

# INNOVATION QUARTERLY

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INNOVATION  
JAM EMPOWERS  
REFUGEE AND LOCAL  
INNOVATORS TO  
CREATE THEIR OWN  
SOLUTIONS**

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**UNHCR**  
The UN Refugee Agency





# HOW THE SDGS CHANGE THE ROLE OF HUMANITARIAN INNOVATION

By Dan McClure,  
Innovation  
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ThoughtWorks

**In the fanfare surrounding the release of the Sustainable Development Goals it may be easy to miss a shift in thinking that can have a dramatic impact on the role of Humanitarian innovators. Our job as advocates and practitioners of innovation is about to get much harder... and more important.**

In closing remarks at the recently concluded OCHA Global Humanitarian Policy Forum in New York, Hansjoerg Strohmeyer, Chief of the Policy Development and Studies Branch of OCHA, challenged the current humanitarian model, where extended displacements can run for 10 years using the same mode of operation.

He sees the Sustainable Development Goals as an opportunity to change this thinking. Simply meeting

ongoing needs for the delivery of aid should no longer be enough. Humanitarians need to accept responsibility for scaling up local actors instead of just funding the sector's own operations.

The themes are repeated in OCHA's newly released report, Leaving No One Behind, Humanitarian Effectiveness in the Age of Sustainable Development Goals. The report reinforces the message that investments in aid often create humanitarian

holding patterns, ultimately denying opportunities for self-reliance and real resilience. There is call for change. Reducing vulnerability and improving resilience needs to be seen as an essential component of humanitarian action.

## Innovation becomes aid – internal to external focus

So, how does this change the role of humanitarian innovators?

At its heart, innovation is about changing the way that systems work. When calls are made to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals by progressively reducing the vulnerability of affected populations, what is really being said is that innovations are needed in the complex systems that surround a local context.

While traditional aid may dominate the early days of a crisis response, over time a shift must be made to evolve the underlying systems that create risk and fragility in the first place. In effect, innovation focused on serving local communities progressively replaces traditional aid as the most important component of humanitarian action.

It might well be argued that the development/humanitarian sector has long been working to address issues present in underlying community systems. Is this simply rebranding business as usual with an innovation label? The facts on the ground seem to argue against this view. Decade long humanitarian holding patterns are indicative of an ongoing failure to reduce long-term vulnerability. Innovators need to step up and contribute more.

## Shifting from internal to external challenges

This should be an exciting opportunity for innovators to expand their impact in the field, but it is not one for which most are well prepared.

Today, a large portion of humanitarian innovation focuses on internal change, making incremental improvements to existing systems. For example, an innovator might replace time consuming error-prone paper forms with digital data capture, or use big data to more accurately target aid deliveries. The context for this work is usually well understood and at least partially under the control of the innovator.

These inward facing improvements to operational efficiency and effectiveness are important, but they don't change the underlying context for those receiving aid. These community driven challenges are harder. They involve messy real world systems plagued by complex wicked problems. Processes, roles and motivations are less clear-cut and even the root problems to be solved are often unclear.

Lean Startup techniques have been widely adopted to deal with this kind of challenge. Small experimental pilot programs test ideas and teams are given the freedom to fail fast and learn quickly. Funding for early stage pilot programs has grown dramatically over the last 5 years and innovation labs leveraging these techniques are now common in large NGO's and agencies.

Yet despite a growing portfolio of successful pilots, the number of

good ideas that go on to generate sustainable meaningful change is frustratingly small. It is as if the sector has learned to breed new ideas like baby bunnies, but lack the management and innovation tools to make them sustainable solutions in a complex real world context.

Why is there a gap? It is important to understand that when doing complex system innovation, a successful Pilot is just the start of a much longer innovation lifecycle. Innovators must do more than simply test ideas if they are going to create sustainable solutions in communities rich with diverse actors, conflicting motivations, missing capacity, and interconnected dependencies. They need to shape and deploy change across an entire system that currently generates vulnerability.

## Where can an innovator find a roadmap for doing this externally focused complex innovation?

There is good news on this front. The OCHA Leaving No One Behind report lays out a high level framework for tackling complex system innovation. Echoing Mr. Strohmeyer's comments, the report explores what it means to move away from "spending on activities and outputs at the expense of long-term sustainable impact."

