

The Quest for Impact: Collaboration Sheds Light on Being an Innovator



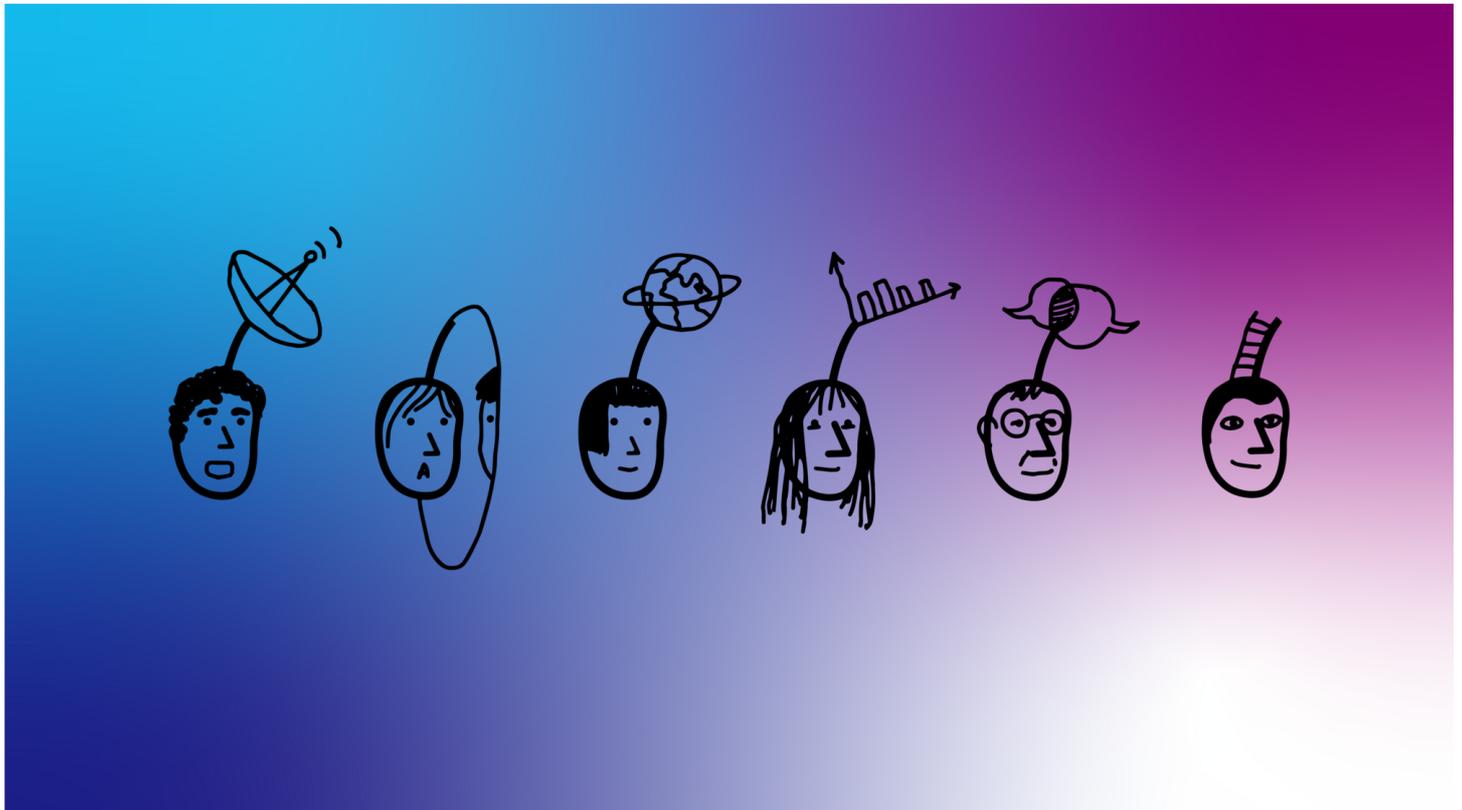
UNHCR Innovation Service

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UNHCR’s Innovation Service and Loughborough University London examine the Innovation Fellowship Programme.



Characters by Ailadi

The vision of UNHCR’s Innovation Service is an organization where colleagues have the skills and opportunities to question the way they operate, to imagine new and better ways of working, and to draw on novel tools and approaches to fulfil the mandate to protect displaced communities. The Service’s Fellowship Programme is a natural byproduct of this vision. Almost as old as the Service itself, the Fellowship has

stewarded scores of UNHCR staff members and colleagues from partner organizations through the learning and unlearning of innovation.

Over the course of a year, the Fellowship is structured according to modules and tasks that cover topics such as the innovation process, collaboration, user-centred design, experimentation, influencing and communication. In addition, participants choose a challenge within their work context, and, incorporating the Programme's teaching, follow the innovation process to arrive upon and test assumptions around a possible solution. Prioritizing the attainment of new knowledge and skills over the success of any individual project, the Fellowship encourages the participants to be ambassadors of innovation in the organization, and to bring fresh ideas and a creative flair wherever they work to find solutions alongside refugee communities.

The end of each Fellowship cohort is an occasion for asking even more questions. Reflecting on the year gone by, the Fellows remark on what they have learned, the connections they have made, and the hope they carry for the future of their work in UNHCR. The meeting is adjourned (or Zoom meeting ended), and everyone goes their separate ways. The concentration of innovation growth in the Fellowship team is diffused throughout an organization of over 17,000 people, located across 135 countries.

Does every raindrop raise the sea?

Innovation Fellowship Programme Manager, Emilia Saarelainen typically reflects on another year of the Fellowship completed. With the vision of the Innovation Service and the Programme's extensive objectives in mind, she is eventually haunted by the questions that haunt most educators: Have we made a difference? Did the lessons stick? Or, in the case of the Fellowship, is UNHCR more innovative?

