

3 Organising and collaborating to innovate for development

While innovation has emerged as an imperative, external pressures threaten to close down the space for innovation and experimentation. This chapter looks at how innovation efforts are organised in terms of resources, organisational contexts, dynamics as well as collaboration. It identifies how innovation could be better embedded and promoted in programming, financial and operational processes as well as in staff learning and development approaches. It discusses the role of innovation portfolios to enhance learning and oversight, and to underpin innovation governance and strategic decision-making. The chapter also analyses the tendency to ignore national and local actors and its consequences on the type of innovations that are funded – leading to more incremental innovations that maintain the status quo than transformative approaches that disrupt it.

Key messages

- At the same time as innovation has emerged as an imperative for transforming development and humanitarian efforts, countervailing external pressures are threatening to close down the space for innovation and experimentation. More can be done to ensure alignment and mutual reinforcement between innovation efforts and wider ongoing change efforts.
- There is potential to strengthen how innovation is embedded and promoted in Development Assistance Committee (DAC) member institutions through adjustments and reforms to project and programming processes, country and thematic strategies, staff learning and development approaches, and financial and operational processes.
- More work is needed to strengthen shared understanding and management at the level of overall innovation portfolios, to enhance learning from and oversight of DAC members' innovation investments, and underpin innovation governance and strategic decision making.
- Successful innovation for development means bringing together the public sector, non-profit organisations, end users and corporations. Many DAC members see new kinds of business models as vital to establishing balanced innovation partnerships.
- More outreach is needed within DAC members to ensure innovation is not a top-down, headquarters-driven effort; and to engage country offices at a strategic level, and national/local counterparts.
- A critical blind spot in current innovation efforts is the widespread tendency to ignore national and local actors or not consider them until it is too late. Despite widespread ideas about working with end users in context-specific ways and being participatory and open, in practice, DAC members' work has placed much more emphasis on innovation work by mainstream development and humanitarian actors themselves. This has, in turn, led to more incremental innovations that maintain the status quo than transformative approaches that disrupt it.

How is innovation organised?

Organisation of innovation relates to the direct organisation of innovation efforts, in terms of mobilising and allocating resources to innovation activities, and the wider organisational context within which innovation efforts are embedded: the institutional processes and systems and how aligned these are with innovation efforts.

Current state of play

How do organisations create the enabling environment for innovation?

Innovation faces a complex set of institutional enablers, barriers and constraints within OECD-DAC members. These include the ideas set out in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1. Enablers and barriers to innovation

Enablers	Barriers
Shortfall between Sustainable Development Goal targets/humanitarian needs and current performance of the sector.	Broken or imperfect market for development and humanitarian assistance.
Demands for new development and humanitarian business models, including end user focus and local ownership.	Institutional preference for supply of established approaches over demand for novel, creative ones.
Growing involvement of private sector firms, entrepreneurs, scientists, military and other actors.	Negative attitude to experimentation in development and humanitarian work and fear of negative perceptions.
Rise of new technologies and techniques.	Bureaucracy and risk aversion.
Growing uncertainty and complexity in operational and policy contexts and environments.	Ethical and reputational concerns.

Changes to existing procedures and, in some cases, new organisational arrangements, have been critical to navigate these enablers and barriers, and establish innovation processes and activities within and across donors. In particular, the missions showed that all of the case study countries had reformed and adjusted institutional processes to make them:

- less bureaucratic and simpler in terms of the number of procedural requirements that project ideas, proposals and implementation processes must fulfil
- more flexible and adaptive, attuned to the complex and dynamic nature of development and humanitarian challenges, and to unforeseen changes in circumstances and contexts
- more focused on evidence, learning and results, with a greater emphasis on ensuring that projects and programmes build on what is known, and seek to build on that knowledge through active learning
- more open to collaboration with both the usual and unusual suspects with relevant skills and experience, to achieve development and humanitarian ambitions.

Although these reforms have not always been instigated with innovation efforts in mind, there are examples of “stars being aligned” in the four case study countries (see Box 3.1).

Box 3.1. How the UK Department for International Development's Smart Rules provide institutional support for innovation

The Smart Rules established in 2014 provide the operating framework for the UK Department for International Development (DFID)'s programmes. To eradicate poverty in a complex and fragile world, DFID has set out to transform the way it manages programmes. This is based on an appreciation that delivering results and addressing the underlying causes of poverty and conflict require programmes that can adapt to and influence the local context.

