From Black Hole to North Star: A Response to the *Journal of Humanitarian Affairs* Special Issue on *Innovation in Humanitarian Action* (JHA, 1:3)

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Introduction

This contribution presents a challenging yet welcome opportunity to respond to the special issue on *Innovation in Humanitarian Action* (JHA, 1:3). As Head of Elrha's Humanitarian Innovation Fund (HIF) since 2016, and as both an academic and humanitarian practitioner, there are multiple 'angles' from which I might offer a considered response to humanitarian innovation's 'potentials and pitfalls' (Müller and Sou, Innovation Issue). The articles in the Innovation Issue provide a rich and varied commentary and invite deep exploration on several fronts. There is no scope to do full justice to each of these here, hence I aim to provide some preliminary reflections to open up further debate.

Hunt (2018) has suggested that humanitarian innovation occupies a 'liminal space': not clearly 'bounded and regulated' like research or standard humanitarian practice, but something 'in-between'. This consideration helps him to focus attention on the ethics of humanitarian innovation (to which I will return later). More broadly, from this complex positioning, other issues and tensions can arise. The question of what kind of space, or spaces, humanitarian innovation is thought to occupy – how the different authors in the Issue consider these and what this means in practice for the humanitarian sector – is perhaps a useful approach to explore.

I begin this response with the space from which there's no escape: humanitarian innovation as a 'Black Hole' (Currión, Innovation Issue). I then propose an alternative analogy, to instead redirect attention to where we might want humanitarian innovation to 'go'. Humanitarian innovation can also be repositioned at the centre of humanitarian accountability and core concern. The idea of humanitarian innovation as a purely private-

sector, tech-focused and product-ridden space is critiqued through attention to the more nuanced evolution of the humanitarian innovation agenda. Some recent efforts to forge or support more ethical, participatory and locally driven spaces for humanitarian innovation are also shared. Finally, the 'big space' question of humanitarian innovation at scale is given consideration, as well as the expectations and structural limitations involved.

From Black Hole to North Star?

[A black hole] takes the brightness of the stars ... then swallows them whole, compressing them until there is nothing but a dark, blank sky¹

Currión's notion of humanitarian innovation as a 'Black Hole' (Innovation Issue) is somewhat disheartening. It leaves us with few places to go. Notwithstanding the critical importance of addressing structural and systemic barriers and the many challenges involved (to which, again, I will return), we might also explore the more positive metaphor of the 'North Star'. Here the focus is on what we are aspiring towards – our 'guiding light' – and looking out for signs that we might be travelling in the right direction. Krishnaraj, Hunt and Schwarz (2019) point to

the importance of establishing clear parameters for the kind of humanitarian innovation we want to see, and how to translate this into practice.

There is much in the Innovation Issue about what we *do not* want for humanitarian innovation and perhaps less about what we *do* want. It is true that humanitarian innovation is a complex, challenge-ridden and often contested space. However, given the current state of the humanitarian system, it is something, as Finnigan and

Farkas (Innovation Issue) make clear, that we *cannot do without*:

New and innovative systems, methods and approaches are urgently needed by the humanitarian system to mitigate the effects of ... context dynamics on communities in crisis.

They go on to say that 'the speed and magnitude with which these new forces are threatening humanity' should be all the imperative needed to urgently address and reconcile these challenges confronting humanitarian action.

For Elrha, humanitarian innovation is not peripheral but integral to effective humanitarian response.² We believe that through supporting the generation of new, evidence-based solutions which *work*, we can together start to make progress in tackling protracted humanitarian problems and become more accountable to the people that we serve affected by crises. As such, the attention given to innovation at the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit – 'brought to the fore yet again' (Müller and Sou, Innovation Issue) – and the substantive focus of the Innovation Issue is, for us, a welcome call.

