

Learning from UN ‘innovation spaces’

By Camilla Burkot

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A [working paper](#) published in mid March by the University of Oxford’s Refugee Studies Centre (RSC), entitled *Innovation spaces: transforming humanitarian practice in the United Nations*, presents new research on the objectives, motivations, and challenges of ‘innovation spaces’ in humanitarian and development work.

Through providing an analysis of innovation ‘spaces’, ‘labs’ and ‘hubs’ within United Nations agencies, the working paper offers a number of insights relevant to DFAT’s [recently launched](#) innovationXchange, which has indicated that [humanitarian innovation](#) will be one of its priority areas.

First, *Innovation spaces* outlines a pair of imperatives facing innovation labs: the ‘indirect imperative’ of fostering organisational change, and the ‘direct imperative’ of enabling communities of beneficiaries to lead their own change. The paper argues that these imperatives should be balanced, so that an innovation lab can work effectively within the existing organisational structure while meeting the real needs of aid beneficiaries in novel ways.

Related to this, the paper highlights the significant knowledge gaps in how the impact of innovation labs is measured. When embedded in an existing institution, there is a risk that innovative practice and risk-taking may be (unintentionally) stifled by attempts to capture or quantify it as part of standard monitoring and reporting practices.

The paper also acknowledges that while failure is part of innovation spaces’ *raison d’être*, in practice they must be perceived as ‘failing responsibly’ in order to remain sustainable (p. 22). As Devpolicy Research Fellow Terence Wood and others have [previously commented](#), whether the innovationXchange will be able to achieve this delicate balance amid departmental budget and cultural pressures remains to be seen.

All of these points indicate an overarching need for innovation spaces to clearly define who their ‘end-users’ are, as these are the people who should be the ‘heart and soul of innovation spaces, determining their direction’ (p. 15). Without this, innovation spaces risk pursuing innovation merely for innovation’s sake, leaving their objectives and impacts – and thus their ability to measure success – uncertain.

Though its recommendations raise the bar quite high for innovation ventures in development, the RSC working paper also suggests that even where the innovation label is

applied as strategic 'hype', it can still be 'useful hype' (p. 23) – hype that boosts fundraising, or promotes unorthodox approaches in orthodox institutions. Ideally, though, the innovationXchange will prove itself to be not merely useful, but a productive and effective catalyst for change in the Australian aid program.

About the author/s

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Camilla Burkot was a Research Officer at the Development Policy Centre, and Editor of the Devpolicy Blog, from 2015 to 2017. She has a background in social anthropology and holds a Master of Public Health from Columbia University, and has field experience in Eastern and Southern Africa, and PNG. She now works for the Burnet Institute.

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