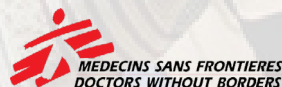# Mapping the Humanitarian Transformation: Spotlight on Innovation in International NGOs

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Innovation in International NGOs Now: A Snapshot

In 2020, inequalities were on the rise[1], yet both funding and trust in the different organizations designed to alleviate these issues are decreasing. With greater connectivity enabled by digital technology, and a potential for increased internal efficiencies, International Non-Governmental Organizations (INGOs) are feeling the need to change the way they address beneficiaries' needs and how they work internally in order to increase productivity. Some INGOs have embraced innovation and have undergone significant transformations. However, silos exist between organizations and learnings are not always shared broadly. This research thus aims at answering the following questions: What are best practices for innovation in INGOs? How does the organization's innovation journey evolve? Which challenges do organizations face and how could they be addressed?

This paper presents a snapshot of innovation in NGO's today, based on up-to-date case studies and examples. It highlights key opportunities and challenges to fostering further innovation as we move into the post-pandemic world. The first part of the paper synthesizes the findings from interviews with five Swiss based International NGOs, highlighting new examples and patterns. The second part of the paper focuses on the detailed case studies created for each NGO, outlining the innovation journey to date.

The NGO Context

International NGO's - also known as 'non-profit', 'voluntary' or 'civil society' organizations – are "independent organizations that are neither run by government nor driven by a profit motive." [2] The overall goal of these organizations is to improve society by addressing social issues such as human rights, humanitarian and developmental assistance, environmental protection and disaster relief. These organizations play multiple roles: they act as implementers by mobilizing resources to address social issues; as catalysts by initiating and driving change; and they partner with multiple stakeholders to deliver the highest level of impact. They are active on local, national, and international levels.

International NGO's have a unique financial mechanism. Their existence and survival are strictly dependent on a global network of different types of stakeholders: including Governments, private and institutional donors, and International Organizations. In most cases, the money they receive from donors cannot be used in a flexible way, meaning that it needs to be allocated transparently based on pre-assigned budgets and is often called "earmarked money." INGOs traditionally have decentralized governance structures and thus decentralized decision-making processes. This type of governance facilitates informal exchange of information and knowledge. However, this might create a challenge when it comes to disruptive innovation and change for which resistance is likely to be high when compared to incremental change and innovation.

The Research

To better understand how and to what extent INGOs are innovating, we based our analysis on a sample of five detailed case studies of INGOs active in the Humanitarian and Development sectors, precisely Helvetas, Médecins Sans Frontières, the Swiss Red Cross, Terre des hommes, and Medair. All organizations are based in Switzerland but have international scope. Each one had already started its innovation journey - developed innovation tools and instruments. Diving into the nuances of this set of NGOs enabled the identification of converging themes around the challenges and best practices of NGOs' innovation structures. The findings of this paper are based on eight semi-structured interviews with staff members of the selected organizations active in the humanitarian sector. The data resulting from these interviews was completed using secondary data that is publicly available on the respective organization's website and from other sources.

To examine best practices, challenges and characteristics of every International NGO in our sample, we applied an inductive case study-based research design. In line with this research method, each interviewee was asked the same set of questions. We started by trying to identify tangible and intangible innovation activities. Tangible activities include things such as whether an innovation unit exists. Innovation units have, in fact, been acknowledged to be an indicator of whether an INGO has allocated resources and strategic thinking towards innovation. Intangible activities are not directly targeting innovation but supporting it indirectly, such as the degree of innovative culture present in the organization, the presence of resources such as knowledge, or the amount of time staff could dedicate to innovative projects. Additional questions concerned the evolution of the organization's innovation journey, the relationship with senior management as well as with field operations, and to what extent innovation was integrated in the organization's strategy.

Why Innovation Now?

Innovation is crucial for International Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) to meet the scale of current global challenges, increase performance in terms of social impact, and remain relevant in today's changing environment. International NGOs must consider the strategic goals of their innovation activities. If it aligns with the organization's strategy and vision, innovation has the potential to spark greater efficiency and effectiveness in such institutions. Organizations need, therefore, to proactively embrace an innovation mindset and cultivate the capacity to think and work differently.

Providing relevant services to their beneficiaries, International NGOs are increasingly thinking about innovation, especially in light of the current global health crisis. The COVID-19 pandemic aggravated a funding crisis for International NGOs, persisting since more than a decade. If in 2009 the funding gap was approximately of USD 2.5 billion, to date it corresponds to almost USD 15 billion.[3]

Nowadays, the way that donations are made is changing. Pure philanthropy is frequently replaced by social investments. Since donors expect to see the impact of their effort and money, external pressure on International NGOs is increasing - and more and more questions about their efficiency and effectiveness are being raised. The decrease in funding triggered by the current health crisis is threatening International NGOs missions further, meaning that these organizations could face the risk of no longer being able to continue to serve their beneficiaries. As these challenges do not only concern single organizations, but the entire ecosystem of humanitarian and development work, cross-organization and cross-sector collaboration becomes crucial for NGOs in order to find solutions that would enable them to remain relevant actors. To this end, NGO's are increasingly looking to "design and develop new financing solutions, which could help to find new and better ways to tackle global challenges together." [4] In other words, there is an urgency to innovate financing mechanisms, the ways of work, and the collaborative processes. Now, more than ever before.

Organizing Innovation

A key question for every organization embarking on an innovation journey is how and where 'innovation activities should be embedded in the organization. Approaches range from centralized solutions of innovation units or centers to distributed innovation roles in staff member's job descriptions to informal, bottom-up arrangements. How innovation is organized usually has a major impact on the visibility innovation activities get in the organization but also on which topics are emphasized. As innovation spans a broad range of activities, we found very different approaches in our study.

Of the five NGOs, only Terre des hommes had an innovation unit established at the time of writing, composed of five people working full time on innovation. Médecins Sans Frontières used to have an innovation unit but, in 2018, with a view to becoming more agile and acting as a catalyst that would help the different departments of the organization put innovation projects in place, it was dissolved and transformed into an Innovation Coordination formed by different innovation advisors. Focal points were introduced in each department and some time was spent

in trying to identify the right processes that would allow development of ideas coming from the field. Compared to the other organizations, Medair had fewer human resources, having only one 50% innovation advisor position within the organization. The innovation advisor role was combined with the Cash Assistance position, one of the organization's main areas of expertise. At Helvetas and the Swiss Red Cross, innovation was included in other departments such as the Knowledge and Learning and IT departments. In terms of financial resources, Medecins Sans Frontières, the Swiss Red Cross, and Terre des hommes had a dedicated innovation budget; at Helvetas and Medair, innovation activities were funded through the organization's overall operational budget. Regarding the embeddedness of innovation within the organizational strategy, all entities had a clear definition of innovation and innovation as such was part of their corporate strategy.

Collaborative Initiatives

Innovation seldomly happens in isolation. Our findings showed that innovation in these organizations was often driven by collaborative work with others, even when formal structures and strategies did not exist. Examining how such collaborative initiatives developed and evolved over time can present key learnings to showcase the success stories that exist in this context. Two such initiatives from Terre des Hommes were The Resilience Collective and IeDA (Integrated e-diagnostic Approach). Both initiatives were built on cross-sector partnerships.

Resilience Collective

The Resilience Collective[5] consists of a collective journey between Terre des hommes (Tdh), the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the University of Geneva (UNIGE), the FabFoundation, MerakiLabs, Fab Connections, Red Cross Kenya and UNIGE though InZone to empower migrants and refugees with digital facilities, called "Resilience Innovation Facilities" including FabLabs and project accelerator. A FabLab is a physical space conceived as a technical prototyping platform for innovation and invention as well as for learning and innovation. In other words, a space to create, invent, learn, and share, both locally and globally.

IeDA (Integrated e-diagnostic Approach)

IeDA (Integrated e-diagnostic Approach), Terre des hommes' flagship initiative, is an integrated digital strategy that bolsters adherence to WHO clinical protocols by health workers.

IeDA was launched in 2010 as a pilot project. Since its deployment, 3.5 million children received at least one consultation by health professionals through this digital tool. It has a record of 8 million consultations all together. By the end of 2020, 1,600 clinics in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger were equiped with IeDA. This Integrated e-diagnostic Approach enabled improvements in the diagnosis and treatment of children living in rural areas and has now become a successful example of digital project that scaled nationally in Sub-Saharan Africa. Now one of the pillars of the Health program, the project's original innovation team, today focuses on R&D including "revolutionary AI base new functionalities."[6]

Innovation Journeys: Challenges, Workarounds, and Triggers for Change

The innovation journeys portrayed in the case studies at the end of this paper illustrate how the organizations in our sample differ in structure and design. Yet, the findings that emerged show that they are facing common challenges along their innovation journeys. Key learnings from failures and successes can pave the way for future organizations embarking on this journey.

