How to be more innovative in your practice:
6 reflections from SIX and Hivos
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Across the world, development and social challenges are increasingly more complex and urgent. From INGOs to community organisations to governments, finding new ways of working to meet these challenges is more of a priority than ever. The organisations that are best placed to deliver the biggest impact are those that are highly connected, that are agile and seek to be disruptors. But what does this mean in practice?

Over the past year and a half, SIX and Hivos have partnered to discover and understand innovation processes with social impact. By organising gatherings from Johannesburg to Nairobi, we connected social innovators and international development communities to share insights and reflections. We've started to build up a pioneering network of practitioners across Africa linked to the global field of social innovation. Based on our experiences, we're sharing six reflections to be more innovative within development projects. This is relevant to anyone who is looking for practical ways to put innovation into action.

1. Be practical about 'solutions'

The greatest innovations are not planned but arise by - so it seems - coincidence. However, upon closer evaluation, we know that most innovations are actually the result of a lot of testing, experiencing and reflecting. The DESIS Lab at the University of Johannesburg is a great example of a project that has taken an iterative but creative approach. 'Izindaba Zokudla' or 'Conversations about Food' explores how design thinking is transforming the Soweto food system. Izindaba Zokudla brings together designers, farmers, consumers and the Soweto Theatre to create local, organic and sustainable farming, and change the perceptions of those who see farming merely as a sub-subsistence activity.

Over the last year, this project has transformed from the small farm we visited that relied on the help of a few volunteers, to an organisation that is on track to set up 50 new businesses amongst small urban farmers in Soweto. They are running a bi-weekly farmers' school with over 300 registered attendees built on the premise of peer-to-peer teaching from more experienced farmers with the help and facilitation of the DESIS Lab. Afternoons at the farmers' school are set aside for the demonstration and training of open-source technologies that are developed by students and the Lab to increase the productivity of farmers. So far these include the development of a DIY water pump, a small-scale growing tunnel and a DIY drip irrigation system- all of which will feature in creative commons licensed booklet.

This is a great example of a cross-sector project that tries to find solutions by trying a range of interventions and iterates these as they progress, instead of trying to find the perfect solution.

2. Use the power of imagination

Innovative processes are hard to grasp and often harder to put into words. Boniface Mwangi, the renowned photographer and activist, explained the power of visualising perspectives to trigger social innovation processes. When his photos of the post-election violence in Kenya in 2008 made international headlines, Boniface demonstrated how art and photography could push boundaries, debate and politics. As he explained 'photography is the only non-political tool that can bring about change - a photo can bring down a country'. This underlines the power of seeing reality through a different lens.

We also found another unique example of how art and creativity are pushing political and cultural boundaries simultaneously through the work of the NEST Collective, a multi-disciplinary arts collaborative, challenging homophobia by documenting the lives of homosexual Kenyans in their award-winning film and book 'Stories of our Lives'.

Lack of resources and tools have long meant that slum-dwellers are excluded from vital information and public debates that directly impact their lives. In order to improve access to information for slum dwellers in Nairobi and to give them a better evidence base for community discussions and to lobby government bodies, Sauti Ya Mtaa combines art and innovative journalism by using graffiti artists to spread data-based information.

These projects show the power of imagination by letting social change thrive through photography, film, images and paintings. Besides the practical use of visualisation, they bring a certain beauty to complex and painful issues, and through this touch a deeper sentiment, engaging all parts of the community in understanding social issues, triggering people into action.

3. Create an oasis

Many social innovators often feel isolated within their own communities, or even within their own organisations. Spaces to meet is needed for those who have the power to enrich society with their refreshing ways of thinking. As Rym Baoudendi, Founder of Co-gite, Tunisia's first co-working space and innovation hub said 'connecting with your peers is like a breath of fresh air. Co-gite was created to tap into the collective creative energy that came from the Arab Spring- we're like an oasis in the desert'.

The power of innovators connecting with their peers or like-minded individuals should not be underestimated. We saw the power of innovation hubs, whether tech or cultural, across Africa. These hubs bring together like-minded individuals to focus and collaborate on their passions and thus foster a sense of community. They also provide essential infrastructure support. Physical spaces such as these hubs are crucial to create an enabling environment where methods, knowledge, experiences and insights can easily be shared and applied in different situations. With over 100 hubs and growing across the continent, it's a clear sign that these oases are truly needed.

Spaces do not necessarily have to be physical. There is also added value in creating communities and networks of social innovators. Global communities like SIX & Hivos can help showcase what's possible in different contexts, and encourage innovators to reflect, share and learn from others. The Innovation Station (TIS) is a global platform presenting the best videos on social and technological innovation. The station's objective is to improve the world by making it more innovative, connected and open. TIS puts innovations and innovators in the spotlight, taking advantage of the power of the public to find and select good content, and brings contributors together on its platform to inspire and educate each other.