An Evolving Space

What is not fully captured by the contributions in the Innovation Issue is the extent to which the humanitarian innovation agenda has *evolved*. Whilst Finnigan and Farkas (Innovation Issue) suggest that humanitarian innovation has always been around, what we have been experiencing in the sector in the last ten years is something different – more deliberate, systematic and applied:

The humanitarian sector has always relied on the determination and ingenuity of those on the front line working to deliver life-saving aid to communities affected by conflict or natural disaster. But while reactive innovation has always been central to humanitarian action, the systematic application, study and implementation of proactive innovation is [relatively] recent. (Elrha, 2018a)

In addition, while it is indeed the case that there has been a multiplication in the *number* of innovation labs, studies and funds (Currión, Innovation Issue), there has also been an evolution in the *nature and substance* of humanitarian innovation. This has enabled the agenda to better match the complexity of the problems it seeks to address.

To illustrate, from Elrha's own innovation portfolio, in 2011 we funded a body of early-stage innovations across multiple technical humanitarian sectors and problem areas. With the humanitarian innovation agenda relatively immature, it was necessary to put money into the

system to foster creativity, generate promising ideas and gain momentum. This led to a wide and dispersed portfolio.

Now, at the time of writing in 2019, working closely with sector experts, strategic partners and the humanitarian innovation community, our funding is deliberately and purposively aligned to our key thematic areas of focus – water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH), gender-based violence (GBV), disability and older-age inclusion – or to systemic humanitarian innovation 'problems', such as localisation and scale. Thematic gaps for innovation to address are identified through robust gap analyses, problem exploration 'deep dives' and challenge prioritisation exercises, engaging a wide range of stakeholders and working together with experts in these areas. We support more complex, cross-sector challenges (for example, humanitarian inclusion in WASH), seek to address systemic as well as operational aspects of humanitarian problems (for example, to tackle gender bias as a barrier to improving monitoring and evaluation in GBV) and engage other actors, for example, research partners, to support our grantees, maximising the impact they might achieve.

The notion of a humanitarian innovation agenda solely driven by the private sector also no longer holds true. While I would agree with Sandvik (Innovation Issue) that there has been a 'culture shift' in the sector along with a growing focus on innovation, including a 'permissibility and *necessity* of private-sector collaboration to achieve success' (emphasis in Sandvik), there have also been efforts to address and counter this. For example, the need for a more careful positioning of the private sector amid humanitarian innovation is captured in an introduction to our Humanitarian Innovation Guide (Elrha, 2018a), which targets both social entrepreneurs outside the sector and humanitarian practitioners as would-be innovators, within:

We need to empower innovators in humanitarian organisations, and ... encourage more ideas from outside the sector, while ensuring that these social entrepreneurs understand ... the importance of adhering to humanitarian principles and standards. The opportunities for impact are huge ... but so are the risks.... The Humanitarian Innovation Guide is an attempt to provide these two audiences – humanitarian practitioners and social entrepreneurs – with a grounded framework for managing a successful innovation process.

Through such outputs and the facilitation of effective partnerships for innovation at both project and system levels, the extent and nature of collaboration on humanitarian innovation has also developed and evolved.

Finally, many – if not all – of the articles in the Innovation Issue refer to the relationship between

humanitarian innovation and technology. Sandvik speaks about an ‘unrealistic optimism’ about the role of technology as ‘game changer’, and for Scott-Smith we are in a state of ‘uncritical technophilia’. For Redmond there is an over-focus on the technology and not on ‘the human support that is required for that technology to work’. In the closing remarks of his interview, Redmond points to the role of human support and particularly to this being locally driven and led.

The HIF’s funded portfolio features several promising technology-related innovations, but we are also keenly aware of the need to tackle the *over*-association of innovation with technology. Indeed, I have called elsewhere (Skeels in [Hestbaek, 2019](#)) for a ‘conscious uncoupling’ of technology from humanitarian innovation, where the relationship remains strong but not automatically connected, as before. This acknowledges the essential role technology might and often needs to play in humanitarian innovation, but that it can only be *part* of the solution or not relevant for solving many humanitarian problems. Jafar’s (Innovation Issue) recommended approach to consider the points ‘at which technology would be acceptable and beneficial to the process’ and her call for technology ‘when implemented in a considered, safe and evidence-based fashion’ are of relevance in this regard.