The main callenges highlighted in our interviews with changemakers in International NGOS included: organizational culture, resources and capacity building, collaboration, communication, and governance. Below we outline each challenge and present workaround solutions or opportunities that emerged from the discussions.

The Challenge: Culture

In many organizations, fostering innovation remains challenging as the organizational culture is still rooted in traditional ways of working and thinking. Culture change is thus a long, often painful and slow process that requires a shift in the mindset of collaborators at all levels of the organization and also of stakeholders. An organization with a strong innovation-oriented culture supports creativity and experimentation, rewards employees, embraces risks and failures, facilitates connections among individuals and provides a conducive institutional environment where employees are given the conditions to fully realize their potential.

In the case of Medair, we were told that there was a discrepancy in the definition of innovation. This highlights the different viewpoints that exist in globally dispersed organizations and could lead to misunderstandings and internal fractures.

A Workaround: Leadership Buy-In

Helvetas succeeded in reaching a high level of organizational culture by engaging the senior management and having thus the needed leadership buy-in. The idea was that the top leadership supported in a concrete and visible manner the belief that knowledge, innovation and learning came from both within and without the organization.

Triggers for Change: External Pressure

External pressures such as COVID-19 have shown themselves to be important triggers for culture change since organizations were forced to adopt new ways of working after been hindered by traditional values, beliefs, and behaviors. Marcin Wesolowski, Chief Digital Officer at the Swiss Red Cross stated that "Covid-19 did so much to digital transformation and cultural change, much more than what we achieved in several years of work." This reflects how challenging it is for an organization that is still largely defined by its hierarchical and siloed system to change its internal culture.

> " *There are some systemic changes happening now and the organizational culture is changing as a consequence. This shows how culture is a shadow of the organization.*

The Challenge: Resources & Capacity Building

A common challenge for almost all the examined organizations is the limited access to resources and the difficulty of dedicating resources to innovation projects. Those resources can be tangible, such as human, physical and financial resources or intangible, such as the lack of time and capabilities. For example, at Medair, the innovation advisor was appointed only 50% to innovation and did not have a dedicated team to work just on innovation on a daily basis.

Budgetary restrictions and a lack of flexible financial resources, also called non-earmarked money, were a major hurdle for developing innovation in some organizations. Indeed, organizations were heavily dependent on identifying external institutional donors to prototype and develop an innovation initiative. Moreover, rigid reporting and compliance by donors increased the administrative burden and reduced the flexibility of supporting new initiatives.

One Workaround: Dedicating Time for Innovation

Dominika Bednarova, Innovation Advisor at Medair, underlines that it is important that innovation is part of the job description of employees.

Triggers for Change: Training on Innovation Methodology

To face these challenges and thus increase capacity development, organizations such as Terre des hommes adopted a design thinking approach, introduced bootcamps and design sprints for prototyping and testing. A further example is the Swiss Red Cross, which started an internal innovation process structured in different stages where employees received a certain number of resources to develop their innovative ideas. The facilitation of processes for learning and knowledge creation or skill development and coaching sessions as was the case for Helvetas, also contributed to capacity building.

> " *The question is to which extent investments in innovation are understood and valued by donors and other stakeholders at large?*

The Challenge: Collaboration

Findings emerged from the case studies showed that organizations structured in silos are likely to have high resistance to innovation and collaboration. Breaking down these silos and enhancing both internal and external collaboration is key for organizations to move forward in their innovation journey.

One Workaround: Creating Communities of Practice and Broadening Scope of Partners

Internal collaboration can be increased by creating communities of practice where people across divisions can share what they are doing and learn from each other, as at Medecins Sans Frontières. Change management practices such as including external partners, widens an organization's scope of activity and helps to put in place disruptive change and innovation. As explained by Maya Shah, former innovation lead at Medecins Sans Frontières, "I think the innovations that have succeeded the most, were those we developed with an external partner. The reason why you often proceed in this way is because you don't necessarily have the internal expertise, or you need to have validation."

Triggers for Change: Adopting Communication Tools

To increase intra-organizational collaboration, organizations relied on communication. For example, Medair adopted tools such as storytelling by sending out monthly innovation newsletters. By making employees an active part of the organizational innovation journey, storytelling has proved to be a powerful tool in engaging staff as well as challenging stereotypes and old narratives. Other organizations such as Helvetas organized virtual Sharedays during which thematic experts from within the organization usually shared knowledge around their areas of expertise. The idea was for everybody in the organization from around the world to have the opportunity to exchange views on given topics. The experts' interventions were considered a point of departure for an in-depth dialogue between whoever was interested. As Marcin Weselowski, CDO at the Swiss Red Cross stated, ". . .for innovation to happen, you need stable relationships which can be cultivated by constantly being present and a network within the organization, through informal and formal exchanges, leadership meetings and workshops."

> " *Communication is crucial because we learned that the resistance increases when change is limited to a certain elite of people who are thinking of change and then presenting it to the other employees.*

The Challenge: Governance

INGOs often adopt decentralized structures; leveraging and implementing innovation thus remains a major challenge. In the case of Medair, there was a disconnect between HQ and country programs regarding their understanding of the term 'innovation' and the perception of priorities also differed. It was very difficult to bridge the language discrepancies. This shows that, often, decentralized structures require more formalized innovation roles as well as more systematic knowledge sharing to progress and innovate.

The Swiss Red Cross faced the challenge of following very traditional ways of working. The organization was, in fact, organized in separate functional units, with experts in each respective unit working on specific tasks. Though, for innovation to happen, especially at a disruptive level, interconnections within units were needed. As Marcin Wesolowski explained, "There is no value in a functional team itself; they do their task, yes, but the value creation is in this horizontal connection between teams."

One Workaround: Exchange Platforms

The organizational culture of the Swiss Red Cross was still largely defined by a hierarchical and functionally divided structure. Nevertheless, in Spring 2020, as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic, the organizational culture started to change. The adoption of tools like Teams or Zoom removed some of the structural barriers that were hindering the cultural transformation within the Swiss Red Cross, enabling employees to connect in an easier, informal way and, consequently, creating bridges between the different silos.

Triggers for Change: Relying on Informal Networks

As the person responsible for the digital transformation process of the Swiss Red Cross, it was important for the CDO to be embedded in all the different departments of the organization. To do so, presence and networking were key. "You really need to have these exchanges, and in a quite complex organization like ours you need to go through informal networks. In an organization with a structure as the one of Swiss Red Cross [still organized in functional units with experts in each unit working on a specific task] you also need to go through informal networks otherwise it would take a long time to get things done", explained Marcin Wesolowski, Chief Digital Officer at the Swiss Red Cross.

A big part of my work has been to connect the organization to creative eco-systems (researchers, entrepreneurs, investors, etc.) by always keeping in mind that innovation is happening as a result of an iterative process which not only connects ideas but also stakeholders.

Looking Ahead

Innovation is a necessity in today's changing world. International NGOs have embarked on promising innovation journeys addressing the needs of their beneficiaries in new ways as well as tackling internal rigidities. Despite the diversity of organizational backgrounds, missions, and approaches, we identified common challenges across organizations: in particular the "resources and capabilities" challenge was perceived as the most severe. This indicates the need for the entire sector to develop more managerial skills and capabilities. This also shows that INGOs could envision adapting financing models to enable them to become more innovative such as no-strings attached donations, individual sponsoring or organizational sponsoring. Our research also showed that NGOs find creative ways of addressing challenges and others could learn from them. This calls for more collaboration within and across the humanitarian and development sectors in order to foster transformation towards innovation.

Innovating Innovation Research: Machine Learning to map innovation relevance

Investigating the presence of innovation in organizations is a complex task that typically relies on qualitative research methods (i.e.., surveys and case studies, as in the present paper), which are frequently characterized by a limited sample size, given the resources required to establish partnerships between researchers and organizations and conducting the interviews and analyses of each organization. One intriguing novel method to expand the breadth of qualitative research is offered by recent developments in machine learning and natural language (NLP). These methods are particularly well suited to analyze so-called big-data. Given the large amounts of text produced by organizations to describe their structure, governance, and activities, it is possible to systematically construct rich text databases for a large number of organizations. One can then apply NLP algorithms to these datasets to disclose patterns in the organizations analyzed along any variable of interest, for instance the relevance of innovation among these organizations.

