

Reimagining Humanitarian Action: Innovations and Knowledge Infrastructures Driving Transformation

Over the past few decades, the humanitarian sector has undergone significant changes, including the 2017 “New Ways of Working” initiative and a growing movement toward human rights-based programming and localization. However, the sector still struggles to meaningfully incorporate community voices and decolonization principles, and to drive systemic change. A full-scale disruption may no longer be a radical proposition, but an idea that demands strong consideration. Recognizing that traditional pathways are insufficient, this panel seeks to explore how “disruptive” innovations and novel knowledge infrastructures can catalyse more sustainable and equitable solutions. Given the rapidly changing humanitarian landscape, there is an urgent need for renewed design and future practice. The panel explored and critically assessed such methods for action and influence during the annual conference of the International Humanitarian Studies Association in Istanbul. It brought together researchers and practitioners to engage with needs-based, community-driven strategies offering scalable, adaptive and sustainable pathways for broader system transformation. The panel served to inspire and learn with and from each other.

Recent initiatives have begun to leverage alternative models of humanitarian action, including stronger partnerships with local actors and civil society organizations. For example, Humanitarian Observatories, organized spaces that observe trends and processes in humanitarian governance and propose changes when needed. They can include, for example, national aid providers, civil society actors, researchers, think tanks and government representatives. Observatories create locally rooted spaces for learning, exchange, strategic thinking, and action exemplifying a novel method of localization.

During the panel Pegah Seidi of the Kurdistan Technical Institute presented her experiences working in the context of Iraq and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq that is characterized by protracted conflict, forced displacement, and widespread psychological trauma. Current models of mental health service delivery are neither effective in terms of population coverage nor culturally adapted. Pegah described two alternative approaches: first, the deployment of lay counsellors trained within affected communities; and second, the implementation of low-intensity, scalable interventions, such as Thought Field Therapy (TFT), which are low-cost, short-term, and adaptable to diverse cultural and linguistic contexts.

Eefje Hendriks of Twente University presented a model for housing reconstruction that is disaster-proof and customised to household needs, designed with people that lost their homes after the 2015 earthquake in Nepal. It uniquely combines qualitative depth with quantitative structure, and so enables tailored reconstruction based on household-

specific indicators, built on a strong theoretical foundation. Most importantly, it embodies a participatory approach.

Martha Thompson and Amy Smith of MIT presented on their experience supporting design led by affected populations, working with partners to develop and build local innovation ecosystems in Rhino and Imvepi refugee settlements in Uganda, and in conflict zones in South Sudan. Refugees and displaced people learned through a design process to build self-selected technologies relevant to their livelihoods, which increased their agency and transformed their self-image.

Mihir Bhatt informed participants about All India Disaster Mitigation Institute's initiatives with workers, small businesses, and city authorities in India. These showcase how hyperlocal innovations across 11 cities - like heat shelters for homeless, micro-insurance, small business, and climate alerts for anticipatory action - can shift the humanitarian paradigm from reactive relief to proactive preparedness. He emphasised that innovations happen every day, especially at the smaller scale that have potential for upscaling and widescaling.

During the exchange with the audience it was stressed that innovations happen continuously and that the best that humanitarian actors can do is create space and offer support for affected communities to unfold those innovations, without too much external interference. It was emphasised that donors and implementing agencies tend to limit the emergent nature of innovation by seeking to identify ex-ante outcomes. The question was how to explore making decisions and prioritising innovation and who can be involved. Peer-learning was emphasised, for the dual purpose of strengthening place-based knowledge, and for the sake of cost-effectiveness. Also, innovations do not always require major investments, smaller support can go a long way and limit the amount of control exercised by external actors.