What makes the report particularly valuable for innovators is that Lesley Bourns and Jessica Alexander, working with a broad team in the OCHA Policy Analysis and Innovation Section, have defined five actionable strategies for making this shift. (The recommendations appear in the "How Do We Get There" section of the report, beginning on page 72. They have been paraphrased and renumbered here to facilitate discussion.)

1. Begin with a 360 Degree View: Take a systems view of the challenge. Start with whole system perspective of risks and needs. (#3 in the original report)
2. Work toward an Exit Vision: Enter with an exit strategy that ultimately reduces and ends humanitarian need (original report #2)
3. Evolve (Don't Replace) Existing Systems: Reinforce, don't duplicate or replace existing capacities and coping strategies. Recognize the value of building on systems that are already in place. (original report #1)

4. Leverage Diverse Actors and Resources: Work collectively. Leverage the comparative advantage of multiple actors and institutions, including those outside the Humanitarian system. Strengthen connectivity and strategic leadership. Don't do it all yourself. (original report #4)

5. Measure, Learn and Adjust: Measure shared results for cross system accountability. Don't simply execute a series of individual plans. Learn and collectively adjust the path forward. (original report #5)

The five recommendations are not targeted solely at innovation teams. They are good general advice for advancing the SDG's. However, since innovation is at the core of reducing systemic vulnerability, it shouldn't be surprising that these five themes can be applied as a roadmap for guiding complex innovation within affected communities.

## Embracing the difficulty of the work

Shaping innovative change in a complex local context is hard. Incredibly hard. The five-part model from Leaving No One Behind helps to keep the system level challenges front and center, providing principles for a high level practice.

**The journey begins with an embrace of the system nature of the problem (1). Real world communities come with a multitude of interconnected and interacting parts. Attempts to see change as a single point of action are doomed from the outset. The long line of failed cook stove innovations highlights the danger that comes with the hubris of point solutions inserted into complex systems of behavior, culture and economics.**

The exit point is a systems view too (2). The SDG's are not satisfied with unending cycles of aid. There needs to be an exit. However, the goal is not to simply stop the delivery of aid, but rather to shape an environment where vulnerability and the need for aid is vastly reduced.

Between these two holistic views is a process that evolves from one system state to the other (3). Innovators must evolve new capabilities



and resilience within the context of a complex and interconnected system that already exists. They cannot pretend they start with a blank slate and simply replace all the broken parts.

This requires diverse talents and capabilities (4). At every point in the evolution there will be messy problems with multiple dimensions. It's impractical to act alone. Innovators must actively engage the full range of capabilities within their reach and respect the contributions each can make.

And finally, even with all these skills at hand, there will be no clear path from beginning to end. Unexpected insights, constraints, and change will require continuous learning based on measurement (5). This is more than measurement to produce an evidence base. Each measure provides a new insight that helps guide the evolution of the system innovation.

## An important journey with a long way to go

The Sustainable Development Goals call for lasting reductions in vulnerability rather than simply continuing to serve immediate needs. There's a lot to do. If the sector is going to seriously take on this task it must provide affected communities with complex innovation support, drawing on an organizational capacity that is still extremely limited.

Innovators should (and likely will) welcome the opportunity to step up their contributions, but there is still a long way to go on this journey. Recognizing the scale of the shift and admitting the gaps are good first steps. The challenge is then to build the models of practice that enable the externally focused complex innovation that the SDG's require.

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# HUMANITARIAN INNOVATION JAM EMPOWERS REFUGEE AND LOCAL INNOVATORS TO CREATE THEIR OWN SOLUTIONS



**“Jam” usually refers to an informal gathering of jazz or blues musicians improvising together. In recent years, however, information technology companies like IBM have used the concept of a jam to advance collaboration and catalyze solutions to business issues.**

UNHCR recognized the potential of jams to generate solutions in the humanitarian space, too, and began to organize such gatherings. The first one took place in December 2013 at Georgetown University in Washington, where 100 humanitarians crafted a roadmap for humanitarian innovation. The second jam — again in partnership with Georgetown — focused on how to manage the innovation process.

For the third humanitarian innovation jam, UNHCR Innovation chose Uganda. Apart from hosting a large number of refugees and asylum seekers — more than 500,000 — the East African country “offers a relatively positive environment for refugee innovation” since the government has afforded refugees with the freedom to move around and work, according to a report by the

Humanitarian Innovation Project of the University of Oxford’s Refugee Studies Centre.

**“It marked a shift from human-centered design to human-led design, putting refugees in the driver’s seat of innovation”** says Corinne Gray, Innovation Engagement Officer.