To illustrate this novel approach, in this paper we analyze innovation in 10755 non-profit organizations (NPOs) registered in Switzerland. To this

There is no value in a functional team itself; they do their task, yes, but the value creation is in this horizontal connection between teams. And when this horizontal connection is working, then you will have the chance to have some innovation and progress. But if that is not working and you are talking about silos, you can have the best ideas and the best technologies in place, you will have big problems to lay the ground for innovation.

end we first collected mission statements from Swiss NPOs either from their websites or the web repository Stiftungscheiz.ch. We then classified NPOs as either Donor Foundations – i.e., foundations that give resources to develop projects – or Operating Foundations – i.e., foundations that receive funding to develop their own projects. Each of the donor and operating foundations were also assigned to one of fourteen domains of activity (see Fig. 1A) in which these are engaged.

We proceed to analyze the text as follows: first, given that Switzerland is multilingual, translated all mission statements to English from their original language (either German, French, or Italian) using google translator. Secondly, we preprocessed data following standard procedures[7] to eliminate generic words (e.g. "the", "a,", etc.) and thus constructed a database of 8485 unique words from the text collected from the above-mentioned organizations; third, since we are interested in identifying a pre-determined pattern in our dataset, i.e. the presence of innovation in each organization, we constructed a dictionary containing words that are related to innovation (e.g. innovation, advances, research, etc. see appendix). Finally, using this tailor-made lexicon we performed NLP supervised learning analyses to obtain a detailed mapping of the presence of innovation related words in the NPOs (see Fig. 1B). Overall, we found that only a minority (7.7%) of organizations used one or more of the innovation terms in their communication material analyzed. We also observed that donor foundations referred to innovation words more frequently than operating foundations (10% the first and 5% the latter, see Fig 1B). The number of foundations using innovation words varied largely across the domain of activities: unsurprisingly we found that foundations active in the area of research and development of technologies are those using innovation words the most, while foundations active in the religious services area are among those with least presence of innovation words. Consistent with the overall findings, we also observed that across all domains of activity innovation words are used more by donor foundations than operating ones (see Fig 1B).

We performed an additional exploratory analysis to measure the evolution over time in the use of innovative words by NPOs. The results revealed a clear increasing trend in the number of foundations using innovation words in their communication material over time, with organizations working in the areas related to technologies and development being the main drivers of this trend (see Fig. 1C).

Figure 1 Caption: **A** areas of activities in which Swiss NPOs work either as donor or operating foundations. **B** These graphs illustrate the percentage of NPOs using one or more words related to innovation (see appendix) in their communication material, overall (histograms on the left) and per area of activity. **C** Number of innovation related words (normalized by the existing number of foundations in a given year) identified in Swiss NPO's communication material in the time period between 1920 and 2019.
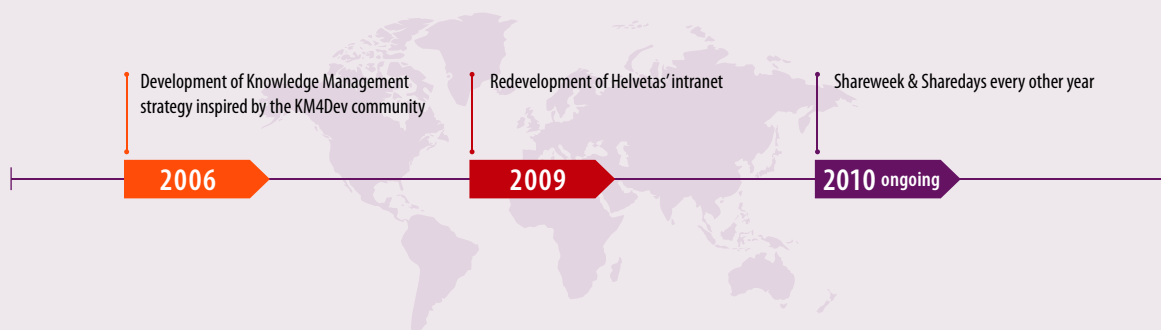
Case Studies

1. Helvetas

Founded seventy years ago, Helvetas is a non-profit development organization based in Switzerland with affiliated head offices in Germany and the USA. Helvetas' mission is to:

- "Support the efforts of disadvantaged people and communities in developing countries to determine the course of their own lives, thereby helping them to help themselves
- Promote fair access to essential resources and protect social, economic, political, environmental, and cultural rights
- Promote [in Switzerland] a spirit of solidarity among the public and campaign for coherent policies that benefit people in developing countries." [8]

The organization provides support to countries in Asia, Africa, Latin America, and Eastern Europe and is active in five different areas: water and infrastructure, skills development and education, sustainable and inclusive economies, governance and peace, and environment and climate change. Despite being, by nature, a development organization, since the early 2010s the organization started to engage in humanitarian activities, mainly undertaken in partnership with other organizations with expertise in that area. The move was due to country programs increasingly being confronted with emergency situations.

Helvetas provides services such as development projects and humanitarian aid, consulting, education and information, and development policy. In 2019, Helvetas supported 3'880'202 people through 300+ projects spanning 29 countries with a total expenditure of CHF 139 million.[9] At the time, the INGO employed between 1,200 and 1,400 people, with 1/10th in the head office in Switzerland and the other 9/10ths working in country programs.

The Organizational Innovation Journey

Development of Knowledge Management strategy inspired by the KM4Dev community — **2006**

Redevelopment of Helvetas' intranet — **2009**

Shareweek & Sharedays every other year — **2010** ongoing

At Helvetas, the origins of innovation are in Knowledge Management. In 2006, the organization was running a Knowledge Management Strategy inspired by the Knowledge Management for Development (KM4Dev) Community. At that time, the Community was very influential in different multi-lateral organizations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) mainly due to some individuals who were part of it. Initiated by Riff Fullan, Head of Knowledge and Learning at Helvetas, and put together through a highly consultative process, the resulting strategies were called Knowledge Sharing or Knowledge and Learning strategies and emphasis was given to the possibility of supporting communities of practice within the organization. Riff explained:

"A Community of Practice (CoP) is an ideal form of knowledge management and innovation. It is a very strong way to have what you call, state of the art kind of knowledge and continuous learning embedded in a sort of social network. And so, you don't rely on databases of what is the most crucial knowledge, you rely on what people have in their heads and what they exchange with each other."

Although acknowledging that the organization has never been fully successful in cultivating thematic communities as self-sustaining entities within the organization, great emphasis continued to be put on the organizational culture and on learning and knowledge management. The idea was that the people who are closest to where the knowledge is used and generated should be the curators of what emerges and is shared. To this end, in the late 2000s, Helvetas redeveloped its intranet to avoid a siloed way of working. The focus of the intranet was on virtual collaboration and sharing. Riff explained:

"Part of what we want to cultivate in terms of knowledge sharing, learning, and innovation is an organic situation where innovation happens, and it has an ease of movement between people and across the organization. The more you can cultivate an organizational culture where people feel empowered to share their ideas, even if they are not well developed and they don't get shut down because is not an accepted way of doing things, the more open you are to innovation."

Senior management buy-in enabled Helvetas to move towards this organizational culture. The idea was that the top leadership supported, in a concrete and visible manner, the belief that knowledge, innovation, and learning came from both within and without the organization. Nevertheless, to effectively support knowledge, learning, and innovation systematization of processes and structure were also needed, *"We have various ways that we try to steer the energy that people have without being a kind of a prison in which they feel they are constrained in the way they work. Indeed, quite challenging at an organizational level, but we are basically trying to balance this openness with the sufficient amount of structure to ensure coherence and quality,"* explained Riff.

Reporting to the Director of Advisory Services, the Learning and Innovation team is composed of five people: two advisors focused on monitoring, evaluation, and learning; one advisor focusing both on the technical support for the online platforms and on the facilitation of processes for knowledge sharing and learning. The remaining two are in charge of the general knowledge management and facilitation aspects, *"We do fair bit of direct facilitation ourselves and coaching and capacity development for others around those kinds of skills because we believe facilitation and having a good process for learning or knowledge sharing and innovation is just as important as having specific tools or the kind of content knowledge that people need,"* explained Riff.