The article by Hunt, O’Brien, Cadwell and O’Mathúna (Innovation Issue) provides a very rich and nuanced picture of technology amid innovation, drawing out both the technological and very human components of Translation without Borders’ innovative approach. Translators without Borders (TWB) represents an innovation where machine translation technology is situated within a broader process innovation and which is working towards truly addressing language inclusion as part of effective emergency response.

Forging New Spaces

Beyond attention to the evolution of the humanitarian innovation agenda, we might also be encouraged by efforts to forge more ethical, participatory and locally driven innovation spaces. These are some of the key domains that must be meaningfully addressed for an innovation agenda to be appropriate for the humanitarian sector. We set out our own ‘responsible ambition’ ([Elrha, 2018b](#)) for humanitarian innovation in 2018 with ethics, participation and local engagement as areas of key concern.

The articles by Hunt *et al.* and Sandvik (Innovation Issue) refer to ethical concerns with the introduction of new actors, practices and technologies along with innovation to the humanitarian sector and the risks

involved, particularly for communities affected by crises. As Sandvik notes:

Experimental innovation in the testing and application of new technologies and practices in humanitarian contexts can underpin unethical, illegal and ineffective trends that result in increased vulnerability and harm for the humanitarian subjects involved.

While Hunt *et al.* envision a reconnection of humanitarian innovation with humanitarian principles and standards and the importance of an appropriate values-based approach, applied to ‘humanitarian organisations’ and ‘commercial developers’ alike:

We propose that all stakeholders (e.g. humanitarian organisations, policymakers, technologists, commercial developers, governments and affected communities) should demonstrate a moral posture of attentiveness to how values are upheld, engaged with or challenged throughout the innovation process.

At Elrha, we have written about ([Skeels, 2018](#)) and have been exploring how to operationalise ethical humanitarian innovation with the help of a team of academics/ethicists from McMaster, McGill and Ohio State universities through the development of an Ethical Humanitarian Innovation Tool. This Tool will be aligned to and draw on existing standards and principles (for example Elrha’s Principles for Humanitarian Innovation Management and MSF’s Ethics Framework for Humanitarian Innovation) and organised along the stages of the humanitarian innovation process. It will provide a resource both for those funded by HIF and humanitarian innovators at large.

Other positive drivers in the sector for more ethical humanitarian innovation in addition to MSF’s Framework mentioned above include the Do No Digital Harm Initiative and ICRC’s Digital Risks in Situations of Armed Conflict programme; the Start Network’s DEPP Innovation Labs’ collaboration with Kristin Bergtora Sandvik on a series of papers exploring ethical questions faced by community-centred innovation labs ([Sandvik, 2019a, 2019b](#)); and the Digital Ethics Summit in December 2019. The Summit showcased (as in 2019) practical examples of digital ethics in action and explore the extent to which this is delivering genuine benefits to people’s everyday lives.

As Hunt *et al.* (Innovation Issue), citing Betts and Bloom, note: ‘Values of participation and engagement are highly relevant to innovation processes in humanitarian settings.’ However, it is the case that ‘the sector continues to struggle to recognise the point along the innovation cycle at which to engage and collaborate with the community’ (Finnigan and Farkas, Innovation Issue), with many emerging innovations not engaging

communities in the innovation process at all. However, participation and innovation often must be deeply intertwined.

In our *Humanitarian Innovation Guide* (Elrha, 2018a), we give attention to the participation of people affected by crises as both a fundamental ‘enabler’ of humanitarian innovation as well as a ‘humanitarian parameter’, part of the essential framework that needs to be in place for responsible innovation in a humanitarian setting. We also capture what participation might mean at different phases of the innovation process, for example in relation to the problem recognition stage:

When the local community are engaged in problem identification through inclusive, user-centred design processes, people in these local organisations – using their local knowledge – hold often-untapped potential to develop game-changing innovations. (Elrha, 2018a)

A promising partnership between Elrha and MIT’s D-Lab is enabling us to build on our understanding of the participation of people affected by crises in humanitarian innovation and to explore the development of tools and guidance in response. In considering participation in innovation, we recognise the utmost importance of diversity and inclusion:

Innovators must do their utmost to ensure that all vulnerable groups’ needs are recognised, that they have access to the assistance that is being provided and are included/participate in the innovation process as much as possible. (Elrha, 2018a)

Participation is implicit in discussions around enabling more local innovation. It is the case, including in relation to our own innovation portfolio, that humanitarian innovation has been subject to a ‘Northern bias’, with mainly the large international NGOs, private sector or academic actors in the ‘Global North’ receiving most of the funding and support. For Müller and Sou (Innovation Issue), citing Roth and Luczak-Roesch, while ‘major technological innovations are largely driven or developed by the Global North, they are bound to perpetuate existing global inequalities’.