The event at Makerere University, the first university in sub-Saharan Africa to host a Microsoft Innovation Center and engage in a partnership with the U.S. Global Development Lab, represents a milestone for the UN Refugee Agency.

“It marked a shift from human-centered design to human-led design, putting refugees in the driver’s seat of innovation,” said Corinne Gray, UNHCR’s Innovation Engagement Officer, and helped to organize the event.

### Innovating with and by refugees

UNHCR tapped the Massachusetts Institute of Technology’s D-Lab to help facilitate the three-day workshop. D-Lab offers guidance to people engaged in international development as it builds a global network of innovators to develop and share ways to improve the lives of the world’s poorest.

On the second day of the workshop, participants — 50 refugees and 50 humanitarians — discussed light-related challenges. Tools in hand, they split into small groups to design a variety of solutions for the homes, the street and the walk to an outdoor toilet.

All too often, said Amy Smith, founder of D-Lab, the humanitarian community focuses on flashy technology and hourlong human-centered design workshops that don’t adequately take into account and don’t build the capacity of refugees. It’s a missed opportunity, as the story of one workshop participant suggests.

The man, one of eight Ugandans who had gone through a D-Lab training before, had wanted to open a bakery. To build it, he soon realized, he needed bricks. His solution: He invented a brick maker.

“We don’t need to be innovating for refugees,” said Gray. “They can pretty much do it themselves if we give them tools; this empowers them to develop and own their solutions. It’s more sustainable this way.”

Jam participants in Kampala explored barriers to locally driven innovation and ways to innovate with scarce resources. Refugees were encouraged to share their innovative ideas and seek feedback. Many participants made plans to continue their collaboration after the event.

### Next steps

UNHCR is working with D-Lab to create a long-term innovation plan for the agency’s operations in Uganda. The partnership, supported by the Humanitarian Innovation Fund, will involve more creative capacity-building and train-the-trainer workshops.

There are also plans to establish local innovation hubs, which could be housed anywhere from thatched-roof huts to concrete building.

Holding jams will certainly continue: Already, UNHCR is looking at new locations — and partners, and it also plans to involve more locals as innovation mentors.

“It makes sense for refugees,” Gray said. “We clearly see the importance in bottom-up innovation.”

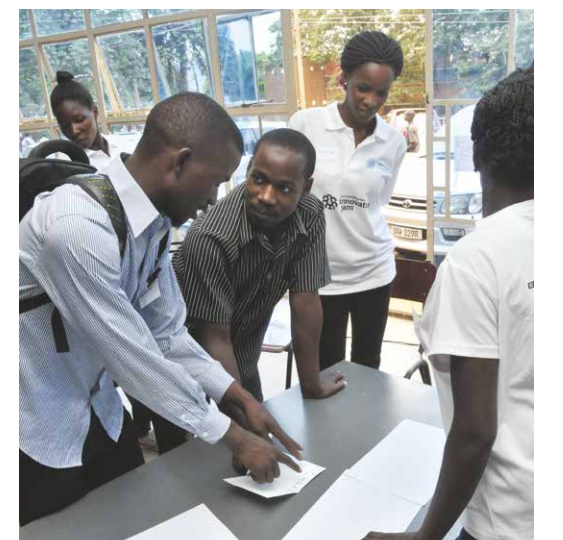
### Are you interested in learning more about the role of bottom-up innovation?

Read more about refugee innovation and the creative capacities of crisis-affected communities at: [innovation.unhcr.org/what-is-bottom-up-innovation/](http://innovation.unhcr.org/what-is-bottom-up-innovation/)



Refugee and local innovators participate in a creative capacity building workshop at the Humanitarian Innovation Jam. Creative Capacity Building (CCB) is a methodology that encourages people to make technologies to improve livelihoods. By distilling elements of the design process into a hands-on curriculum, CCB presents a framework through which anyone can become an active creator of technology.

**“We don’t need to be innovating for refugees,”** said Gray. **“They can pretty much do it themselves if we give them tools; this empowers them to develop and own their solutions. It’s more sustainable this way.”**





# UNHCR INNOVATION FELLOWSHIP 2016 COHORT KICKS OFF IN BANGKOK

**The Global Learning Center in partnership with UNHCR Innovation kicked off the 2016 cohort of Innovation Fellows with a five-day intensive training workshop in Bangkok.**

The workshop served as an introduction to the innovation process, where Fellows were trained in the basics of human-centered design, prototyping, and end-user research. The workshop also included discussions with local social entrepreneurs and innovators, as well as a visit to a 3D printing lab where Fellows will have a chance to experiment with this new, cutting-edge technology.