An additional reason why the Knowledge, Learning, and Innovation team puts considerable emphasis on the culture and motivation of individuals is linked to the fact that they also rely on other people not directly involved in the team, *"It is all about the networking of people working together, the diversity of perspectives that you can bring to a challenge that makes innovation much more possible and practical."*

With individuals being among Helvetas' primary resources, the organization had in-house champions for precise tasks or topics, who themselves provided coaching and mentoring to other staff. The overall senior management support was also considered an important resource for the INGO. In fact, this allowed anybody from the organization to propose an initiative and his/her position would have not be the deciding factor for whether that idea would be propagated or validated. Once a year, an innovation award was assigned to the three most innovative projects which would receive between CHF 2,000-5,000 to be invested with the purpose of further developing the project or developing relevant competences. The innovation award was something appreciated by the whole organization, *"We should remember that individuals thrive on recognition, it is something to which people respond in a very positive way,"* explained Riff.

Every two years for the last decade, with strong support from the Knowledge and Learning team, Helvetas has organized a Shareweek specifically for country directors. It consisted of a one-week workshop where all country directors (and in some cases deputy directors) come together in Switzerland to discuss a range of strategically important topics with senior and middle management from the head office. Riff explained, *"We spend a very intensive week in exchanging and bringing our experiences from various places together, bringing up new ideas and trying to see what kind of follow ups we should take from these exchanges. To create not a huge program, but just something that would inform how we work together in the future."* Besides the Shareweek, virtual Sharedays were also organized every other year. During the Sharedays, thematic experts from within the organization usually shared knowledge around their areas of expertise. The idea was to give the opportunity to everybody in the organization from around the world to exchange on given topics. The experts' interventions were considered a point of departure for a consequent in depth dialogue between whoever was interested.

Aiming at integrating more innovation in its strategy, the organization institutionalized the process for which every country program, while developing their own country strategy, had to develop a theory of change that encapsulated how Helvetas - as an institution - understood the way change happened. This allowed the organization to better identify entry points for each program and thus, have a more coherent and predictable influence of its work.

In 2021, Helvetas' new organizational strategy will be implemented. It was collectively decided that learning and innovation will be a transversal issue in the organization. The aim is to promote that learning and innovation are inextricably linked and are important to the organization to continue to add value through its work:

"That reflects an understanding that when you are working in complex contexts, you have to be adaptive and open to new ideas, you have to be able to respond to what is happening in the context in which you work, otherwise you are going to run into real serious problems of effectiveness. So, we have to be as open as possible to how things are changing and evolving very rapidly," concluded Riff.

As discussions continue around the new transversal issue of Learning and Innovation, the two areas that receive emphasis are conducive organizational culture and scalability. The latter is receiving increasing attention because it has been acknowledged in the organization that an innovation that cannot be applied at a national level (or within a significant region below national level) is severely limited in its potential impact.
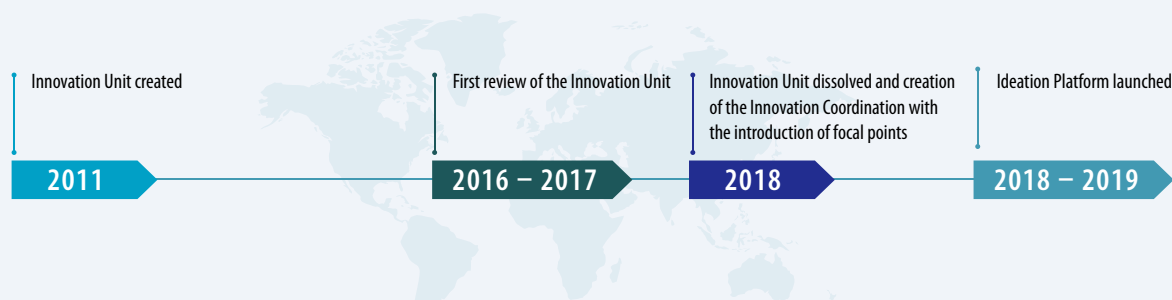
Case Studies

2. Médecins Sans Frontières Switzerland

The International Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) movement is a medical humanitarian non-profit organization. Founded in 1971, its mission is "to provide impartial medical relief to the victims of war, disease, and natural or man-made disaster, without regard to race, religion or political affiliation." The movement is composed of twenty-five[10] legally independent associations connected to five[11] Operational Centers – Switzerland, France, Belgium, Holland, and Spain – that oversee managing the movement's humanitarian action in the field. Engaging volunteers and staff from all around the world, the associations are united by their commitment to the MSF Charter and Principles.[12] MSF International is based in Switzerland (International Office) and its role is to provide coordination and support to the movement's members.

MSF Switzerland is one of the movement's twenty-five associations. For the year 2019, its operational budget was of CHF 200 million. In 2019, MSF Switzerland conducted 72 projects in 24 countries.

The Organizational Innovation Journey

2011	2016 – 2017	2018	2018 – 2019
Innovation Unit created	First review of the Innovation Unit	Innovation Unit dissolved and creation of the Innovation Coordination with the introduction of focal points	Ideation Platform launched

Since its inception in 1971, innovation has been part of MSF and this can be seen throughout its history. The movement was the first humanitarian non-profit organization to put together the "kits" that staff could deploy in the field extremely fast. It started with the "kit 10,000" which was the basic medical kit for primary care. These kits developed overtime to the point that, at the time of writing, it was possible to set up a surgical hospital very quickly. The famine in the 1990s and the AIDS crisis in the 2000s also forced MSF to continue to innovate.

As in the late 2000 innovation in the humanitarian sector became more prominent and gained recognition at the political level, in 2011 MSF Switzerland established an Innovation Unit, aimed at pushing staff to think out of the box and become more creative. The unit was created with a particular focus on thinking of new ways for tackling diseases that had continuously high mortality rates. Maya Shah, Head of Innovation at MSF Switzerland, explained:

"It was created as a unit with – at the time - a particular focus on diarrheal diseases which was the entry point to look at innovation for cholera, rotavirus, etc. There were major innovations done: The cholera vaccine was used in an outbreak to show a reduction of incidence of the disease; we also supported and conducted a phase three clinical trial in Niger on a vaccine for Rotavirus that is thermostable to show (a) that you can conduct phase three clinical trials in a country like Niger and then, (b) the vaccine itself."

Initiated by the senior management, between 2016 and 2017, the Innovation Unit went through its first round of review of operations. The evaluation revealed that the unit was not seen as an integral part of the operations, with innovation being held in the hands of just a small number of people. Moreover, the people that worked in the unit ended up being project managers rather than enablers or catalysts for innovation, hence creating competition instead of fostering collaboration.

In 2018, aiming at becoming more agile and acting as a catalyst that would help the different departments of the organization put innovation projects in place, the Innovation Unit was dissolved and transformed into an Innovation Coordination. Focal points were introduced in each department and a some time was spent in trying to identify the right processes that would enable development of ideas coming from the field. Maya explained, *"If you look at the ways people have to manage in the field, they are innovating all the time, but we are just not capturing them."* To this end, the organization put in place an ideation platform where ideas could be posted and then, depending on the amount of resources needed, either the Innovation Coordination or a committee composed of the Director of Operations, the Director of Logistics and the Medical Director decide which ideas are to be supported or not. Since the formalization of the Innovation Coordination, there was no longer an innovation team, but the Innovation Coordination was constantly in touch with people from the different departments. Maya explained, *"For the Ebola game, there was a team in the medical department that developed it. The Innovation Coordination helped with the coordination of the partnership, the different actors and the piloting."*

At the time of this case, MSF Switzerland was about to launch its new strategic plan 2020-2023. Unlike the previous organizational strategy where innovation sat on its own as a single pillar, in the new one innovation appears in every chapter and is included in all the pillars, thus becoming mainstream. The organizational strategy also revealed that for MSF Switzerland, innovation is not about technology, *"For us innovation is about improving products or services, it is about creating a more patient-centered approach, new models of care or a new vaccine. You might want to use technology because that is how you may get closer to the patient, but foremost is about how do you treat the patient. What kind of drugs do you bring? How can you listen to what the patient wants? For us innovation is really about quality of care in the largest sense of the term,"* explained Maya.