To this end, the Smart Rules seek to provide a clear framework for due diligence throughout the programme cycle (design, delivery, learning and closure). A number of specific elements underpin the Smart Rules:

- Moving from rules to a more principles-based approach, creating deeper ownership and engagement across DFID.
- Directing DFID's effort proportionately towards what matters most (i.e. by removing generic mandatory compliance tasks).
- Simplifying and clarifying mandatory rules, designed to protect taxpayers' money.

Demonstrating the space for discretion where DFID will trust the judgement of frontline staff to innovate, take risks and adapt to realities on the ground.

These changes have supported innovation efforts directly, by providing specific pathways through which innovation programmes and projects can be financed, implemented, scaled and evaluated. There is also evidence of indirect support for these reforms, by providing a more conducive enabling environment for innovators and innovation processes.

Certain supporting and operational functions – such as compliance, legal and procurement functions – are widely perceived to inhibit or limit innovation efforts. Generally, where DAC member systems and processes work effectively and in support of innovation, it appears this has as much to do with exceptions that are made based on informal relationships and trust between would-be innovators and operational and support staff as it does with anything systematic in terms of structure or processes.

How is innovation working as a change process?

Survey respondents noted organisational improvements in their innovation capabilities in the recent past. A more detailed illustration of how such enhancement has worked in practice can be gleaned from the case studies. Over the past five to ten years, each of the case study countries has made progress in its innovation efforts. Reading across the four country case studies and survey findings, a number of distinct and common phases can be discerned:

- Phase 1: New innovation-supporting projects and programmes are designed, funded and implemented, in narrow areas and in a more or less ad hoc fashion (as per the emerging experimenters in Table 2.1).
- Phase 2: Some formal innovation capability is established, with a mandate or scope to co-ordinate and learn from work, and to commission its own work (as per the fast developers in Table 2.1).
- Phase 3: New strategies and capacity development frameworks are designed, seeking to embed innovation as a mainstream capability and to work more on strengthening the innovation ecosystem (as per the established integrators in Table 2.1).

- Phase 4: Focus shifts from a centralised to a decentralised approach, supporting the broader take-up of innovation across the organisation as a whole, with common approaches to strategy, processes and learning (as per the ambitions of many of the case study countries).

Although many staff members spelt out these phases in conversation with the peer learning teams within each of the missions, they were seldom, if at all, explicitly spelt out in any formal document or strategy.

How are innovation efforts structured and delivered?

Across the DAC, innovation is supported in a range of ways. The first and most widespread is the use of financing mechanisms, such as programme funding, dedicated innovation budgets and related expenditure lines, such as for research and learning. These are being deployed in a variety of ways to provide grants, loans and other forms of finance to would-be innovators. This might be direct innovation funding, in the form of early-stage capital for developing new ideas, programme funding to enable implementation and trialling, or investment mechanisms to allow for wider scaling.

Financing can also be indirect, providing resources for specific organisations, sectors or types of individuals to develop abilities to generate, test and diffuse novel approaches to development and humanitarian challenges.

Second, as well as providing finances for institutional capacity strengthening, DAC donors have invested in a number of skills and capacity development mechanisms. These include:

- learning that runs alongside innovation financing mechanisms (e.g. dedicated networking, mentoring or training for recipients of funds)
- learning facilities provided through investment in courses for staff and partners (e.g. learning programmes DAC members invest in so that costs are subsidised for participants)
- learning programmes which are internally focused for staff and on specific aspects of innovation (e.g. digital skills, agile or user-centred design training) or integrated into wider training programmes (e.g. leadership and management training where innovation is one module).

The third common means of support is when a DAC donor establishes in-house teams, hubs or other means of providing technical advisory and support functions. Again, these can be internal, providing support to innovation programme managers, or external, supporting external stakeholders, or some combination thereof. In many cases, these teams also combine roles of direct implementation with enabling and/or supporting innovation programmes and projects (see Box 3.2).