Like previous cohorts, the 2016 Innovation Fellows were selected after a rigorous process that narrows down 100+ applications to a class of UNHCR staff/affiliates who have a clear operational challenge they'd like to solve using the innovation process. However, this year's cohort includes one Fellow from UNHCR implementing partner, Medecins Sans Frontiers. This is a new, exploratory development in the program that aims to include implementing partners in defining field challenges and developing solutions in a collaborative process.

2015 UNHCR Innovation Fellow, Ioannis Papachristodoulou, credits the Innovation Fellowship for giving him support to bring his creative ideas to life and teaching him new methods and tools for idea generation. One of his favorite parts of the training, however, was being given the opportunity to meet with other UNHCR colleagues and explore innovation collaboratively. "There is this continuous flow and exchange of information, and that's the most important thing in order to move forward with your ideas. You may see or hear something you've never heard before, and you can take it into consideration," he explains. "If you see that something is not working as it should, you must be willing to take the risk and think of how it could be done better. This is how we can provide better assistance to refugees."

Another UNHCR Innovation Fellow, Samuel Gonzaga, was facing a growing challenge in Dollo, Ado – the water and sanitation systems

originally set up in the camp were highly dependent on external resources, and were eating up a substantial part of UNHCR's dwindling operating budget for the area. But Gonzaga learned that this challenge was also part of the process in trying to test and improve his daily work. "One thing we're not worried about is failing," he explains. "Even what is considered negative can turn out to be positive if you keep on improving the product." Overall, the Fellowship taught him a lot about the innovation methodology, notably the need to go through various steps – defining the problem, identifying solutions, creating a prototype, and scaling it up. "For me, the process was very important – more important than the technology," he says. Gonzaga has since prototyped a hybrid water system to address this challenge, although it will likely require further fine-tuning before being fully handed to the refugee community. But Gonzaga is confident his efforts will eventually make the case for investing in sustainable water and sanitation solutions in the camps – and for playing the innovation game.

The 2016 Innovation Fellows will have a valuable opportunity for similar collaboration, with the potential for some truly innovative initiatives.

**Are you interested in learning more about UNHCR's Innovation Fellowship?**

Read stories from previous Fellows and find out how you could be a part of the next cohort at: [innovation.unhcr.org/fellowship/](http://innovation.unhcr.org/fellowship/)



The UNHCR Innovation Fellows workshop included an introduction to human-centered design and end-user research. Here you can see some of the prototypes they developed during their experimentation with new innovation methodologies.



## UNHCR'S INNOVATIVE APPROACH TO FRAUD PREVENTION

**The Office of the Controller at the U.N. Refugee Agency has major plans for 2016. It intends to release a detailed anti-fraud manual and an e-learning module on fraud prevention that will be used for the mandatory training of all UNHCR staff this year.**

Both documents will take into account insights from a survey among UNHCR staff members about fraud and corruption. To ensure everyone can participate, the controller's office tapped an online platform managed by UNHCR Innovation.

"Every organization is vulnerable to fraud, and the environment in which UNHCR operates, given the dependencies on third parties and the delivery of projects through implementing partners in remote and often unstable areas, makes us exposed to higher risks of fraud," said Linda Ryan, Controller and Director of the Division of Financial and Administrative Management.

"UNHCR knows it has to be alert to fraud risks," she added. "There is a

difficulty in identifying the problems and gaps in fraud prevention across the humanitarian sector in general."

**Fighting fraud**

The anti-fraud campaign, officially known as the Fraud Prevention Project, takes guidance from the Strategic Framework for the Prevention of Fraud and Corruption. Issued in 2013, the framework aims to raise awareness about fraud and corruption risks, provides concrete and practical advice to the staff on how to identify cases of misconduct, highlights preventive measures.

Fraud, as per the strategic framework, covers acts or oversights committed to benefit oneself or others. Corruption, meanwhile, involves

directly or indirectly offering, giving, gaining or soliciting favors to improperly influence the actions of others.

**Innovating to prevent fraud**

A survey ran in November 2015 through UNHCR Ideas, a Web-based platform powered by Spigit and conceived by UNHCR Innovation.