MSF Switzerland relied a lot on partnerships for the development of its innovations. Effectively, in a substantial number of innovations, the organization collaborated with an external partner to either be able to prototype or develop the ideas. Maya explained:

> *"I think the innovations that have succeeded the most, were those we developed with an external partner. The reason why you often proceed in this way is because you don't necessarily have the internal expertise, or you need to have validation. For example, when we did the insulin thermal stability project, our partner was the Faculty of Pharmaceutical Science of the University of Geneva, because they had the expertise in the laboratory that could do that insulin tests, we didn't have that in house. What we knew is that we had our patients that were living in high security situation in the refugee camps and the teams wanted to give them a monthly supply of insulin, but they had no fridge. So, our question was, can we safely give the insulin to our patients knowing that they don't have a fridge?"*

With 90% of its funding being private, MSF receives hardly any governmental funding. The organization also tries to have as much un-earmarked funding as possible, meaning that when a donation is received it is not for a specific country or project. Nevertheless, sometimes it happens that external donors or foundations are interested in supporting specific projects either financially or by providing the needed expertise.

Linked to historic circumstances, the innovation culture at MSF Switzerland went in waves. There were periods during which the organization was considered very innovative, with initiatives being significantly pushed, whereas during other periods, there was less emphasis on the topic. *"There have been times where we were a lot more vocal, a lot more pushing for things. Then there was a slump when things got better, when the AIDS epidemic went down a bit; in the past five to ten years, it still was less. I think now, particularly with Covid-19, it is restarting again. I believe that the innovation culture is there, but sometimes you might have to push it; and perhaps, not everybody just has it, you need to look for it as well,"* explained Maya.

Considered as one of the organization's major challenge, future efforts will be put in improving even further processes for how to get field ideas captured, *"Indeed, there are some innovations that we are missing, that perhaps we are not focusing on, but that staff in the field would consider much more important than what I would, sitting here in Geneva,"* explained Maya. Future steps would also include the creation of a community of practice in the field, *"It is not just about having innovations coming up, it is also about creating a community of practice where people across missions can share what they are doing,"* concluded Maya.

3. Swiss Red Cross

The Swiss Red Cross was founded in 1866 by the Swiss philanthropist and journalist Henry Dunant. Member of the world's largest humanitarian network – The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) - the Swiss Red Cross is also considered the largest humanitarian organization in Switzerland. With headquarters in Bern and 24 cantonal associations, its legal structure is that of a federal organization. As of June 2020, the Swiss Red Cross employed over 4,000 staff and had more than 50,000 volunteers nation-wide.[13] Its operational budget was CHF 120 million.[14]

Guided by seven Fundamental Principles: humanity, impartiality, neutrality, independence, voluntary service, universality, and unity; the organization's mission is to help vulnerable people affected by a humanitarian crisis in Switzerland but also internationally. Effectively, due to its long existence, the Swiss Red Cross has the means and the knowledge to provide help in other regions like Africa, Asia, and South America. As of June 2020, the organization was active in over 30 countries world-wide.[15] Its activities revolved around seven areas of focus: disaster and risk reduction, livelihoods, protection-gender and inclusion, shelter, health, migration, and water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH).

The Organizational Innovation Journey

Digital Transformation process started

2017

Chief Digital Officer position introduced

2018

Innovation Unit dissolved and creation of the Innovation Coordination with the introduction of focal points

2018

At the Swiss Red Cross, innovation was intricately linked to the digitalization agenda which became a matter of focused discussion in 2017. A year later, digitalization was recognized as essential for the organization to continue to serve its beneficiaries, thus a Chief Digital Officer position and a dedicated digitalization unit was introduced. The aim was to have someone who could help the organization to digitally transform but not only, *"This role is also about coordinating activities, looking at how the market will change in the next five to ten years and try to influence the different units; we can't do top-down steering, but we can influence, consult and guide,"* explained Marcin Wesolowksi, Chief Digital Officer at the Swiss Red Cross. Reporting directly to the CEO, the Chief Digital Officer had a team composed of three core people and was supported by external consultants, according to the specific needs required by the different projects.

Alongside digitalization, innovation was also on the agenda of the CDO's team. Major efforts were put into disruptive innovation, *"Incremental innovation is happening all the time since one hundred-fifty years; I believe there is always incremental innovation happening everywhere, so we are really focused on the disruptive type of innovation. We are focusing on how our services will be different in five to ten years' time (eg. how autonomous driving will disrupt everything we do in the cantons in terms of transports services),"* explained Marcin. *"We are probably not the most technologically advanced organization, but we really try hard to push for it with the possibilities we have,"* continued Marcin.

At the time of writing, financial resources were not a major barrier for the CDO. Effectively, the organization reserved funds specifically for digital transformation and was in the process of introducing dedicated funds for innovation. To this end, in June 2020, an innovation process was proposed within the organization; the aim was to implement a Stage Gate model for innovation. The process consisted of different stages where employees could receive a certain amount of resources to develop their ideas. If financial means were less of a problem, the time that employees had to invest in such a process was considered a challenge. Marcin explained, *"If you say let's have the first stage, an employee dedicates 20% of his time to this idea, then for two months, it is around ten working days. This is of course much more of the budget you need for this idea and if you scale it up for 4,000 people, that's quite a chunk of resources."*

Between 2018 and 2020, a major focus was put into the development of the organization's new digital strategy and the key objectives were also fully integrated into the organization's new overall strategy. In June 2020, this "Strategy 2030" was adopted by the Red Cross Council, signaling the beginning of a new phase for the Swiss Red Cross, *"I think that then we can go into implementation, that will be the momentum we were waiting for; where we could really have a strategic framework because before, when I started in the position, there was no digital strategy giving you some guidance for how to move forward. For the next years we will now have this guiding framework,"* explained Marcin.

It became essential to communicate the changes that the new strategy would have brought to all levels of the organization as well as to start inviting people to participate in the change. Marcin explained, *"Communication is crucial because we learned that the resistance increases when change is limited to a certain elite of people who are thinking of change and then presenting it to the other employees. I think people are not resistant to change itself, but they are resistant to be changed. Moreover, I think invitation is key; good and well-meant invitations are a good approach to engage people."*

As the person responsible for the digital transformation process of the Swiss Red Cross, it was important for the CDO to be embedded in all the different departments of the organization. To do so, presence and networking were key, *"You really need to have these exchanges and in a quite complex organization like ours you need to go through informal networks,"* stated Marcin. *"Of course, you can use formal events, we also do that; we have yearly gatherings, leadership meetings where you are able to present your work and future plans; but in an organization with a structure as the one of Swiss Red Cross you also need to go through informal networks otherwise it would take a long time to get things done. This is the reason why, to move forward, I am focusing a lot on informal exchanges and building relationships,"* Marcin continued.

Despite the major focus on innovative disruptive technology, the organization's way of working was still traditional. Effectively, the Swiss red Cross was still organized in separate functional units, with experts in each unit working on a specific task. Though, for innovation to happen, especially at a disruptive level, interconnections within units were needed. As Marcin explained:

> *"there is usually no added value in a functional team itself; they are experts in their tasks, yes, but real value is created through the horizontal connection between teams, i.e., by connecting various disciplines. And when this horizontal connection is working, then you will have the chance to have some innovation and progress. But if that is not working and you are talking about silos, you can have the best ideas and the best technologies in place, you will have big problems to lay the ground for innovation."*
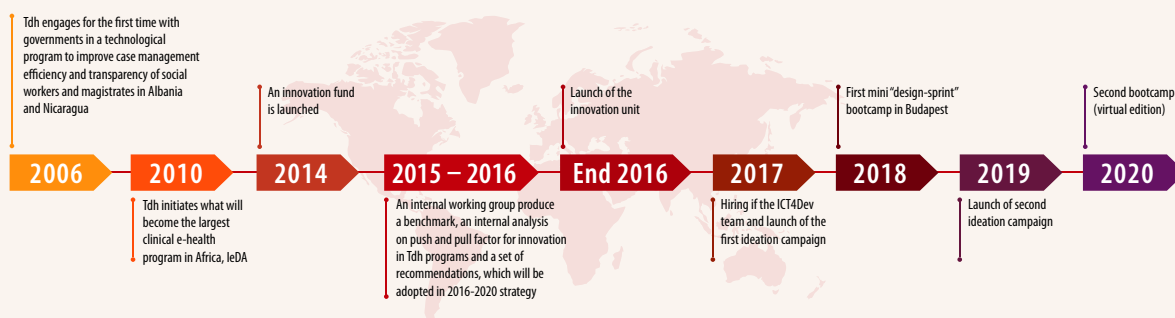
The organizational culture of the Swiss Red Cross was still largely defined by a hierarchical and functionally divided structure. Nevertheless, in Spring 2020, as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic, the organizational culture started to change, "Covid-19 did so much to digital transformation and also cultural change. If you have external pressure and common goals, everything can change very quickly; Covid-19 showed it." For instance, tools like Teams or Zoom removed some of the barriers that were hindering the cultural transformation within the Swiss Red Cross, enabling employees to connect in an easier, informal way. To this end, "I think we will have a serious discussion about how this changed our culture in a way and how we can influence it in the future. I think you can't do it directly. We see that there are some systemic changes now and culture changes as a consequence. Culture is really a shadow of the organization," concluded Marcin.