Box 3.2. Global Affairs Canada's Development Innovation Unit

Global Affairs Canada has a Development Innovation Unit that acts as a centre of expertise to drive organisational culture change on innovation for poverty reduction, consistent with the Whistler Principles to Accelerate Innovation for Development Impact. The Unit serves as a catalyst, connector and knowledge disseminator at Global Affairs Canada to foster innovation in international assistance policies, programming and partnerships. It has a diffused model that works to inspire, support, empower and incentivise staff at all levels across the international assistance stream to foster new ways of doing development. The use of networks and communities is central to this. The Unit manages a network of "innovation ambassadors" that come together monthly at the Development Innovation Community of Practice to follow emerging trends in international assistance, learn from implementing partners and champion innovative solutions. This network contributes to building connections, shifting the mindset and to deepening the organisation's collective intelligence on innovation.

There are two typical programmatic modalities for innovation in DAC donors. The first is often a programme or project dedicated to innovation. Programmes will typically involve supporting a portfolio of specific innovation interventions, each of which more narrowly focuses on the design, development and dissemination of specific innovative products and processes. The programme itself might be a grant-making entity, offering innovation resources through open competitions or challenges, or it may provide resources in-house to teams and individuals with an appropriate mix of skills and capacities.

While some of these programmes are limited to a single donor, a growing number of pooled funds have been established across donors with an interest in a particular problem area (Elrha's Humanitarian Innovation Fund, the multi-donor Global Innovation Fund, etc.). Large-scale initiatives that comprise a portfolio of innovations are especially relevant for areas of work that demand more than quick-win solutions, and where there is a need to develop platforms where DAC members can join up better internally and externally to tackle bigger and more complex challenges. These initiatives take the form of public goods efforts in response to large-scale challenges (e.g. accessing cheap vaccines, anticipating infectious diseases, tackling modern slavery, mitigating climate change, etc.).

The second structure is where a programme is established with a broad focus on a particular issue (e.g. non-communicable diseases, urban resilience), sector (e.g. education, energy) or geography (e.g. regional or country-level strategies). In these initiatives, innovation is generally seen as a cross-cutting theme within a wider programme. Such programmes not only provide a test bed and seed funding for innovation, but can also be a platform for taking novel as well as proven ideas to scale.

Outside of such interventions, there are also many examples of DAC members supporting innovation initiatives directly (e.g. developing a new cholera vaccine, investing in specific frontier technologies such as drones). These efforts might be internally focused (e.g. management information systems, new procedures and processes), externally focused (e.g. health, protection), or straddle internal and external aspects (e.g. emerging new technologies).

How does governance of innovation work?

Effective organisation for innovation means establishing appropriate combinations of vertical implementation support, horizontal enabling support and strategic oversight of the overall innovation portfolio. Effective portfolio management means establishing a set of processes for assessing opportunities and needs, selecting and prioritising innovation opportunities, and allocating resources to best achieve innovation goals in line with overall visions and strategies.

In practical terms, this means generating an appropriate quantity, quality and timely flow of information about innovation opportunities and investments, and anchoring this to decision-making processes. Done well, portfolio management helps to:

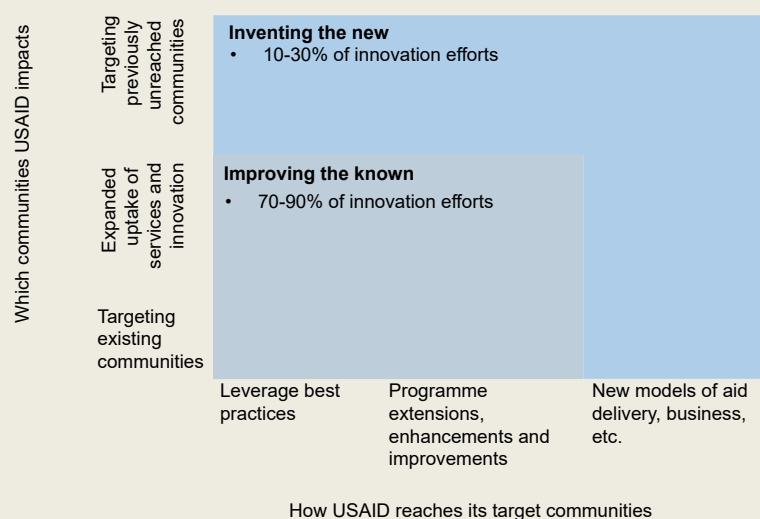
- learn lessons across a diverse set of investments
- understand the performance of the portfolio against different criteria and trade-offs (e.g. incremental vs. transformation, short term vs. long term, risk vs. reward)
- balance, align and focus the portfolio through the allocation and reallocation of financial and human resources
- develop appropriate messages about the progress of the innovation effort
- assess and manage overall risks.