In 2017, Elrha formed a strategic partnership with the Asia Disaster Reduction and Response Network (ADRRN) aimed at overcoming this bias towards international actors by placing engagement with local NGOs and affected communities at the centre of humanitarian innovation. By developing local approaches to innovation, grounding problem recognition and ideation at community level, and engaging with a wide range of stakeholders familiar with, and active in, these settings, our partnership aims to find and support solutions developed for, and by, affected communities themselves (McClelland and Hill, 2019). At the time of writing in 2019, we are working with ADRRN

through Country Focal Points in the Philippines, India and, shortly, Indonesia to support a more bottom-up approach. Other global actors, including the Response Innovation Labs (RIL) – aiming to support ‘in-country innovation’ in the ‘Global South’ in order to tackle humanitarian innovation’s ‘burden of distant engagement’ – and the Start Network’s DEPP Labs have been actively involved in bringing together the localisation and humanitarian innovation agendas through in-country partners and gaining momentum in this space.

The Big Space of Scale

As noted by Sandvik, cited in Currian (Innovation Issue), the pressure is on for those of us working on supporting humanitarian innovation. Expectations are high for transformative innovation at scale and there is an indication that the time to deliver is *now*. While we take this imperative extremely seriously – we too urgently want to see improved outcomes for communities affected by crises – we perhaps need a more realistic stocktake of where we are.

While the world spends billions of dollars annually to provide life-saving humanitarian assistance, this is still not enough to address the mounting problems and complex needs. Chris Houston, Director of Humanitarian Innovation at Grand Challenges Canada, makes an interesting comparison:

The world spends about \$15 billion on humanitarian response per annum, which might seem like a lot of money, but it’s 40% less than what’s needed. To give some perspective, it’s about half what the world spends on chewing gum and a quarter of what we spend on ice cream. Part of the problem is that, collectively, we don’t prioritize humanitarian aid. (personal communication, 21 November, 2019)

The scale of unmet needs continues to grow, and money alone cannot address this gap; the humanitarian system urgently needs robust new solutions to make limited resources more effective (Elrha, 2018c). Sectors that invest consistently in research and development are proven to be more effective than those that don’t. Elrha believes the humanitarian sector is no different to others in this respect. However, spend on research and development here remains low. The best effort to quantify spending to-date identified it as at 0.4%. In terms of resourcing and support for innovation in the humanitarian sector, then, we have only just begun (Elrha, 2018c).

While impact at scale takes resources and time, we need to acknowledge the results achieved by humanitarian innovations to-date. Perhaps only Hunt *et al.*’s article does this to any degree with their discussion of Translators without Borders, who incidentally received

funding to scale from the HIF. As Hunt *et al.* note, TWB were deployed to provide urgent life-saving language support services in the response to the Rohingya crisis in Cox's Bazar, as part of a wider accountability and engagement effort in a consortium with BBC Media Action and Internews. During the lifetime of TWB's HIF Scale grant, surveys showed that the proportion of Rohingya refugees who stated that they did not have enough information fell from 77%³ to 28%.⁴

The space of Scale has also evolved. In their early paper on scaling, McClure and Gray (2015) identified scaling as a 'missing middle': there was little evidence of innovations scaling in the humanitarian sector, and very little understanding of how it could happen. Since then we have seen a growing number of initiatives to support scaling innovations, and there has been further learning on how to scale. However, Currión (Innovation Issue) reflects that

[m]ost of the effort in the sector has gone towards building an innovation ecosystem (Ramalingam *et al.*, 2015) that can support improved innovation processes (Obrecht and Warner, 2016) – not in itself a worthless task, but one which fails to address the most critical barrier to both the generation and adoption of innovation.