The open innovation platform is designed to bring together stakeholders from a wide variety of locations and backgrounds to share their thoughts, concerns and ideas to solve common challenges facing refugees. It crowdsources knowledge and creates communities of practice based on the needs of UNHCR and its partners, allowing the agency to create a more enabling environment for humanitarian workers around the world.

Since it launched in 2013, UNHCR Ideas has hosted eight knowledge crowdsourcing events and is well-regarded among those who have used it.

"The ultimate goal of UNHCR Ideas is to empower and nurture the innovation process within UNHCR operations, while engaging refugee communities directly in driving the solutions that impact them," said Lauren Parater, Associate Innovation Engagement Officer at UNHCR.

According to Parater, UNHCR Innovation was "extremely interested" in engaging the Controller's Office and found the partnership beneficial.

"Our team was learning extensively about the Fraud Prevention Project and the challenges that the organization faces in fraud and corruption at all levels," said Lauren Parater.

As part of the process, UNHCR Innovation and the Controller's Office crafted questions and presented them to members of the agency's fraud prevention working group, who served as moderators of the online exercise. The multi-functional working group is composed of experts from the field and headquarters including the Inspector General's Office, an independent internal body charged with conducting inspections and investigation in operations. Given the online open format, several refugees were able to contribute their thoughts as well.

**Strengthening efforts**

All entries and innovative solutions that were presented are being fed into the Fraud Prevention Project including an upcoming anti-fraud handbook and a mandatory e-learning course on fraud and corruption.

Beyond engaging staff, the Controller's Office is in constant communication with UNHCR's Ethics Office to reinforce its anti-fraud drive. The latter conducts an annual, mandatory refresher course on the code of conduct, which focuses on a new topic each year. This year's spotlight is on fraud and corruption. The Office of the Controller is also exploring with Ethics Office ways to organize a Fraud Prevention Week for UNHCR – an idea that was submitted by one of the Challenge participants.

**Are you interested in launching a challenge on UNHCR Ideas?**

Email [innovation@unhcr.org](mailto:innovation@unhcr.org) for more information on how to collaborate.



# HELP.UNHCR.ORG: A PLATFORM FOR ASYLUM SEEKERS TO ACCESS INFORMATION



**Urban refugees sometimes have a wealth of assistance at their fingertips, and yet no comprehensive, up-to-date and accurate resource to help them access it. UNHCR Innovation tackled this issue with a challenge through UNHCR Ideas and came up with a winner: a website that is simple, effective and now—expanding.**

At [help.unhcr.org](http://help.unhcr.org), refugees find tailored information about rights and protections in their country of asylum. HELP also lists the resources available to them, the specifics of finding work, education and legal advice, and resources refugees can access in person or online.

**“This platform is useful for your operation to provide what you consider the most important protection information asylum seekers should have, and taking into consideration their opinion of refugees on what type of information they need,”**

says Rebecca Moreno, Link Lab Manager.

For a glimpse into the site’s internal organization, information is catalogued using a green, yellow and

red light system. Green information, visible under tabs labeled “Country Information” and How to Seek Help,” is public and non-sensitive and includes the facts all refugees need about things like money and housing costs.

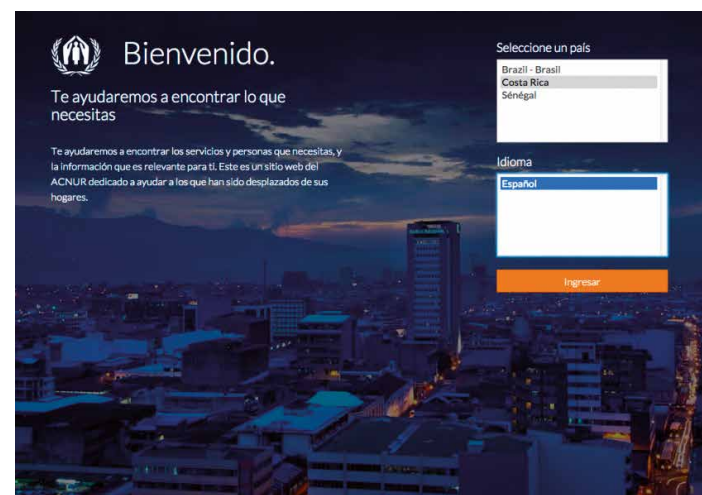
Red information is more sensitive or political—for example updates on onward movement for refugees in Europe and other information that is not aligned with UNHCR policy.

