

Demystifying social innovation in international development- the beginnings



SIX and Bond are collaborating on a piece of research to demystify social innovation for organisations working in international development.

As development challenges become more complex, there is an urgent need for innovation within international development. Sometimes, there is an assumption from donors that INGOs can't innovate, however we believe differently. Through this work, we will be highlighting some of the rich and ground-breaking examples of innovation within the sector, understanding the strategies and tools for innovation that are already being used, and develop a better shared understanding of what social innovation is and how INGOs can be more innovative in their practice.

As part of this research, we hosted a workshop on the 17th of February with 15 individuals directly responsible for innovation within leading INGOs in the UK to better understand what social innovation means to them and their organisations. We tested our assumptions and explored different frameworks for social innovation - looking at type, stage and scale of innovation, and understanding whether and how these typologies can be useful in deciding where INGOs should focus their innovation efforts. We gave participants the opportunity to learn from each other about the strategies that enable and block social innovation in their organisation, and invited representatives from DFID and Comic Relief to share their perspectives on enabling and blocking social innovation within the sector from the perspectives of donors. The workshop also gave the participants the opportunity to network with each other, and connect the dots across the sector sharing commonalities between organisations.

The following short note highlights some key insights from our discussions. It focuses on the participants' shared enablers and blockers to innovation and includes some of the ways organisations are overcoming them.

People - People can either make or break innovation - having a stable and consistent team is important, but so is working with different types of people across silos. Most importantly of all, however, is having senior leaders actively promoting innovation at all levels of their organisations, not just in their senior teams. Priyanka Dutt, Country Director of BBC Media Action in India, shared an example of how simple connections can have a big impact. Priyanka has begun hosting small monthly meetings with mid-level staff from across the organisation to take the time to think about the future direction of the organisation. This sense of space and empowerment has already begun to be reflected in a change in mind-set in daily activity- with staff moving away from ticking boxes to focusing on a more long-term, innovative strategy.

Space to learn - There isn't enough learning within or between INGOs. Too many old mistakes are being repeated- both inside organisations and across the sector. And the challenge is finding the time to not only share what others are doing, but to truly understand what works and what doesn't and why. How can we innovate the learning loop? Teach a Man to Fish is encouraging this kind of learning - from watching TED talks to an Innovation Fortnight that encourages staff to speak and learn from other organisations. Restless Development encourages staff at all levels to complete learning logs to embed a culture of reflection throughout the organisation.

Innovating processes - Although meeting objectives and outcomes is vital to organisations working in this sector, so is the process of delivering these outcomes. We have developed bureaucratic inertia – and sometimes the rules are not as we expect. Sometimes the log frames, or the lengthy evaluation forms aren't necessarily part of the rules – yet we continue to use unsuitable, overly bureaucratic systems without questioning them, even though we know they aren't working. Sometimes, it might be better to tell as story rather than fill in a traditional evaluation. Finding ways to creatively present, design, record and evaluate work will encourage, rather than stifle, innovation. We heard from Comic Relief who received from a grantee a 1 page alternative summary alongside the traditional lengthy report. This alternative summary was so effective that they've adopted the approach in other parts of their work.

Create partnerships of ideas and skills - There are 2 kinds of partnerships - those structured around the least common denominator to make everyone happy, or partnerships of change. Working with

different kinds of organisations can provide a unique opportunity to learn new skills and do something different. They can be a great excuse to try something new and different, challenge the status quo and change internally processes, as well as lead to greater impact.

Time to innovate – As grant funding becomes less available and development challenges become more complex, the notion that time is money is true more than ever in NGOs. It is therefore understandable that many NGOs don't want to prioritise spending time trialling new ways of doing things that might not work. However, it is precisely because of the nature of futures challenges and a decreased funding environment that we need to find a new way of working. Organisations with power, and funds, however small, can help. The Humanitarian Innovation Fund provides seed funding to organisations in the [recognition phase](#) to pay for time to develop and test a great idea. An example of this fund was enabling [Save the Children to](#) undertake desk research and kick start discussions on the impact of violence on women and children in Latin American communities.

Change doesn't happen in donor reporting cycles - Unfortunately systems change doesn't happen in timely quarterly increments. Most change happens in years not quarters. Doing things differently takes time, and results may not be realised at the same time as reporting cycles. How to reflect and influence the funding and reporting mechanisms to reflect this is a key question going forward.

What next – building on the insights

We will continue to work with NGOs to learn about more of the rich social innovation activities that are happening across the sector, and to better understand the strategies that NGOs are adopting to support innovative practice in their organisations. Through further interviews, we will better understand the methods, tools and tactics being used to enable innovation, and record them in order for others to adopt and adapt them in their own practice. A social innovation briefing for INGOs will be published in April, alongside an online hub of case studies highlighting some of the great social innovations in international development.



We will also be creating more opportunities for shared learning and peer exchange within the sector, and drawing on examples from examples outside the sector

If you want to get involved in the process or just share what's on your wish list- we'd love to hear from you! Get in touch at jordan@socialinnovationexchange.org

Organisations that participated at the workshop
BBC Media Action in India
CAFOD
Comic Relief
Department for International Development
Humanitarian Innovation Fund, ELRHA
International HIV/AIDS Alliance
Nesta
On Our Radar
Oxfam GB
Restless Development
Save the Children
Start Network
Sightsavers
Teach a Man to Fish
WWF (UK)