'Impact Assessment' is the thorn in the side of many programme managers. If the north star is not profit on an excel sheet, metrics for success become notoriously difficult to design. Against the backdrop of pressure from directors and donors, impact metrics in the humanitarian sector can become farcical constructions, far removed from the description of an intervention's value, quantifying individuals and materials as if quantifying a person's dignity or an organization's agility and culture. Education presents a similarly slippery dilemma.

And yet, even if a clear answer is to remain elusive, the question of impact rightly persists. The question of the impact of the Innovation Fellowship persisted into the

conversations Saarelainen had with Professor Mikko Korja, Director of the Institute for Design Innovation at Loughborough University London. The Institute's research interests in exploring design and innovation methodologies to add value to projects across a wide range of sectors made them enriching partners. Their conversations led to a research initiative that grappled with the diffuse transformations and the cultural needlework of the Innovation Fellowship Programme.

“The looser timeline and objectives allowed for iterative cycles of wonderment.”

Prof. Mikko Korja

Collaboration is a term often hastily deployed. In the world of innovation, it has come to designate almost any activity that involves the labour of another. The collaboration between the Innovation Service and Loughborough University, however, sought to secure an arrangement that was mutually beneficial and mutually developed, and worked towards symbiotic outputs beyond managerial tasks. There was little investment in this initiative beyond time spent by respective focal points. The desired output for the Innovation Service was an understanding of the impact of the Fellowship, and for Loughborough University London, research that could form the basis of an academic paper. The partnership proceeded without the power dynamics typically instilled by a vendor agreement and a predefined set of deliverables. Considering the balance of power in a partnership creates a collaborative and deliberative dynamic, as opposed to a consultative or a managerial one.

Indeed, the ability to be explorative in a partnership can also be hindered by a traditional approach to partnerships or evaluations, where the contract insists on a predetermined set of outputs or the angles of analysis follow the convention of the evaluator's framework. The research partnership began without such clear outcomes that procurement processes may necessitate, allowing for the exploration to be iterative and experimental as it proceeded. In his work as Director of the Institute for Design Innovation, Prof. Korja observes that, “The best collaborations are based on ideas that are bounced back and forth.” It may be said the bounceability of the ideas is rooted in a commitment to exploration, and comfort with the occasional dead-end or meandering path.

Of course, the mutual development of a collaboration is easier said than done. It proved helpful for the Service and Loughborough to hold regular meetings to reassess approaches and priorities, and to maintain a degree of flexibility and openness to the path taken. Saarelainen remarked that what is taught in the Fellowship also applied to

the research partnership, “We teach in the Fellowship about the importance of trust, creating a supportive environment, and being vulnerable enough to try new things. All of these lessons were also important to the partnership. They sustained the need to explore.”

The research process truly got underway with the theorizing and collation of the traits of an innovator, such as ‘to act despite fear of failure’ and ‘to understand and be responsive to user and client needs’. Those traits were then put to the test in surveys and interviews with Fellows from the previous years. With the support of Dr. Antonius van den Broek, Lecturer and Teaching Fellow in the Institute for Design Innovation, and Connor Dunlop, Research Intern in the Innovation Service, the innovator traits from the survey responses were coded and quantified. Dr. Van den Broek and Dunlop engaged with the qualitative interview data, and Prof. Koria led the analysis of the quantitative survey data. The results revealed the cumulative perceptions of Fellowship participants on to what extent the Fellowship impacted the development of the key innovator skills and traits. The process of defining the traits and competencies of an innovator can be found in a [second article here](#).

A bridge to further collaboration and a stronger Fellowship

The study found that the programme contributed significantly to the abilities of past participants in their individual and social competencies, especially in their ability to influence and direct others, to understand client needs, and to shape an innovative environment. These findings led to recommendations for bolstering the social component of the Fellowship.

Building on the learnings and recommendations of the report, this year’s Fellowship places even more emphasis on collaboration and peer-to-peer feedback. A shift to building greater social competencies in the same year as a pandemic that led to remote connection presented a double challenge. Ongoing attempts to achieve this shift in focus include building community and relationships on a variety of remote platforms, such as Zoom, Slack and Mural. In addition, the Fellowship is testing new structures, such as Fellows working together in small groups with a coach to provide support on their team activities. Like many adaptations to pandemic restrictions, their success and impact remain to be fully understood.

The first stage of the collaboration with Loughborough University London confirmed many assumptions that had undergirded the Fellowship design for many years. The

surprise that will breathe life into the research collaboration in the coming years is the criticality of human skills. In a hierarchical and heavily siloed organization such as UNHCR, it is logical that the ability to forge relationships and animate cross-disciplinary teams is a prerequisite for innovation to occur.

This finding from the report was not lost on Joel Nielsen, Head of Leadership Development in UNHCR's Global Learning and Development Centre (GLDC), who said that, "The importance of social competencies from the research was significant for the Innovation Fellowship and other programmes. The GLDC has become wiser on what we should be doing more of and what's impactful in terms of the solutions we deliver. The big insight is that innovation skills and human skills are critical for the organization's learning programmes."

When this year's Fellowship Programme draws to a close, and the 'graduation' Zoom call has ended, Saarelainen may well still ponder whether this new band of innovation agents returning to their workplaces will move the needle towards an innovative organization. One thing that won't require any further thought is the lesson from the research partnership that technical, individual knowledge on innovation processes is not enough. An environment, a culture, that leads to innovation's flourishing is one where innovators foster the capabilities of others, and where the structures, like in the Loughborough partnership, are flexible enough for people to explore.

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