Evaluating Grand Challenges and Innovation Approaches, Lessons and Reflections

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Introduction

It is widely recognised that in an increasingly globalised world, there are highly complex contextual issues and interconnected challenges in both development interventions and in humanitarian action, and that programme designs and proposed solutions need to diagnose and respond to complexities if they are to be effective.

The search for responses to complexity and 'wicked problems'[1] by donor organisations, be they bilateral, multilateral or philanthropic, has taken many forms. One approach favoured by some is to establish programmes and funding streams with the intention of funding projects to develop solutions[2], sometimes dubbed a 'grand challenge'.[3] Such funds are oriented to taking 'alternative approaches' and to fostering and scaling innovation, including through the funding of early stage innovation. (At this point it is worth noting that, whilst a contested term, innovation can be understood as both 'exploitation of new ideas that create value at scale'[4] and re-working existing ideas whilst addressing issues such as access, scale, resources and funding.[5])

The challenge of 'innovating' within development and humanitarian programmes raises questions and challenges for evaluation: how are such initiatives best evaluated? Are the evaluation challenges specific to the nature of the fund itself and how might they be addressed? What innovative approaches can be taken within evaluation methodology itself?

This paper opens with a brief review of the 'doing development differently' debate which has driven a quest for innovation programming reflected in the two funds evaluated by the author, the Humanitarian Innovation Fund (HIF) and Amplify. The paper describes the two funds, outlines the evaluation approaches and methodologies used to evaluate them and explores the main challenges which arose and why they matter. The paper provides recommendations on how evaluators can respond to these challenges to better assess innovation funds, and in so doing provides advice to strengthen their design and management.

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[1] 'A wicked problem is a social or cultural problem that is difficult or impossible to solve for as many as four reasons: incomplete or contradictory knowledge, the number of people and opinions involved, the large economic burden, and the interconnected nature of these problems with other problems.' https://www.wickedproblems.com/1_wicked_problems.php As the UKES Conference 2019 brief stated, 'Many issues facing society are large and complex. Most require interdisciplinary solutions. They are often characterised as wicked problems.'

[2] Indeed this approach can be found in the domestic policy sphere, for example the UK Industrial Strategy

[3] See https://gcgh.grandchallenges.org/ and https://www.usaid.gov/grandchallenges

[4] Ramalingam, R., and Bound, K (2016) Innovation for International Development: Navigating the Paths and Pitfalls Nesta, UK

[5] Innovation Hubs: an overview

The Grand Challenge

There has been increasing recognition of the need to tackle long-standing challenges differently, as evidenced by a burgeoning literature on systems thinking and innovation, the need for adaptive and experimental approaches and 'doing development differently'.[6] The literature review of innovation within the humanitarian space which provided the context for the HIF evaluation noted that the concept of 'innovation' has become a growing field of interest and activity since the publication of a ground-breaking paper on the subject published by ALNAP[7] in 2009.[8] This paper had provided the impetus for the HIF which was established in 2011. Since the HIF, a significant number of aid organisations have established innovation hubs and initiatives specifically to develop programming ideas and operational improvements.[9] Consequently, the funding for innovation in humanitarian programming has increased substantially.[10] The HIF evaluation literature review also noted substantial challenges facing humanitarian innovation, including gaps in dedicated resources and spending; a lack of capacity to manage innovation; insufficient involvement by affected populations and wider stakeholders in designing innovations that worked for them and addressed their priorities; and the difficulties of taking ideas to scale. These themes recurred in the HIF evaluation itself.

The Amplify evaluation was similarly informed by a contextual analysis and a literature review which shed light on how the design of the programme responded to the 'increasingly recognised constraints of more traditional approaches' and by 'the common practices identified within successful development initiatives'. Such common practices include a focus on solving local problems with the active engagement of local people; rapid cycles of planning, action, reflection and revision; and a recent increase in research on human-centred design for development.[11]

HIF and Amplify: two innovation funds

The two funds evaluated, HIF and Amplify, represent a concerted effort on the part of donors to establish new models for tackling long-entrenched problems. The **HIF** is a multi-donor fund established by DFID and managed by Elrha[12], who commissioned the evaluation. Its aim is to 'reduce mortality and morbidity, maintain human dignity, enhance protection and sustain livelihoods in humanitarian crises by improvements in humanitarian systems'. **Amplify** is an experimental DFID fund managed by IDEO.org, a not-for profit design agency in New York. The fund's goal is to 'establish a new model for tackling pressing development challenges'. As well as funding innovation, the fund design is itself innovative: innovation is supported through the application of human-centred design, a design approach originally pioneered by IDEO for product development and focused on finding solutions that are 'desirable, feasible and viable'. An 'open innovation platform' was used to attract and develop ideas before formal submission; and the fund was targeted at 'grass-roots' and non-traditional actors – small, locally based organisations who had not typically previously received donor funding.

