Daring to take risk and fail

Building an innovation agenda in Canada's global development and humanitarian community

Executive Summary

Innovation has become a significant topic of discussion within the Canadian global development and humanitarian sector. It is a central theme for the current government, including Global Affairs Canada (GAC). For its part, the development and humanitarian community has engaged in a mixed fashion – with some embracing and acting on this new focus, others saying that they are already demonstrating innovation in their work, and still others challenging the status of innovation as the buzzword *du jour*. The topic is top of mind for the sector. Yet there is little if any common understanding of what innovation is or entails.

To help assess and engage with this growing innovation agenda, this paper seeks to provide some clarity to the discussions, and some parameters for how organizations might think about innovation in the context of global development and humanitarian assistance. To realize this objective, the paper maps out current thinking on innovation among five national platforms of non-governmental organizations working in the global cooperation sector – sister organizations to the Canadian Council for International Co-operation (CCIC) – as well as the Cambridge Humanitarian Centre.

The intent of the paper is to help give shape to how CCIC might learn from the experience of these platforms as it shapes its own innovation agenda and works to implement one of three core CCIC strategic directions for 2018-23: *Inspire and support the growth of a more relevant, responsive and effective global development and humanitarian assistance sector that, through a broad range of innovations, can create sustainable impact and change in collaboration with our partners*.

The paper is divided into seven parts. After a brief introduction (1), the paper looks at how the five platforms are defining innovation and social innovation, in terms of newness, value-added, effectiveness, and impact (2). Some of the elements raised include organizational openness to new or external ideas, and cross-disciplinary collaboration; only one platform explicitly defines innovation relative to its mission of building a more inclusive and sustainable world.

The paper then addresses why platforms chose the innovation route they took, exploring six specific stated rationales (3). While not all the platforms examined explicitly articulated their reasons for engaging with the innovation agenda, the range of rationales included the following: adaptation to a changing world; positioning vis-a-vis donors; responding to members' interest; remaining relevant and valued in an evolving development landscape; making work on innovation more intentional; and improving existing capacities, using innovation as one tool among many.

Next, the paper identifies key elements of the innovation agenda common to the work of different national platforms, and specifically relevant to the global development and humanitarian context – recurring factors that add clarity to a complex concept (4). Core pieces that helped further consolidate national platforms' thinking about innovation include the degree of newness and scale of impact of an innovation; considering varied entry points to innovation in terms of process, outputs and outcomes; the degree of their intentionality in trying to be innovative; organizational and environmental factors that hinder or promote innovation; the extent to which they fostered collaboration, knowledge-sharing and learning; and how they adapted to change and managed risk.

The paper then assesses the approaches taken by various platforms to foster innovation among

their respective members, identifying and analyzing a variety of six types of approaches (5), including the following: collaborative learning and knowledge sharing (e.g. conferences, workshops, and thought experiments); capacity assessments (e.g. member surveys); applied research and practical guidance (e.g. systematically framing innovation for members); innovative/innovation partnerships (e.g. creative North-South collaborations); promoting innovation (e.g. stimulating member competition and celebrating innovative failures); and intra-organizational leadership (creating dedicated staff positions to lead internal work on innovation).

To provide a backdrop for the Canadian context, the penultimate section of the paper specifically examines approaches to innovation at GAC (6). Not unlike the national platforms profiled in this paper, GAC's thinking about innovation is broad. It focuses on the newness, effectiveness and impact of innovation, where and how it can occur, on what scale, and to what end. To these, it adds a focus on inclusion, localization, evidence and data, learning, collaboration and partnership. That said, to be successful, GAC still has some key challenges that it will need to address.

The paper then concludes with some final consideration (7). As a discussion paper, it reaches no clear conclusions for the Council, but provides guidance for CCIC and its members as they shape an innovation agenda for the Canadian global development and humanitarian sector. While it signals the directions that the Council could take, some key questions remain. Readers are encouraged to reflect on these questions as they read this paper and share their reflections with the Council.

1. **Situating innovation:** Beyond the concepts outlined here, where and how do we integrate the Istanbul Principles and build on the Council's historical focus on development effectiveness?
2. **Building and prioritizing innovation:** what are some smaller acts which CCIC could start to foster innovation a) within the Council b) among its members? How might these differ between those who are more engaged, and those who are less engaged, but interested?
3. **Supporting innovation, collaboration, knowledge-sharing and learning:** What types of spaces and opportunities need to be created for innovation, collaboration, knowledge-sharing, and learning? What role is there for CCIC, GAC and members in this?
4. **Ensuring responsible innovation and risk-taking**: How can we better think about and work with risk – in a context where failure can have unacceptable outcomes on people's lives, and organizations and funders have low risk tolerance? How can CCIC help manage this?

As a final thought, the paper suggests that national platforms such as CCIC should recognize innovation as risky by definition, and therefore exercise caution before jumping on the innovation bandwagon. Carefully-worded definitions and intentionally developed plans formulated by CSOs offer no assurance that impactful and sustainable innovation will occur, especially if the rationale for doing so is purely exogenous. Furthermore, so as not to not lose its focus, the Council should consider how to situate innovation within its longer-standing historical focus on enhancing civil society development effectiveness, practice and accountability as defined in the Istanbul Principles. Yet by making a very intentional decision as an organization and national coalition to build on existing approaches and solutions, explore new options where appropriate, and support the creation of an enabling environment for innovation, national platforms can help their members and the wider sector improve their development effectiveness, better address the needs of affected communities and potentially have greater impact.