According to Moreno, yellow information is the information that is extremely valuable to asylum seekers and refugees. This category contains protection-related knowledge that only UNHCR has, like information about about the asylum claim process itself, durable solution options

That’s why although plenty of other useful and timely platforms pop up, nowhere else can refugees get

complete and correct information about what documents to bring with them for claim-related appointments, what their rights are when it comes to work or travel, relocation and resettlement information and answers to questions like, “why am I being fingerprinted?”

“For sure we are the most positioned agency to provide this type of information,” Moreno says. “It’s our mandate to provide it.” Furthermore, the HELP site makes this information available in the languages that refugees need it, instead of just those of host countries.



In these ways the content on [help.unhcr.org](http://help.unhcr.org) responds to a main criticism of the organization’s overall website: there is no specific information for my population.

Giving refugees access to direct information on the site means fewer calls or visits that take up staff time. And using a model in which country liaisons upload the information themselves with UNHCR help on translation and technology helps strengthen human capital and capacity at the country level, as UNHCR colleagues learn to use Wordpress and gain other technology skills.

Costa Rica was the first country office to pilot a [help.unhcr.org](http://help.unhcr.org) site, developed in consultation with refugees about the information they would have liked to have when they arrived.

To publicize the site, Costa Rica field office distributed pamphlets about the HELP site at a national-level soccer game, billboards went up around the busy capital, and a press release issued jointly with the Costa Rican government launched a national integration campaign. One of the country’s premier movie theater chains even played a short video by UNHCR as a trailer; it showed that many refugees look just like Ticos, raising awareness about the urban refugee population in San Jose.

That translates into thousands more informed refugees. And although they can find the information

on various sites if they know where to look, Moreno thinks duplication or competition should never be a concern when it comes to providing information. “Information is protection—that’s the main message we want to give,” she says. “It’s our duty to provide as many channels as possible...”

Based on Costa Rica’s experience, Brazil started its own pilot, challenging developers to provide useful information in a complex context where special refugee populations from West Africa, Syria and Haiti have their own set of needs and questions.

Pilot sites built for Malaysia and Senegal followed. In Senegal’s case, most of the information was already in one place—a booklet handed out at kiosks to urban refugees living in Dakaar. Since the information was already public and cleared, it just needed to be translated and uploaded. Moreno hopes that approach can be adapted as other countries launch their own help sites.

Moreno concedes that country offices hoping to launch a HELP site take on the responsibility of managing another communications channel, with all the updating and responding that requires. But she wants interested country offices to know that her team is committed to responding to their needs, and providing technological and management support.

**“It’s an open invitation and an open call,” she says. “Just contact us and we’ll put together the whole process. It could be short or long but it’s doable.”**

In future phases of the websites, country communication teams can add more interactive elements that allow for better back and forth communication with refugees. And looking ahead, Moreno hopes that HELP can be handed off to the digital communications team and become part of the UNHCR site.

For that to happen, many country offices would need to build their capacity to upload information and keep it up to date. But with support and coordination provided by the global team, they’d be able to do so, and respond to the real and changing information needs of refugees.

# UNHCR ESTABLISHES THE EMERGENCY LAB: INNOVATING AROUND EMERGENCIES



*The Emergency Lab helps UNHCR to identify practices that ensure inclusive CwC and keep refugees at the center of UNHCR’s emergency operations. The Lab seeks to explore new ways to ensure refugees in emergencies have access to information through appropriate and trusted channels.*



**The Innovation Unit, along with the Emergencies division in UNHCR HQ realised that it was no longer possible to shy away from innovating in emergency contexts: trying things differently, utilising new technologies, shifting paradigms to make real changes for refugees with some of the most acute needs that UNHCR are supporting day in, day out.**

So the Emergency Lab was set up. In this first year of its existence, the focus of the Lab is on ‘Communicating with Communities’ - an emerging field of humanitarian response that facilitates dialogue between survivors of disaster or conflict and responders. There is some debate around this topic really means – as is highlighted by organisations such as

the CDAC Network – and it can be approached in many different ways. Some people see it as a mechanism for accountability. Some as broadcasting information / PI. Some as a critical component of protection work, like UNHCR does.

In reality, it is all and none of these things. Communicating with

communities is more like an ethos – it’s about putting the people we’re trying to help in the drivers seat. Many of the ideas around it are represented in commitments 4 and 5 of the Core Humanitarian Standard and the World Humanitarian Summit key action area of ‘Dignity’.