Shared frameworks and approaches can be useful in ensuring the innovation portfolio management effort is intentional and deliberate, that it adds up to more than the sum of its parts, and that different forms of innovation and types of risk are balanced (see Box 3.3).

Box 3.3. USAID's portfolio management approaches

The United States Agency for International Development (USAID)'s Global Health Bureau is an example of a government organisation that manages its innovation initiatives using an ambition matrix portfolio structure (Figure 3.1). With more than 150 technologies financed in 2018 and 25 transitioning to scale, the agency needs to be disciplined in balancing its investments in more cutting-edge alternatives and methods. It invests 70-90% of its innovation funding in solutions in the “Improving the known” category – which could be categorised as core and adjacent innovations – and 10-30% in “Inventing the new” or transformative innovations.

Figure 3.1. USAID's ambition matrix portfolio



Source: Megersa, K. (2019^[11]), *Designing and Managing Innovation Portfolios, Knowledge, Evidence and Learning for Development*, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5da5e56ced915d17bba2c858/662_Designing_and_Managing_Innovation_Portfolios.pdf.

Key issues for consideration

Organisational change in DAC members is seldom rapid, straightforward or unambiguous. It should also be noted that innovation-enabling changes are not the only drivers for change that can be observed across the membership. At the same time as these imperatives for change have emerged from within the sector, countervailing external pressures are threatening to close down the space for innovation and experimentation (as noted in the section “Culture, capacity and mindset” in relation to external perceptions of innovation).

Successful approaches to innovation in the private sector suggest that innovation should be treated as an organisational change process. Within DAC members, more could be done to ensure alignment and mutual reinforcement between innovation efforts and wider ongoing change efforts. Indeed, the organisational aspects of innovation work are often underplayed or not explicitly considered. This is perhaps because innovation efforts have taken more of a “stealth” approach to transforming organisational structure and culture.

There is potential to strengthen how innovation is embedded and promoted in DAC member institutions as a whole. More work could be done to make adjustments and changes to strengthen enablers of innovation

and weaken enablers. Staff note there is more space for change that could be exploited, from programming processes to specific country strategies, thematic areas, and staff learning and development approaches.

There are many windows of opportunity for formally and informally signalling the importance of and opportunity for innovation efforts. In particular, because of the role that DAC donors play in commissioning and funding new programmes, there are many opportunities to embed calls and triggers for innovation into core programme and project processes (see Box 3.4).

Box 3.4. Signalling innovation as a priority: Lessons from across the case study countries

Across all the case study countries, there are many examples of creative teams and individuals working to “push” innovation efforts into life through the intelligent and creative design of projects and programmes. In all of the organisations, there were also examples of how the institutions in question were calling for innovation. The most common means for doing so was through senior leadership statements or other articulations of strategic intent. However, these were often ambiguous in terms of who should do innovation, how and with what means. All four case study countries are starting to experiment with establishing windows of opportunity for innovation within existing processes and procedures, to encourage and foster innovation thinking. These include:

- requesting innovation in proposal processes (i.e. asking the question “How will this project/programme support innovation?”)
- making innovation a criterion in monitoring, evaluation and learning frameworks
- recognising innovation in individual, team and partner performance assessments
- creating innovation awards internally, and participating in innovation awards externally
- building platforms so operational and back-office staff can work with innovators to rethink how bureaucratic barriers to innovation can be navigated in accountable ways
- learning from peers from other government agencies nationally.

This work can be seen as providing a number of windows of opportunity for mainstreaming innovation thinking into core Development Assistance Committee member processes and can also be used to strengthen related technical skills among programme, research and advisory staff.

Examples of how members have fashioned a strategic function for steering innovation as a whole are limited. In terms of strategic oversight, there is little – if any – assessment of the overall innovation portfolio in DAC members. Some ex post analysis is being done and the International Development Innovation Alliance has provided training for a small subset of DAC donors, but this urgently needs to be strengthened. Without this, innovation risks being a series of disparate efforts going in different directions and not a coherent set of initiatives and intentions.

Fear of bureaucracy should not automatically lead to the dominance of “ad hococracy”. One area of senior management activity that needs strengthening across the board is at the level of steering, governance and oversight of DAC members’ overall portfolio of work. Clearer mechanisms at board or equivalent level are urgently needed to deal with issues of innovation governance and related strategic decision making.

