10. Start with the problem in mind and quickly move to testing innovations with potential users. Go from 'framing the challenge' to 'focus' as soon as possible to kick start the activity. The focus can be further defined in the project in an iterative manner as we learn along the way. Because no matter how thorough our assessment of the needs is, or how intense the engage with affected people, limitations to our knowledge will always remain. The question we should ask ourselves before we proceed should therefore not be, do we have all the knowledge to start a perfect project? Rather we should be mindful to ensure that at least we are not doing harm, while we continue to move forward, and continue to test our assumptions along the way.

Human centric design

11. To ensure the innovation is demand-driven, human centric design with affected people is key. They know best what their needs are, and how we can best respond to these. Human centric co-creation can take place in affected areas, but can also be realized in the Netherlands itself. Collaboration can for example be sought with refugees from target areas that are currently residing in the Netherlands, and can be engaged as active members of the project-team throughout all phases of the project.

Innovation

12. Activities of DCHI can focus on innovation that aims to make changes to the system, as well as on process- and product innovation. By making this distinction as we engage in various activities, we explain what we are meaning to achieve with our actions.
13. The guiding principles need to be refined as we continue to learn together. They can be divided into principles and values, and operational do's and don'ts which flow from our principled approach & lessons learned.
14. The risk with the term 'innovation' is that it can be associated with hypes ("fashionista" behavior). Those people that are aiming for incremental improvement of existing practices, or transformation in the humanitarian sector, do not necessarily consider this to be innovation themselves. We should be mindful to explain what we mean when we speak of innovation in the humanitarian sector, depending on who we are speaking too.

Engaging the coalition as a whole

15. DCHI consist of the entire partner network. Although the board and support office play an important role in keeping the coalition going and growing, ultimately this is a responsibility and an achievement of the network as a whole. However, a concerted effort from the board and support office is needed to keep the entire network engaged on the shared agenda, and ensure everyone feels part of the coalition.