Case Studies

4. Terre des hommes

Terre des hommes is an impartial and independent INGO founded in 1960 by Edmond Kaiser, a French-Swiss pharmacist, journalist, and humanitarian activist. Considered the leading Swiss organization for children's aid, the mission of Terre des hommes (Tdh) is to offer assistance for children in need in the domains of migration, child protection, juvenal justice, and health. Besides being a humanitarian organization, Tdh is also considered a development organization working with stakeholders at all levels — from the ministerial level to the individual level - to build sustainable solutions in a systemic way in order to best serve the most marginalized children. The work of the organization is guided by its four core principles: courage, ambition, respect, and commitment. In 2019, 4.2 million children received assistance in 38 countries.[16] The operational budget was CHF 100 million. As of 2020, Terre des hommes employed around 2,500 people worldwide.[17]

The Organizational Innovation Journey

2006	**2010**	**2014**	**2015 – 2016**	**End 2016**	**2017**	**2018**	**2019**	**2020**

Tdh engages for the first time with governments in a technological program to improve case management efficiency and transparency of social workers and magistrates in Albania and Nicaragua

An innovation fund is launched

Launch of the innovation unit

First mini "design-sprint" bootcamp in Budapest

Second bootcamp (virtual edition)

Tdh initiates what will become the largest clinical e-health program in Africa, IeDA

An internal working group produce a benchmark, an internal analysis on push and pull factor for innovation in Tdh programs and a set of recommendations, which will be adopted in 2016-2020 strategy

Hiring if the ICT4Dev team and launch of the first ideation campaign

Launch of second ideation campaign

At Terre des hommes, innovation is identified as being part of the DNA of the organization. The NGO was developed by a strong, disruptive personality – Edmond Kaiser – who was in conflict with traditional ways of cooperation and the traditional humanitarian approach. However, while professionalizing and growing, part of the spirit that characterized the organization since its inception was lost. As Thierry Agagliate, Former Head of Innovation at Tdh explained, *"The more we professionalize, we apply quality and accountability standards, and structure our method with necessary processes, the less we leave space to experiment. This is not unique; this is what happens when organizatiosn grow, they lose the agility to innovate."*

Despite being engaged in global standardization trends, Tdh has long remained a very decentralized and bottom-up organization, with a business model built on a high level of freedom for multiple country delegations. This was both a strength in terms of diversity and creativity and a serious limit in terms of capacity for the organization to invest on scalable new global products. *"Because it was always bottom up and ad-hoc, the global organization didn't learn anything about initiatives that were happening in the field; for this reason, most of them used to emerge and die with their founders,"* explained Thierry.

Having a Latin culture is an asset for the organization when it comes to innovation. In fact, a lot of 'free minds' reigns within the INGO. *"A lot of country directors like to think by themselves. They have a critical spirit, some of them have creativity. Basically, the idea to find new solution, be creative and independent in your mindset is almost there by nature,"* described Thierry. However, knowledge management seems to be more of an issue for the organization. Thierry explained: *"Until last year we didn't have a shared information management system. We had one system for Lausanne and a different for each field offices, so we had forty different information management systems. That was a problem because if you wanted, for instance, to send an email and reach all the 2,500 staff of Tdh you could not do that before. Today we can, we made some progress last year; we are a 60-year-old organization and still it took us all this time to have an information management system."* Even learning from previous experiences seemed to be challenging for the INGO, *"We are not so good at learning either. Again, because we don't write, we don't evaluate enough. If you don't document, nobody knows; you cannot share, you cannot connect the dots. We are now going in the right direction, but I think we still have more efforts to do"*, added Thierry.

In 2014, the CEO of Tdh expressed the willingness to find a method that would allow the creation of a more systematized innovation dynamic serving the objectives of the whole organization. The idea was to structure a more programmatic approach where innovation was at the edge, *"How can we cultivate an innovation spirit? How can we support the growth of new ideas and project in order to help the organization transform around those innovation and not just going into the next one without learning from the previous one?"*

Since the organization used to distribute part of the core funding in a non programmatic way, in the same year, Tdh decided that part of its budget was to be attributed to the best ideas and teams within the organization using an internal financial incentive instrument. The Innovation Fund was thus launched. Thierry explained, *"We rapidly achieved quite good success. The innovation fund ran for a few years; it was interrupted just because in 2018 the organization went through a financial crisis, but most of the projects – if not all of them – that today can be considered as the assets of the organization have gone through the innovation fund."* Between 2015 and 2016, the organization started to develop its innovation strategy; at the end of 2016, with the launch of an Innovation Unit, innovation within Terre des hommes gained a more formal meaning.

The Innovation Unit team changed over the years; particularly, the number of team members decreased significantly in 2018 when the organization faced financial difficulties. As of June 2020, the team was composed by five people working full time: The Head of the unit, three people in charge of the ICT4D – a team leader and two regional managers - and a data scientist. External consultants are also employed according to the needs of the unit. The creation of the unit helped the new programs built under the 2020 strategy to invest more strategically in innovation and undertake their digital transformation. Thierry explained, *"The organization used to follow an unstructured approach of innovation, happening randomly thanks to individuals. My job is to bring more structure, to bring more alignment in innovation processes to serve our programs, so that Terre des hommes strategically invests where it has to be done. But the paradox is that if it goes too far in structuring, we are going to kill creative initiatives."* About his role as Head of the Innovation Unit, Thierry further explained:

"I am trying to avoid getting trapped in this paradox because our unit role is not about setting up continuous improvement mechanisms; the title of my function is disruptive innovation manager. So, I am a person who is not pushing just to incrementally improve what the organization already knows and what it already does. We all agreed, when we launched this innovation dynamic, that continuous improvement is 100% fully part of the regular job of each collaborator and the core responsibility of our program leaders. What is specific to innovation is to explore ahead or aside of the main track and take calculated risks. When you continuously improve what is already working, you take zero risk, but you usually miss disruptive alternatives. So, what we need some times, especially in periods of fast changes, is put aside what we already know and engage in the domains that are unknown, take risks and be creative. It is a completely different mindset."

Once the fund was operational, the organization realized that having just a financial instrument to support projects was not enough. The provision of methodological and technical guidance to in-house innovators was also necessary. To this end, in 2017, the organization introduced a new methodology to design new solutions, consisting of a process called 'idea challenge' to help teams and Tdh's leadership around the globe ideate and brainstorm openly around different challenges. The 'idea challenge' is combined with a mini 'design sprint bootcamp'. As Thierry explained, *"We introduced the design thinking approach and design sprints because it helps engage in prototyping dynamics with an agile and a human-centric approach. We hired great consultants to help us and applied this methodological approach with a first bootcamp organized in Budapest where 50 people took part, divided into five teams from all over the world."* The second bootcamp was planned for June 2020 which, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, was held online. *"It is a whole process that from the ideation campaign to the bootcamp and then to the design of a new service or tools takes a whole year. We can then test these prototypes within existing projects, fund them with our innovation fund or/and fundraise for them"*, continued Thierry. Designing with users, for users, iteratively is something that has always been part of the organization's approach and with the adoption of the design thinking methodology, this way of working was strengthened even further.

With digital technologies playing a strategic role in the innovation process, the organization introduced a technology back-up support different from the regular IT team. The ICT for Development teams helps all programs undertake their digital transformation. *"ICT4D is narrowly connected to innovation as a digital transformation is a phenomenon creating new possibilities, new products and new scaling with potentially disruptive impact as we experimented with IeDA, one of our best success in the domain of e-health, saving thousands of lives and serving more than 3 million beneficiaries every year"*, stated Thierry.