Dignity is impossible in isolation and without agency. Through ensuring communities have the facts and information they need to make decisions, and that their opinions, wants and needs can affect their situation, we are able to ensure their dignity. This is what Communicating with Communities is all about, and the starting point for the work of the Emergency Lab.

**How does this really look?**

Where to begin? Can innovation, and the occasional inherent failures, be justified in emergency situations? UNHCR thinks so and a good starting point for the Emergency Lab was to take it to the field level as quickly as possible to see where we were able to add value without being an additional burden on operations. So we need to work out where this will be, and how we go about it.

To learn about the Emergency Lab first mission to the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, go to [innovation.unhcr.org/blog](http://innovation.unhcr.org/blog).



# WHY ENGAGING REFUGEES IS CRUCIAL TO IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF LIFE IN CAMPS



**On his days off, Abdiwali Mohamed can usually be found on a football field, either juggling a ball or organizing tournaments. For this avid Manchester United fan, there's a lot more to football than working out and having fun. It can bring enemies together, nurture friendships and help erase differences between people, he says. And in Dollo Ado, such benefits cannot be overlooked.**

Born and raised in this rural area located in the southeast of Ethiopia, Mohamed has seen his community struggle to cope with a massive influx of refugees fleeing conflict in neighbouring Somalia – more than 200,000 refugees have now been temporarily resettled in five camps managed by UNHCR, and the population is growing. In this isolated part of the world, basic resources like water and firewood are scarce, and disagreements frequently arise between newcomers and host populations, even though the latter share the same ethnicity (the Somali people can be found throughout the Horn of Africa). “These two groups speak the same language, they practice the same religion and they have the same culture, but they come from different backgrounds, which can lead to some clashes,” he explains.

But Mohamed isn't one to ward off a challenge. Having joined

UNHCR in 2011, first as a Protection Associate, then as a Shelter Associate, he has grown a passion for improving the quality of life of refugees and fostering dialogue with host communities. Whether he's trying to implement innovative shelter solutions, or breaking down cultural barriers, he says it always comes down to good communication.

**“Refugees are very resourceful. If you want to help them, the best thing to do is just to sit with them and listen to what they have to say. They may tell you something that would have never thought of,”**

His daily work revolves around meeting the many needs of refugees in terms of housing. It may be finding a way to accommodate very large

families for whom standard shelters are too small, protecting housing units from destructive termites, or more generally helping beneficiaries adapt to their new lives in the camps. “Refugees are used to better living conditions. They come from different socio-economic backgrounds and may not have the energy to start from zero,” he explains.

The new Better Shelters, developed in partnership with IKEA Foundation and Better Shelter holds tremendous promise in terms of improving the quality of life of refugees, he says, notably because it allows for greater privacy and is easier to maintain over time. In fact, the design became so popular during the testing phase that Mohamed soon found himself overwhelmed with requests for new shelters. “Three months after we started giving out the first units, everybody was asking why they couldn't have their own. It was difficult for them to understand we were still testing the shelter, and that not every family would get one,” he recalls. Working on the Better Shelters eventually proved a great experience.

“I learned a lot from the Innovation unit about team work and coming up with new solutions together,” Mohamed says.

He's also been participating in other shelter projects, such as a termite-resistant prototype made from matured eucalyptus, implemented by the International Organization for Migration. And he's come up with his own solution to the termite problem – an add-on for existing bamboo shelters used in certain sections of the Dollo Ado camps, which protects the eucalyptus frame with a recycled plastic sheet. The additions are made by the beneficiaries themselves in order to increase their sense of ownership and increase community participation.

**Mohamed thinks engaging with refugees is crucial to improving the quality of life in the camps. “Whatever you're planning on doing in the camp, it's important to include refugees in the process.”**

He thinks more could be done to increase their autonomy, such as negotiating with host communities to increase the refugees' access to agricultural land, and developing livelihoods programs. He lobbies for including women in the shelter labour workforce, usually a male-dominated area, in order to increase their income, and he's helped create conflict resolution committees comprised of elders selected among refugees and host communities, to help prevent clashes between both groups. The idea has become so successful that the committees have been asked to work with local authorities on more than one occasion.

By working to improve the lives of refugees, Mohamed ultimately hopes to facilitate their return home. “I have only one dream – that all refugees can one day go back home safely, and with new skills they will be bringing with them from the camps,” he says.