Issues in common

The funds had several elements in common. Both were designed to surface and develop innovative responses to long-standing problems within humanitarian action and development through a challenge fund model. Both engaged

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[6] See for example Ramalingam, B. (2015) *Aid on the Edge of Chaos: rethinking international cooperation in a complex world*, Oxford: OUP on the need for systems thinking; Valters, C., Cummings, C. and Nixon, H (2016) *Putting Learning at the Centre: Adaptive Development Programming in Practice* London: ODI on adaptive programming; and ODI (2016) *Doing Development Differently* London: ODI which summarises the increased call to evolve approaches.

[7] Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action

[8] Ramalingham, B., Scriven, K. and Foley, C. (2009) *Innovations in international humanitarian action* London: ALNAP, Review of Humanitarian Action

[9] For example the 2013 UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs released a report identifying dozens of research programmes, funding programmes and networks for humanitarian innovation, many newly formed; Amplify was launched in 2013 and The Global Innovation Fund in 2014; DFID have had a division named 'Emerging Policy, Innovation and Capability' for a few years now and are currently establishing a new multi-stakeholder Humanitarian Innovation Hub.

[10] As documented in a joint HIF-ALNAP study: Obrecht, A. and Warner, A.T (2016) *More than just luck: innovation in humanitarian action* HIF/ALNAP Study. London : ALNAP/ODI

[11] See Gordon, P, Kramer, J., Moore, G., Yeung W. and Agogino. A (2016) *A systematic Review of Human-Centred Design of Development in Academic Research* A Working Paper from University of California, Berkeley accessed at http://best.berkeley.edu/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/8-26-2017-HCDDSystematicCharacterization_Working-Paper.pdf

[12] Enhancing Learning and Research for Humanitarian Assistance'.

a wide range of actors (including applicants and application assessors) who could be considered non-traditional, in that they had not previously engaged with donor funding mechanisms, but also did not necessarily have a track record of working with humanitarian and development challenges. They included research units, community-based organisations and social enterprises and many were very small organisations. As challenge funds, both included an open call for applications; a selection process; due diligence and grant set-up; grant management including a degree of performance and risk management; and reporting. At the time of the evaluations each fund had made grants totalling about £10m. Both had themed challenges: Amplify had eight different funding rounds, each tackling a different challenge 'theme';[13] whilst HIF had generic calls within the overall humanitarian innovation theme, it also had specific funding streams for innovation in Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) and tackling Gender Based Violence (GBV).

Key differences

The main differences between the funds concerned:

The phase of innovation

The HIF made grants to **fund all stages of the innovation cycle** ('recognition > ideation > development > implementation > diffusion') and had recently introduced a funding round specifically focused on scaling successful innovations. Amplify was focused on **early stage innovation**: surfacing and developing ideas which had not been previously tested.
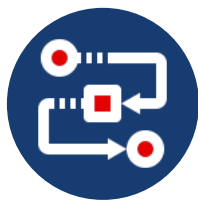
The innovation methodology

HIF had no expectations about the use of particular methodologies although did provide research and thinking on innovation management. Amplify explicitly deployed **human-centred design** principles and techniques to enable grantees to develop their ideas. Grants supported attendance at an initial week-long training on HCD (the 'bootcamp'), a three-month prototyping phase and a 12-18-month pilot phase during which grantees received design support, either remotely or more intensively in person, from IDEO.org.

Experimental nature

Amplify was established as an experimental fund, designed to test the theory that its innovative components (use of HCD, targeting of non-traditional actors; the open innovation platform[14]; and flexible funding[15] within a challenge fund model) would together lead to the desired impact: 'a new model for tackling pressing development challenges'. HIF on the other hand, although expecting a fairly high degree of innovation 'failure' from its grantees, was run on standard challenge fund lines and did not explicitly involve an experimental approach, although similarly it did seek systemic improvement through the innovations it funded.