How does collaboration strengthen innovation efforts?

Collaboration in innovation efforts is a vital means of helping innovative organisations gain and share experiences and ideas, as well as undertake more robust and effective innovation processes. This can be in technical areas (e.g. health, water and sanitation, new technologies), key stakeholder knowledge (e.g. partners, competitors end users) and contextual factors (e.g. social norms, political contexts, legal and

institutional enablers and barriers). Collaboration adds value by enhancing perspectives, strengthening capacities, co-creating solutions, sharing implementation of innovation processes, and pooling and sharing risks.

Current state of play

Evidence shows that innovation problems and challenges are better defined and understood when actors from different backgrounds – with diverse resources, skill sets and incentives – work together at a number of levels in pursuit of innovation management goals (Snow, 2018^[2]).

DAC members pay serious attention to the importance of collaboration and display a refreshing degree of humility about how much they rely on the support and capability of others to be able to innovate.

From the survey of DAC members, a number of different reasons are given for innovation collaborations:

- strategic support to dedicated innovation teams or innovators within donors
- design and delivery of new programmes, mechanisms, modalities
- pooling resources for innovation across the public (donors and more widely) and private sectors
- development and implementation of robust innovation and design processes
- horizon scanning for solutions and products
- fostering and encouraging user and grassroots innovation efforts
- alliances and networks for knowledge sharing and learning.

It can be noted from this list that collaboration can be instrumental and undertaken in pursuit of specific innovation efforts. It can also be more open-ended, to strengthen the development innovation ecosystem as a whole. This last point was especially emphasised at the October 2019 multi-stakeholder conference, where it was noted that “the whole innovation ecosystem in OECD and non-OECD countries must be strengthened”, with a particular emphasis on DAC members “support[ing] innovation capabilities within and across countries and build[ing] up collective approaches with a broad range of partners.”

As shown in Box 3.5, there are increasingly sophisticated approaches to addressing collaboration issues.

Box 3.5. How the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade's iXc has established external partnerships for innovation

The Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT)'s InnovationXchange (iXc) established a number of external partnerships from 2015 to 2018, including private sector companies, global programmes and philanthropic organisations. The resulting programmes were co-led, and also included co-funding and collaborative thought leadership. Examples include:

- collaborating with Bloomberg Philanthropies on the Data for Health Initiative, which operates in 20 countries, including 7 in the Indo-Pacific
- partnering with Monash University on the World Mosquito Program to develop a new innovative method to eliminate dengue and Zika in Fiji, Kiribati, Sri Lanka and Vanuatu.

iXc was seen by external partners to be solutions-oriented, responsive and a strong thought partner, and iXc staff were typically enthusiastic about their objectives. Partners also noted that the iXc team was characterised by a good management style, ease of grant administration and a clear mandate from the Australian Minister for Foreign Affairs. A number of external partners that were interviewed reported increased strategic alignment with iXc over time, and some noted that they had begun proactively factoring DFAT's priorities into their investment strategies and focus areas.

These external partnerships provided channels for iXc to engage in a range of different contexts and countries, and many were successful in catalysing additional funding in support of programming goals. iXc reports leveraging nearly AUD 60 million in co-funding for the Asia-Pacific region, plus in-kind contributions of expertise and time.

External partnerships were found by an independent review in 2019 to be one of the most successful aspects of the first three years of the DFAT innovation strategy.

Source: Elson, O., T. Feeny and L. Heinkel (2019^[3]), *Experimentation, Partnership and Learning: Insights from a Review of the First Three Years of DFAT's InnovationXchange*, www.r4d.org/resources/experimentation-partnership-and-learning-insights-from-a-review-of-the-first-three-years-of-dfats-innovationxchange.

Across both the survey responses and the case studies, the private sector is widely seen as the partner of choice for innovation. This is not straightforward and there are unresolved tensions in DAC members, especially in relation to their respective domestic private sectors and relationships with tied aid. This has led to questions about how best to capitalise on DAC members' domestic national innovation capabilities, which are still being resolved.

Researchers and scientists also play a vital role in innovation for development efforts: in assessing existing approaches; scanning for new ones; designing and testing out pilots; and building the evidence base necessary for scale. Many DAC members have ongoing research partnerships with academic institutions and think tanks, and also have consultancies with them on specific innovation issues. While these partnerships are well-developed and mature, there is often a need to strengthen the feedback loop between the production of research and its use to inform innovation efforts of DAC donors and their partners. Among the case study countries, all invest significantly in research and development, and are seeking to create better linkages between research and programming efforts to ensure the fruits of these investments are capitalised on.