# USING GIS TECHNOLOGY TO MAP SHELTER ALLOCATION IN AZRAQ REFUGEE CAMP

**Yahya Hassune, doesn't take no for an answer, quite fortunately for UNHCR.**

About two years ago, Hassune was working on his first day as Associate Field Officer in Azraq, a new camp located in central-eastern Jordan that currently hosts about 26,000 Syrian refugees living in 10,000 shelters

Shelter allocation was known as a critical step that could cause significant challenges due to the high number of refugees who were expected to be processed each day. Hassune was warned by his colleagues that it would inevitably become the bottleneck of the operation. How to sort and deliver 10,000 keys, for instance, would be a headache.

But when he sat down to look at the system he was supposed to use to assign a shelter to each family, then manage the constant flow of people who would come in and out of the camp, he realized it was deeply flawed. The system relied on a massive and complex Excel sheet that was shared between so many users that it risked being quickly compromised.

*Hassune's spirit of facing challenges head-on was one of the reasons he was chosen as part of UNHCR's Innovation Fellow cohort for 2016. During his Fellowship year, Hassune will define a challenge unique to his expertise, use human-centered design and prototyping principles, in addition to being connected to mentorship, and funding to refine his innovative solutions.*



Hassune had a few notions of computer programming and Geographic Information System (GIS), a system used to capture, process and displaying geographical data. He thought Azraq would be the perfect place to use GIS for shelter allocation.

Hassune enlisted the help of Shadi Mhethawi, a programmer at the Amman office who had shown enthusiasm about the project, and together they convinced their superiors to give them permission to build a program.

They spent a month working together, Hassune making regular trips to Amman so that he could vet every step. There was no room for errors, because the code couldn't be easily changed once the system would be up and running. “There is a rule in programming, it's ‘garbage in, garbage out’” Hassune explains. “We made sure the program was well built, and we tested it. It was perfect.”

On the day Azraq opened, Field Officer Nuria Fouz paid a visit to



Hassune to see how the GIS-based system was performing. What she saw astounded her; to allocate shelters, staff just had to navigate through a map of the camp to see which shelters had already been allocated, which ones were available, and how many people were living inside. Later on, the program would show additional data, such as whether the shelter had been damaged, or if it was occupied informally by another family. Staff only had to click on

the desired shelter to allocate it, and the data would then feed directly into the progress file. What's more, it only took an impressive 20 seconds to find the right key among 10,000.

Nowadays, the shelter allocation team can easily process the 300 to 400 refugees who arrive at the camp each day, and Hassune says they once processed 1,600 newcomers in a single day without difficulty.

**“We're not the bottleneck anymore. My colleagues at the next step have had to tell me to slow down because we were processing too fast, and they didn't have enough space in their waiting area,” he says with a laugh. The number of staff required to work on shelter allocation has been reduced from eleven to five.**

Hassune is now working on bringing minor improvements to the program, while solving the myriad other challenges that arise at the camp each day. “From the moment I wake up in the morning, I want to be at the camp,” he says. “This is not a routine job. Each day has new adventures, and I'm always trying to identify problems and find solutions for them.”



# UPCOMING HUMANITARIAN INNOVATION EVENTS

Event	Date	Time	Country	Organization
The Syria Crisis: Researching public health in urban humanitarian contexts	18 May - 19 May 2016	9.00am	Jordan	ELRHA
World Humanitarian Summit	23 May - 24 May 2016	9.00am	Turkey	UNOCHA
Evaluating Humanitarian Action Workshop	20 June - 22 June 2016	1.30pm	Canada	International Program for Development Evaluation Training
Aid & International Development Asia Summit 2016	21 June - 22 June 2016	8.00am	Thailand	Aid and International Development Forum



## INNOVATION QUARTERLY ISSUE 1: APRIL 2016

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We're always looking for great stories, ideas, and opinions on innovations that are led by or create impact for refugees. If you have one to share with us send us an email at [innovation@unhcr.org](mailto:innovation@unhcr.org)

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### ABOUT UNHCR INNOVATION

UNHCR Innovation is an inter-divisional initiative launched within UNHCR in 2012. UNHCR Innovation partners with people inside and outside of UNHCR to innovate with and for refugees.

We work collaboratively with refugees, academia, and the private sector to creatively address challenges faced by uprooted or stateless people worldwide. Whether it's co-developing mobile tracking technology for distributing supplies with UPS, or applying IKEA's flat-pack principles to designing shelter, if there's a more efficient, more sustainable way to meet refugees' needs, we will find it, learn from it, and promote it.