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[13] How might we make low-income urban areas safer and more empowering for women and girls?; How might parents in low income communities ensure children thrive in their first five years? How might we improve education and expand learning opportunities for refugees? How might urban slum communities become more resilient to the effects of climate change? How might we improve the livelihoods of small-scale farmers by reducing food waste and spoilage? How might we expand economic opportunities for youth in East Africa? How might we reduce stigma and increase opportunities for people with disabilities? How might provide comprehensive sexual and reproductive health services to girls and women affected by conflict or disaster?

[14] See https://challenges.openideo.com/challenge. Applicants submitted their ideas through this online platform, run by OpenIDEO, received feedback on their idea from the online community, developed and re-submitted it for review by a community of technical experts, and then made further refinements before final submission.

[15] Flexible funding in this context meant that the grant value was discussed and agreed after an initial $10,000 grant for the prototyping phase. Budget changes could be made and there was some flexibility in both disbursement schedules and grant length.

Evaluation approaches

Both evaluations covered **process and performance** questions and were for **accountability and learning purposes** - for Amplify towards the end of the funding envelope to inform future DFID programming, and for HIF to inform future strategy and positioning and expansion of the fund within an increasingly populated landscape of innovation funding. Both funds were evaluated after several years of operation but neither had a baseline.

Both evaluations employed a specific **utilisation focus** which is defined as taking time to understand who would use the evaluation and how, and to work closely with the principal stakeholders (donors, fund managers, advisory board / technical advisers) throughout the process. This was done through regular meetings and several workshops, held for example on the theory of change – for the HIF supported by a live illustrator[16] who captured visually the underpinning logic of the fund and its evolution - and on emerging evaluation findings and recommendations. The HIF evaluation also included engagement with the HIF Steering Committee on methodological considerations and presentation and discussion of findings with the HIF Board.

This approach ensured that evaluation outputs met the evidence needs of those who had commissioned the evaluations, that recommendations were useful and actionable and that, whilst independent, the evaluation was 'owned' by all those involved in the programmes including people responsible for future funding and programme design

decisions. The approach also kept parties engaged and willing to accept uncomfortable findings. A utilisation approach should arguably be a feature of any successful evaluation.

The Amplify evaluation also took a clear **theory-based approach** to examine which aspects of the Amplify model worked, and why. This approach lends itself particularly well to experimental models. Using this approach, the evaluation was able to test both pathways of change within an overarching theory of change and supporting theories of action, and to identify and test corresponding assumptions.

Interrogating the theory of change helped to identify whether weaknesses in the model were due to faulty design or weak implementation of certain strategic approaches – for example, whether the HCD approach had failed to establish a 'new model' for development because of inherent failings in the model when applied to development (e.g. weak consideration of political context; tendency to focus on breadth not depth of impact; tendency not to meet the needs of poor people; unrealistic cost or timescales required to effect change) or because it was poorly executed (e.g. insufficient capacity building for grassroots - and other grantee organisations; inadequate monitoring and evaluation (M&E) to demonstrate results). Development and debate of the theory of change during inception was therefore crucial, to lay the ground and shape the evaluation methodology, framework and supporting tools, and made for an intensive and quite complex start to the work.

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[16] An illustrator who works during workshop discussions to capture the main points made in highly engaging cartoon-style drawings. The drawings themselves acted as points of discussion and further reflection during the workshop, illustrated the evaluation report and were used as discussion prompts by the HIF team during their strategy discussions after the evaluation had ended.