Currión considers the systemic barriers to the success of humanitarian innovation at scale, as do Finnigan and Farkas. For Currión, unless we innovate a new financial model for the sector that will include mechanisms for generating financial returns, humanitarian innovation as it is currently structured is fundamentally unsustainable. For Finnigan and Farkas, substantive challenges exist around the meaning of innovation, the changing global context of emergencies, the need for an integrated structure to deliver innovation and how innovation is financed. It is to these more structural issues that I now return.

In our report *Too Tough to Scale: Challenges to Scaling Innovation in the Humanitarian Sector* (Elrha, 2018d), we conclude that humanitarian innovations looking to scale, face a complex set of barriers and constraints at both operational and systemic levels. While operational barriers are being overcome with focused effort and support, the more systemic barriers to scale remain significant and intractable. Elrha recognises that if we are to achieve the impact and transformative change we are seeking from humanitarian innovation, we must address these more systemic barriers. These cannot be tackled by any single actor in isolation: system-wide issues need system-wide collaboration. The *Too Tough to Scale* report is a 'call to action' and catalyses collaboration on two fronts: (1) with other innovation hubs/labs/accelerators and (2) with donors and key funders of humanitarian innovation. With each group, a series of

targeted, action-focused round tables was proposed to discuss what we can do collectively to address the key barriers we have identified at systemic level.

Since the launch of the report, three donor round tables have been held. Donors have considered how, both separately and collectively, their approach and practice – for example through application and reporting processes and criteria, priorities and compliance – might contribute to addressing the systemic barriers identified and what they would require from others in order to be able to do this. Donor discussions include a focus on alternatively financing humanitarian innovation and incentivising the adoption of the most promising innovations. This discussion connects to the comment by Finnigan and Farkas (Innovation Issue) that while donor finance has fuelled humanitarian innovation, donor conditions have also introduced limitations:

Rarely have donors provided the funding flexibility or time necessary to test implementation variables around uptake, penetration, barriers or the applicability of the innovation across different clusters.

Such donor round tables are a highly promising example of the kinds of strategic collaboration at system level that we need to see. While such discussions are incremental in nature, not immediately transformative in offering up a new financial model for humanitarian innovation, they are an indication of the recognition that how innovation is financed and incentivised (or not) is a problem to be addressed. This creates at least some distance from Currión's 'deeply pessimistic picture' – the 'black hole of humanitarian innovation'.

Conclusion

While there is much progress to be made, based on consideration of the evolution of the humanitarian innovation agenda and professional practice, I would refute the assertion made by Finnigan and Farkas (Innovation Issue) that we have not moved beyond a 'dominant focus' on 'product development' in humanitarian innovation. Nor would I agree that we do not understand the implications of innovation, or that we have no consensus on the process for advancing our practice. This response has hopefully put forward counter examples for a more dynamic and optimistic view. Recognising the challenges and barriers to humanitarian innovation, we need to clearly set out the kind of humanitarian innovation that we want to see – ethical, responsible, impactful – and be deliberate and purposeful in how this is achieved, including taking actions at systemic level. While we are not there yet, we are, through collective endeavour and purposeful

collaboration, heading in the right direction – following our ‘North Star’.

Notes

- 1 www.cram.com/essay/Depression-Signs-And-Symptoms-Of-Depression/FK3YUVAY7MWQ (accessed 11 November 2019).
- 2 Elrha’s *Strategy 2019–23* seeks to bring about a fundamental shift in the orientation of the humanitarian system towards research and innovation, so that by 2023, investing in the production and uptake of new evidence and innovation is considered central to the very culture and practice of providing humanitarian assistance.
- 3 Internews (2017), ‘Information Needs Assessment: Cox’s Bazar – Bangladesh’, https://www.internews.org/sites/default/files/2017-11/Internews_Coxs_Bazar_Publication%2030Nov_web.pdf (accessed 11 November 2019).
- 4 Translators without Borders (2018), ‘The language Lesson: What We’ve Learned about Communicating with Rohingya Refugees’, https://translatorswithoutborders.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/TWB_Bangladesh_Comprehension_Study_Nov2018.pdf (accessed 11 November 2019).

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