Besides the innovation fund – which at the time of writing was frozen due to 2019 financial issues, the introduction of the design thinking approach and the creation of a technological team, additional key elements are the international connections and partnerships. Thierry explained, *"A big part of my work has been to connect Terre des hommes to creative ecosystems (researchers, entrepreneurs, investors etc.) but always keeping in mind that innovation is happening as a result of an iterative process which not only connects ideas but also stakeholders. This is why Terre des hommes has a strong partnership with the University of Geneva, with the EPFL, the London School, the John Hopkins or tech actors such as Cloudera foundation, Dimagi, etc.). It is the whole dimension of using the R&D capacities of academia and corporates at the service of the new products both for evaluation purposes and for technical expertise."* Thierry continued, *"As a social entrepreneur, I always have an equation in my mind what the problem I have to solve is, what the type of solution I have in mind, the technologies that are currently in the air and what kind of people I know who could help make things happen."*

Terre des hommes' flagship innovation initiative is *IeDA (Integrated e-diagnostic Approach)*, an integrated digital strategy that allows bolter adhesion to WHO clinical protocols by health workers; IeDA tablets equip currently 1,600 clinics in Burkina Faso (80% of country coverage with a 90% use) serving 3,5 million children under time. The original innovation team transferred its supervision and its scaling up strategy to the Health program in 2018 and today concentrates its support on R&D including "revolutionary AI base new functionalities."[18] Further successful projects in the digital health domain are *SIMSONE (Simulation of Essential Skills in Obstetrical and Neonatal care)*[19], a tool that trains midwives to improve the quality of care provided at birth, *Gravit'eau* , a system that enables water recycling for hand washing, or the Resilience Collective[21], a collective journey between Tdh, IOM and UNIGE to empower migrants and refugees with digital facilities, including FabLabs.
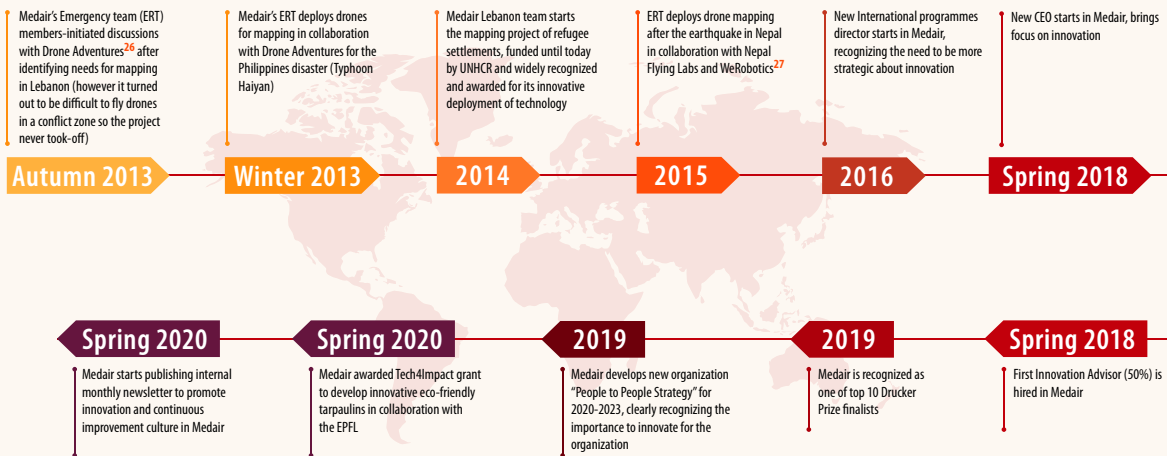
With the 2016-2020 strategic plan coming to the end of its term and its new program-driven structure in place, stimulated by an independent innovation unit, Tdh has demonstrated the value for the organization to create internal spaces and instruments, where risks can be taken and out of the box ideas can be formulated, prototyped, and tested. The strategic conversation today is about applying this same approach to the rest of the organization. For Thierry, *"Under the leadership of the CEO, the unit could indeed help other departments (fundraising, communications, HR, etc) experiment and innovate so that the whole organization fosters a coherent culture of innovation."*

Case Studies

5. Medair

MEDAIR is an impartial, independent and neutral humanitarian international NGO with headquarters in Switzerland and six affiliated offices in Europe and North America and is currently operational in 12 countries.[22] Inspired by the Christian faith and established in 1989, its mission is "to save lives and relieve human suffering in in the world's most difficult-to-reach and devasted places."[23] Guided by its core values - Faith, Compassion, Hope, Dignity, and Accountability - the organization provides humanitarian assistance both in emergency situations and in the context of protracted crises (e.g. the Syria crisis, MEDAIR has been active on the ground since 2015). In 2019, the organization employed 123 staff in its headquarters, 1,447 nationally recruited staff, and 166 internationally recruited staff in the field, enabling direct assistance to 3,508,117 people.[24] Of its USD 89.6 million operating expenses, 88% were allocated to the direct delivery of humanitarian assistance, the other 12% was used for management, fundraising, and indirect expenses (overheads).[25]

The Organizational Innovation Journey

Autumn 2013 — Medair's Emergency team (ERT) members-initiated discussions with Drone Adventures[26] after identifying needs for mapping in Lebanon (however it turned out to be difficult to fly drones in a conflict zone so the project never took-off)

Winter 2013 — Medair's ERT deploys drones for mapping in collaboration with Drone Adventures for the Philippines disaster (Typhoon Haiyan)

2014 — Medair Lebanon team starts the mapping project of refugee settlements, funded until today by UNHCR and widely recognized and awarded for its innovative deployment of technology

2015 — ERT deploys drone mapping after the earthquake in Nepal in collaboration with Nepal Flying Labs and WeRobotics[27]

2016 — New International programmes director starts in Medair, recognizing the need to be more strategic about innovation

Spring 2018 — New CEO starts in Medair, brings focus on innovation

Spring 2018 — First Innovation Advisor (50%) is hired in Medair

2019 — Medair is recognized as one of top 10 Drucker Prize finalists

2019 — Medair develops new organization "People to People Strategy" for 2020-2023, clearly recognizing the importance to innovate for the organization

Spring 2020 — Medair awarded Tech4Impact grant to develop innovative eco-friendly tarpaulins in collaboration with the EPFL

Spring 2020 — Medair starts publishing internal monthly newsletter to promote innovation and continuous improvement culture in Medair

At MEDAIR, the first innovative projects were more ad-hoc initiatives than the results of strategic decisions. As an ex-Medair ERT member described the situation, "I am not even sure we called it innovation back then." The projects launched deployed emergency drone mapping in Philippines and Nepal. The Nepal project was recognized as a huge success, with the INGO even winning an award. At the same time, the team in Lebanon developed and launched an innovative project to map refugee informal settlements. This was also recognized winning various international awards for Innovation. However, these initiatives were heavily dependent on the "innovation" potential of single individuals or country-specific teams, and innovation was not seen as a strategic direction for the organization. After the individual staff leading and pushing for the drone initiatives left, the enthusiasm generated by that drone project rapidly decreased, creating an innovation leadership gap.

In 2018, with the arrival of the new CEO, the idea of innovation rose in prominence. The senior leadership started to formalize innovation by introducing a part-time 'Innovation Advisor' position (50%) within the organization and formalizing the innovation strategy. It consisted of a role that was combined with the Cash Assistance position; the latter, together with (1) health and nutrition (including mental health and psycho-social support), (2) water, sanitation and hygiene, and (3) shelter and infrastructure, form the organization's main areas of expertise. Being one of Medair's key objectives, innovation can be found in all the organization's areas of focus. Moreover, it figures in its strategy and it is recognized as a big part of the identity of the INGO. Since April 2020, the Innovation Advisor reported directly to the CEO in the Executive Office, "To give more weight to innovation and show organizational commitment, I think to have the Innovation Advisor in the executive team is a good step," explained Dominika Bednarova, then Innovation Advisor at MEDAIR.

Though, with the introduction of the 'Innovation Advisor' role, the need for someone to lead the process was recognized at an organizational level, major challenges for the Innovation Advisor were related to the minimal resources at her disposal. Time and human resources, together with finances, appeared to be major concerns:

"The role of the innovation advisor is a lonely one, as I don't have a team of people who would be officially assigned to some kind of innovation unit, even if only at a certain percentage; people who know that innovation is in their job description. So, very often it happens that there are people just interested from other departments who jump in [on top of their normal job]. I work a lot with sectoral advisors, we have health experts, architects and engineers, and with them I have a close work relationship because they have a great overview of the countries we work in and they know the technical needs and often think outside of the box. But they are not really in my team, and for various factors we are not meeting regularly. I believe it would bring my role a great value to have a little team of people supporting me in implementing our Innovation strategy and working together on strengthening the innovation culture."