Evaluation methods

Whilst of different sizes and timescales, both evaluations employed a mixed methods approach to data collection whilst focusing mainly on the collection, synthesis and analysis of qualitative data. Data was collected through several methods, some fairly standard but many specific to the innovative nature of the programmes. Below are outlined some of the methods used, why they were chosen and the learning and challenges arising, many of which were directly due to the innovation focus of the funds.

a) **Literature review**. The donor quest for innovation is relatively new and developing rapidly. It is essential to root evaluations of innovation programmes in the fast-changing conversations around the subject in humanitarian and development fields more widely, to understand how it is defined differently and how expectations for it shift over time and in different contexts.

b) **Stakeholder interviews** with a sample of interested actors, programme managers, grantees and donors – in order to gain a range of perspectives on the programme, its effectiveness and operations and to explore the wider context of innovation and evidence needs.

c) **On-line surveys** with both successful and unsuccessful applicants, to gather insights about the effectiveness of fund operations from the user perspective – for example ease of using Amplify's open innovation platform - and to see whether unsuccessful applicants had secured funding for their idea through other means.

d) **Programme and project data analysis**. Data generated by the fund manager and grantees on project progress and achievements allows evaluators to gauge results. In the case of the HIF and Amplify, neither fund had developed adequate M&E systems to track or aggregate the progress of projects in their portfolio. Fund managers had not supported grantees to track their own project achievements and projects had not clearly or consistently defined their expected outcomes. Additionally, neither fund aggregated or made good use of what M&E data did

exist to assess overall progress, to develop an evidence base of success or to inform programme adaptation. This meant the evaluation had 'evidence gaps' and that additional work had to be carried out to sample and analyse raw project data.

e) **Case studies involving feedback from intended beneficiaries of the innovation and testing of grantee capacity in HCD.** Case studies looked at innovations at different points of development and grant funding. They included some organisations whose grants had ended some time previously, to assess the 'sustainability' of the innovation. Although in these cases the former grantee organisation has arguably little incentive (and no funds) to collaborate in the evaluation research, this proved to be a useful approach and we were grateful for their interest and engagement.

- One HIF case study was of an operational research project run by the ICRC[17] to test different approaches to menstrual hygiene for refugee women and involved visiting northern Uganda. The research had concluded a year earlier so this case study particularly explored what had happened since in relation to the innovation, from the perspectives of both the refugee women and the ICRC, and what future hopes and plans were for it.

- The Amplify case studies were used to assess how and how well HCD was being applied by the grantees, as part of testing a key component of the theory of change. An innovative approach was taken to this, not just by asking grantees about how they had used HCD but also by watching them use design research to collect insights, then synthesise that information (solution iteration workshops) and by testing the effectiveness of solutions developed through Amplify and exploring alternatives with user groups (organisational change workshops). One case

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[17] International Committee of the Red Cross

study was of HI's[18] work to develop tools and adaptations which would help businesses in Nepal to employ people with disabilities.

f) **Programme adaptation map / timeline -** at the time of evaluation both funds were five years into implementation and had evolved and developed in response to external influences (such as the 2014 World Humanitarian Summit stream on innovation or shifting DFID policy priorities) and, to some extent, learning and reflection. Amplify's evolution was mapped across all eight challenges (funding windows) and eight dimensions of the fund.[19] Somewhat surprisingly, the HCD principles of research, testing, adapting and re-testing did not seem to have been applied to fund management.

g) **Observations and interviews at Amplify's initial week-long training 'bootcamp'** - these were aimed at assessing how HCD was communicated and demonstrated, the support provided and grantee responses to it. Evaluators used a before and after questionnaire and interviews with each grantee in attendance. These methods gave a rich picture of grantee perspectives, needs and expectations and capacity building in HCD.

h) **'Key intervention discussions'** – interviews were held with a sample of Amplify grantees who had received varying degrees of HCD support specifically to explore their experience of the fund at 'key intervention' points in the grant cycle (application, selection etc) and in HCD training/support. It provided a useful qualitative supplement to the on-line survey and a perspective on how the fund might have adapted in response to learning.

i) **Comparator analysis** looked at the fund management cycle and the application of HCD across three other funds sharing similar characteristics (innovation fund; use of HCD; challenge fund model). This provided useful insights and examples to surface the relative strengths and weaknesses of Amplify.

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[18] Humanity and Inclusion

[19] Target participant, outreach, application process, selection, grant design, monitoring and evaluation, capacity building intervention, scaling support

Challenges and reflections:
learning for evaluations of innovation funds

The search for solutions for global challenges continues and all the evidence is that Grand Challenges and innovation funds are here to stay. The main reflections from the experience of evaluating HIF and Amplify which are of wider application to similar evaluations are discussed below.