Other donors are key players, as are multilateral agencies with specific shared interests and mandates (e.g. the World Health Organization for health, the United Nations Children's Fund for children, the World Food Programme for nutrition and food security, the World Bank for economic development and financial access, etc.). These partnerships can be specific to particular innovation areas (e.g. funding a new

approach to dealing with maternal health) or can be more generically about building multilateral capabilities in innovation.

Across the case study countries, civil society does not play a consistent role in how innovation for development works at present. Sometimes civil society organisations (CSOs) are asked to innovate, but across the case study countries, very few CSOs were pointed to as critical players in innovation efforts. Among the CSO representatives consulted across the case studies, many pointed to a lack of coherent signals from donors, and even to a pronounced tendency for donors to shut down creative and original approaches in favour of predictable and pre-defined goals and approaches. One interesting example of how this has been navigated from across the DAC membership is how Global Affairs Canada has used communities of practice to reach out to and engage with CSOs on innovation issues, and embedded innovation into CSO policy (see Box 3.6).

Box 3.6. Global Affairs Canada's Multi-stakeholder Community of Practice with Civil Society

Global Affairs Canada hosts a collaborative and vibrant dialogue with Canadian civil society organisation (CSO) partners through its Multi-stakeholder Community of Practice (MCOP). The MCOP advances the Canadian development innovation agenda and Global Affairs Canada's profile by supporting collective capacity development through learning and knowledge exchange on good practice, lessons and tools for innovation in international assistance.

Canada's Policy for Civil Society Partnerships for International Assistance sets out an approach for enhancing effective co-operation with Canadian, international and local CSOs to maximise the impact and results of Canada's international assistance and foster a strong civil society sector, which includes an objective on innovation. This innovative engagement and approach with civil society partners has led to a unique process of co-design of the implementation plan and subsequent mutual implementation of the policy. This novel approach has been received very positively by CSO partners, with the sector fully embracing the opportunity to discuss CSO policy implementation in an open and collaborative environment. In 2018, the Canadian Council for International Co-operation undertook research on innovation by learning from national CSO platforms in other DAC members, and used this to set out lessons for Canadian CSOs, concluding that "the biggest risk for CSOs may be to ignore innovation".

Source: Gareau, L. and C. Heshmati-Calderón (2018^[4]), *Daring to Take Risk and Fail: Building an Innovation Agenda in Canada's Global Development and Humanitarian Context*, <https://ccic.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Daring-to-Take-Risk-and-Fail-December-2018.pdf>.

Key issues for consideration

Many DAC members see new kinds of business models and partnerships as vital to establishing balanced tripartite relationships, which are often as useful as giving the private sector the leading role. Successful innovation for development is as much about the wider public sector, non-profit organisations and end users as it is about corporations. Ideas about the "entrepreneurial state"¹ are starting to filter into the development discourse and should play a role for both DAC members and their counterparts in the global South.

While being careful around issues of tied aid, there are a number of examples of how domestic ecosystems can be harnessed for development gains; for example, by looking for comparative advantages, creating fellowships and knowledge exchanges, and establishing acceleration mechanisms or hubs to address priority areas.

Internally, outreach is needed to ensure innovation is not a top-down, headquarters-driven effort, and engage country offices at the strategic level and national or local counterparts.

A critical blind spot in current innovation efforts is ignoring national and local actors or not thinking about them until it is too late. Despite widespread ideas about working with end users in context-specific ways and being participatory and open, in practice DAC members' work has placed much more emphasis on innovation work by mainstream development and humanitarian actors themselves. This has, in turn, led to a greater emphasis on incremental innovations that maintain the status quo rather than transformative approaches that disrupt it. Earlier and more sustained engagement is needed with innovation actors in developing countries as a matter of course within innovation initiatives and processes.

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Notes

¹ Based on the landmark work of economist Mariana Mazzucato, this approach argues that, far from being a bureaucracy that should “get out of the way” of private sector creativity, governments can play an active role in fixing market failures and shaping and creating new markets, by actively investing in new technologies and sectors which then provide opportunities for private enterprises and investors.



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