4. Embrace the power of low tech

"Innovation is more than just ICT, it is in process, programs and partnerships" @UNICEFinnovate @amaniinst #LearnFromNBO #SocInnAfrica

Too often in the world of social innovation, new and flashy high-tech is promised as the solution to some of the biggest social challenges we face. Although technology can be an enabler of social innovation, we shouldn't forget the ever-present power of low tech. Shifting systems and changing behaviour is about understanding the motivations of the people you'd like to influence.

Zach Metere realised that most of his neighbours in rural Kenya not only couldn't access but also couldn't understand the internet, so he made Google available offline via a community notice board to answer all of their questions about farming. Digital Matatus mapped the local bus routes in Nairobi and printed it offline to help systematise the informal transport system that thousands rely on every day.

Wikipedia is an invaluable resource and repository of information, but is impossible to access offline. Wikipedia Zero enables anyone with a basic mobile phone to send a SMS to a free number and access a basic, text-based version of the encyclopedia. As Gustav Praekelt of the Praekelt Foundation and partner of Wikipedia Zero told those at the Johannesburg event 'this has the power to transform the way people access information…and access to information should be a universal right'. The service has been launched in 64 countries.

All of these examples are innovative in their own contexts and their ability to connect communities in new ways, and are using simple and low-tech platforms as a way to achieve their aims.

5. Create new methods within existing frameworks

Out-of-the-box thinking not only stimulates new concepts but can also change existing institutions. In the back of a courthouse in Randburg in South Africa, we met with and observed 10 young people who were halfway through an 8-week intensive rehabilitation programme. They were discussing the root causes of violence and how they could change their behaviour to avoid having to stand before the judges in the rooms behind them. This diversion programme, run by Khulisa, is a process of channelling both children and adults away from the formal court justice system to programmes that support reintegration by focusing instead on developing life skills.

The programme acknowledges and builds responsibility instead of punishing young people for petty crimes they have committed. In the context of South Africa where over 50% of offenders are between the ages of 14-25, and the rate of recidivism is exceptionally high with over 80% of released re-offending, Khulisa has been hugely successful with over 70% of the youth who complete the programme not returning to crime. Khulisa has been rolled out across South Africa working in partnership with the Department of Justice and is constantly improving their methodology and success rate.

Rather than rejecting the system entirely, Khulisa's works both inside and outside of the formal criminal justice sector as an effective intermediary. They have the unique ability to '*look as*' their users instead of '*looking at*' - which is a by-

product of both peer-to-peer learning and effective methodologies, including ethnographic research as well as a rigorous evidence-base.

6. Cultivate trust as your core business

On various levels we see how innovation accelerates within your organisation when people feel free to doubt, speak up and experiment. Trust is the soil to stretch existing norms and create space for unlimited social innovations. Angelique Edmunds, from the School for Creating Change and the University of South Australia, reflected at the end of our event in Johannesburg on the importance of trust. Angelique noted that whilst many innovators embrace openness, learning and failures, many people are still wary of the vulnerability that this work creates. This is often due to an eagerness to show (good) results and pressure to be accountable to the general public. So how can we better encourage practitioners to choose to create a culture of openness, trust and vulnerability?

Alan Fowler, of the International Institute of Social Studies, identified the role of brokers to help bridge trust. Alan defined these brokers as 'interlocutors'. These are individuals and organisations that are able to 'translate' contexts and in this way build trust and resolve conflict. While they are highly empathetic and aware of the stakes, they are also sovereign enough to mediate between different interest groups. As Taffy Adler explained, 'innovation isn't just about interesting people or the tipping point. You need the glue-something that can hold it all together'. That glue is called trust.

Twaweza, or 'we can make it happen' in Swahili, is a ten year citizen-centred initiative, focusing on large-scale change in East Africa. By tapping into existing networks across the region, they want to increase access to information to enable citizen action and spur the state into action to deliver more effective public services. Their belief in open information reflects throughout the organisation with a learning architecture that seeks to cultivate a culture of critical inquiry, reflection and adaptation informed by strong evaluations and quick feedback loops. As they say 'they're as committed to learning, as to their programmes making a difference: in many ways these two components are linked and mutually reinforcing.

What's next for the future?

Throughout this series of work, we've connected large NGOs and institutions with innovation strategies and with practitioners. Some of these associated themselves with social entrepreneurship, tech and digital innovation or systems thinking, whereas others referred to themselves explicitly as activists or advocates for change. We've seen innovations that disrupt and significantly contribute to equity, wellbeing, sustainability and more. This rich exchange led to the insights we have shared here. These experiences will continue to inform our work while we explore new perspectives and practicalities of social innovation across Africa. We welcome your additions and critiques on these six points.

If you would like to help us build on this knowledge or connect more communities, please get in touch at Jordan@socialinnovationexchange.org

This paper was a collaboration between Jordan Junge, Amis Boersma, Louise Pulford, and Josine Stremmelaar and Evelien van Egmond.