1. Evaluation methodologies need to expect and compensate for weak M&E systems and data. There are many reasons for M&E weaknesses. Innovation fund managers may not have much experience of actually running a fund and establishing an M&E system to capture results, however defined. IDEO.org for example is a design agency with a recently emerging practice in international development. The organisation had very little experience with institutional donors and was unfamiliar with DFID's expectations and standards. Innovation funds also typically seek to involve non-typical actors in solution development, to bring in solutions from other disciplines, such as mobile technology and digital platforms. Such actors are also not familiar with M&E concepts as understood within the development community. We also noticed a tendency amongst fund manager staff to feel that innovation programmes do not require rigorous M&E as there is an expectation that not all the innovations will 'succeed'. Coupled with this is a reluctance to define or measure

progress towards success, perhaps because iteration and creativity mean that what is designed is unpredictable, and likely to evolve significantly over the course of development. However, this does not mean that sound M&E cannot be done.

There is a danger that the desire for innovation is overriding best practices when it comes to M&E and that innovation programmes are even being let off the hook when it comes to their responsibility to deliver robust M&E systems and processes. This matters for the people who might benefit from innovation, for taxpayers and for aid effectives and the practice we observed of substandard M&E in innovation programme design and practice should be challenged. Systems and processes for M&E should be expected to yield timely high-quality data to analyse progress and results to understand innovation successes, challenges and failures in multiple contexts where they are being developed. These insights matter for policy makers, for fund managers and for potential grantees who need to this information to inform decision-making about what to fund and why and what approaches work or do not work and why. Good M&E is all the more important when a programme design is deliberately experimental, as in the case of Amplify.

The lessons for evaluators are to:

- Remind policy makers and programmers of international commitments to the aid effectiveness agenda where countries and donors focus on results and results get measured.[20] This can be done in the inception report and in the final report.

- Be prepared to plug the gaps in data and think creatively about how to do this. For example, the HIF evaluation took a representative sample of project completion reports and assessed each against the original proposal, developing a typology of innovation type, rating achievement against original aims, the nature and quality of M&E and beneficiaries reached (definitions, numbers).

- Include an assessment of the quality of M&E systems and processes within the evaluation remit. Assess systems and processes at multiple levels: e.g., donor, fund manager, grantee.

- Look at how M&E data is being used (or not) to aid learning, adaption and ongoing innovation. This point is relevant to both project and programme levels.

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[20] Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness (2005) http://www.oecd.org/dac/effectiveness/parisdeclarationandaccraagendaforaction.htm

2. Look for potential misalignment between the aim of a fund and its implementation. Amplify was intended to target small, locally led, grass roots organisations in the belief that they were typically unable to access donor funding for innovation and yet were an untapped source of innovative thinking and far more aware of the context in which they were operating than 'outsiders'.[21] Through a mapping exercise we found that in practice only 25% of Amplify grants had been made to organisations with these characteristics and that many of those who fitted with this description and who received grants – and indeed some who did not - had struggled with the application process, and found it particularly challenging to adopt the HCD process, in many cases not doing so beyond a basic level. The fund was not attracting or working effectively with its target grantees due to a combination of factors that included the relative inexperience of the fund manager (for example, the application form did not ask about organisation size or leadership; the needs of such organisations were not effectively assessed); insufficiently engaged donor communication and oversight; and lack of time at the outset and between each funding round to engage critically about these issues.

Alignment between implementation and aims is clearly important in an experimental fund designed to test a certain model. But even in more standard innovation funds, any gap can lead to false conclusions about why the fund is or is not delivering; and trade-offs between ambition and reality are not acknowledged

3. **Expect the involvement of 'non-traditional' actors but be aware of the challenges and risks this can pose.** In addition to potential pitfalls around M&E already noted, engagement of actors unused to development or humanitarian settings can lead to weak contextual analysis and insufficient attention to power and local politics, class and social norms that drive inequality, including gender inequalities. Such actors may be unaware of why these issues matter, and of the need to collect and analyse socio-economic data, including gender disaggregated data. This lack of understanding may in turn result in a loss of focus on the needs of people, men, women, boys and girls, particularly those who are marginalised and vulnerable.

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[21] This is of course somewhat problematic: local organisations are also embedded in complex class and power relations and may also be far removed from the concerns of affected communities.

If grantees are unfamiliar with development and humanitarian action this can lead to unanticipated implementation difficulties. For example, one HIF project listed challenges that are generally understood by people used to implementing projects in developing countries - delays at customs, extreme weather and limited capacity on the ground, typical problems which it clearly had not anticipated.

Of more concern, lack of experience and a focus on the product or a 'tech' solution can result in innovations which are inappropriate for specific groups of people who have different needs because of their age, gender or cultural beliefs and preferences. Innovations have the potential to cause harm. Examples might include innovations around sexual and reproductive health for young adolescent girls which put them at risk of stigma, violence or rejection from their families or community; or digital solutions which do not take into account – and might even reinforce - the 'digital gender divide' of women having less access than men to digital technology and its associated benefits (information and services).

The lessons for evaluators are to:

- Be ready to delve into grantee characteristics to see how and whether capacity gaps and weaknesses are being assessed and met through the fund

- Include in the evaluation team, or be able to draw on, a sufficient range of expertise covering not only specific focus of the fund but also fund management, important cross-cutting themes such as gender, poverty and social inclusion and a range of development and humanitarian sectors as appropriate (e.g. health, children, protection).

- Be on the lookout for inappropriate and potentially harmful practice, and ask what processes are in place to avoid this.

4. **Remember scaling – the 'so what?' of innovation.** What happens after innovation? If the whole point of funding early innovation is to 'start a fire' which could have wide-reaching benefits, then what are the intentions for the next stage, the further development, the replication or scaling? Wider ambitions will not be met if little or insufficient thought is given to the 'what next?' for innovation and, without this focus on pathways to impact at scale, Grand Challenges will only ever be addressed locally and for a limited time. As well as stifling the potential of innovations, this can have very negative consequences for small grantee organisations. One small Amplify grantee with a promising and successfully tested idea was unable to maintain operations after the end of the grant, and many others struggled to take their innovation to the next stage. Many Amplify grantees said that they would have welcomed more support for scaling or follow on work. The HIF's funding of all stages of the innovation cycle meant that several organisations had held more than one grant, and just before the evaluation took place a specific 'scaling' window was established.

The lessons for evaluators are to:

- Ask whether the programme adequately considers pathways to impact at scale for promising innovations, and the quality and quantity of support it provides for 'life after the grant'. Support for scaling can take many forms and will be different for different types of organisation - follow on funding, signposting to follow on funding; business incubator support, mentoring, sufficient grant timescales, requirement to develop a scaling plan and so on.

- Look at what has happened to innovations after the end of the grant, for example through an online survey of former grantees, and develop a typology or framework for assessing outcomes

5. **Assess the effectiveness of incorporating new skills, disciplines and techniques for innovation**, if this is part of the fund's aims. The idea of learning across disciplines is very positive but there are potential pitfalls. For example, in the application of human-centred design within Amplify there was insufficient rigour and depth in building the capacity of

grantee organisations to practice HCD, with the result that many did not apply it sufficiently well or consistently. This weakened HCD's potential for supporting effective innovation development, drained grantee time and resources and meant there was no significant legacy.

The lessons for evaluations are to:

- Include on the evaluation team expertise in the specific innovation / programme approach who has seen it applied in different settings and can understand and interrogate its use and application.

- Design the methodology to test how effectively capacity in the technique is being built, tracked and embedded.

Conclusion

The impetus to 'do development differently' including through seeking innovation is likely to continue. This paper has explored some of the implications for evaluation methodology and identified challenges, their implications and how evaluators can respond.

Of key importance is the role of the evaluator to remind donors of the commitments they have made to aid effectiveness. This paper has shown how important it is that donors, policymakers and programmers uphold commitments to measure results when it comes to innovation. Yet innovation funds in humanitarian action and development tend to have weak M&E systems which are unable to provide the data needed to demonstrate the value – or not - of what is being achieved.

In this situation, those commissioning evaluations may put the onus on evaluators to come up with innovative and creative ways to plug the gaps and in this regard, the paper provides advice on methods that can be applied. The paper has also shown how easily Grand Challenges to support innovation can paradoxically lose their focus on its ultimate purpose and on the communities, who should be involved in finding solutions to their pressing needs. There is so much skill, expertise and enthusiasm for funds to tap into but this brings its own risks. As evaluators we are in the unique position of having permission to ask the hard questions and supply uncomfortable answers, and the opportunity through this to help innovation deliver some of the solutions.

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