In terms of financial resources, Medair did not officially have an innovation budget. This meant that for every innovation project the organization wanted to start, there was the need to find a donor. Of the entire budget, 80% depended on institutional funding which the organization must use for what it was assigned to, without having the flexibility to fund innovative pilots. The remaining 20% consisted of private funding that was usually used

for required co-funding of the projects. "*Without financial resources available in-house for the ideation, prototyping stage and experimentation, we have our hands tied and are heavily dependent on finding external private donors and partnerships if we want some ideas to take off. This can mean that some ideas need to wait to be tested and this also means we are losing very valuable time*", stated Dominika.

For innovation to flourish, an innovation-oriented culture and tools were essential. Creating a culture of innovation was something the organization has been struggling with. "*I don't think we grasped it yet. In many ways there is a certain disconnect between the headquarters and country program locations. The understanding of 'innovation' is different and the priorities are also perceived in different ways. At the end of the day, the ultimate goal of humanitarians is to save lives, not to fly drones and even if I believe the two are not contrary to each other, in the human sector, we don't have the same understanding of whatt innovation means*", explained Dominika. The struggle to build an innovative culture in the organization is also due to the fact that in country programs there was a high turnaround of international staff in management positions (whereas at HQ people stayed for many years), which hindered the establishment of that type of relationship necessary for the organization to enhance an overall innovative mindset. To address the culture issue, Medair opted to rely on communication. In Spring 2020, the organization started a well-structured process of awareness raising, "*So, we send out the Innovation Newsletter every month, speaking about topics and concrete projects from the area of Innovation and Continuous Improvement in Medair. We have received very good feedback from our colleagues around the world. We are also about to start a campaign that we call 'Dare to Try', recognizing our colleagues who are thinking out of the box and try to bring change to the ways to work, even if it sometimes doesn't work, even if it doesn't have the happy ending – they dared to try – and we want to create a culture where risk is taken. We will see how it goes, for the moment we are still at the very beginning.*"

Together with innovation, Medair recognizes continuous improvements as one of its key strategic objectives. Medair has a Process Excellence Manager, who is part of the Executive team, together with the Innovation adviser. News and updates on continuous improvement are also part of the awareness raising newsletter previously mentioned.

Partnerships are key for MEDAIR in order to achieve its mission, particularly when it comes to the development of disruptive innovations. Medair's main partners were peer agencies, networks, alliances, other INGOs, but also academia, private sector and tech startups. Dominika explained:

"I think to have disruptive innovations come to life in NGOs, to collaborate with an external partner is key. Most of the time, we need to work with someone because we don't have an R&D department and human resources available for it. Also, it is the best use of our capacities, as many times, the solution to our problems is already out there, we just need to identify it and adapt it to our needs and context we work in. We know the needs on the ground because we are there, in the most remote, forgotten places of the world. And this is what we bring to the innovation equation, the knowledge of the needs. Over the past few years, we saw this in MEDAIR and I believe this is the way to go if we want to see results. Corporate with external partners, academia, foundations, etc., and just work with them to solve the challenges we encounter on the ground. And the bonus is that these external partners can also help to bring the funding necessary for the innovative projects."

In 2019, the INGO was recognized as one of top 10 finalists of the Drucker Prize[28] and thus recognized as one of the most innovative nonprofit organizations, "not only for current projects, but also for the potential Medair has to contribute to the field of innovation."[29] Early 2020, the organization was also assigned the EPFL Tech4Impact grant[30], to work together with the EPFL's LPDC which has developed a disruptive technology to convert agriculture residues to polyester, and see its possible deployment for the emergency shelter sector.
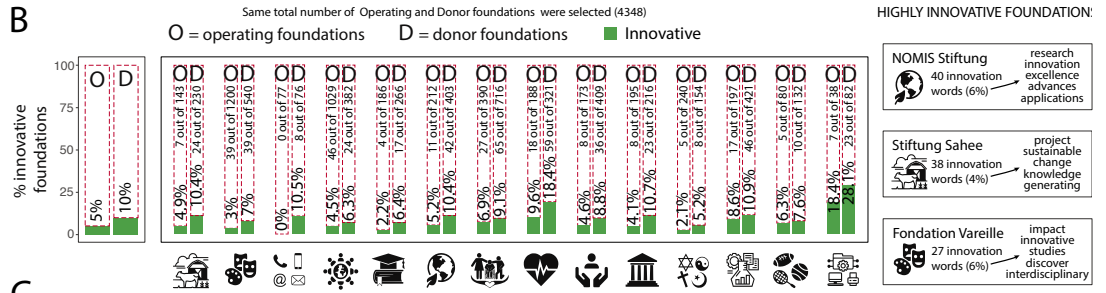
Facing the uncertain future of how the humanitarian sector will adapt to the "new normal" of post-COVID19, Medair firmly believes that with shrinking available resources set against growing needs and the complexity of humanitarian disasters, innovation is key to save lives. As a result, starting January 2021, the Innovation advisor will become a full-time role at Medair.
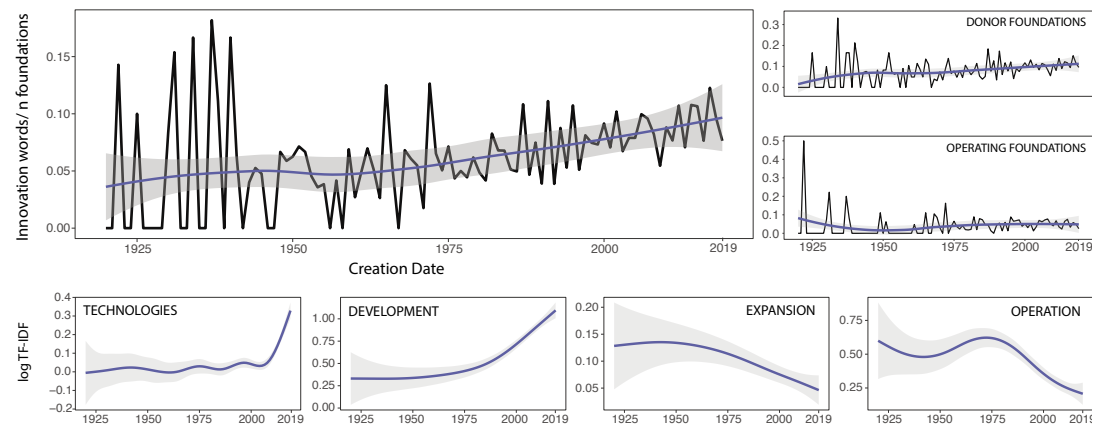
Appendix

A

- TECHNOLOGY
- SPORTS
- RESEARCH
- RELIGION
- PUBLIC POLICY
- MULTIPURPOSE SUPPORT
- HEALTH
- FAMILY & DISABILITIES
- ENVIRONMENT
- EDUCATION
- COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT
- COMMUNICATION
- ART, CULTURE & HUMANITIES
- ANIMALS & LAND

B

Same total number of Operating and Donor foundations were selected (4348)

O = operating foundations   D = donor foundations   ■ Innovative

% innovative foundations

O 5%   D 10%

HIGHLY INNOVATIVE FOUNDATIONS

NOMIS Stiftung — 40 innovation words (6%) → research innovation excellence advances applications

Stiftung Sahee — 38 innovation words (4%) → project sustainable change knowledge generating

Fondation Vareille — 27 innovation words (6%) → impact innovative studies discover interdisciplinary

C

Innovation words/ n foundations — Creation Date

DONOR FOUNDATIONS

OPERATING FOUNDATIONS

log TF-IDF

TECHNOLOGIES   DEVELOPMENT   EXPANSION   OPERATION

Endnotes

1   https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/jan/22/wealth-gap-widening-for-more-than-70-per-cent-of-global-population-researchers-find#img-1

2   Lewis, D., Kanji, N. Non-Governmental Organizations and Development. London & New York: Routledge, 2009, p.2

3   https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/04/how-to-reform-ngo-funding-so-we-can-deal-with-threats-like-covid-19/

4   https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/04/how-to-reform-ngo-funding-so-we-can-deal-with-threats-like-covid-19/

5   http://theresiliencecollective.org/

6   https://www.tdh.ch/en/ieda

7   Waltman, L., van Eck, N.J. A smart local moving algorithm for large-scale modularity-based community detection. *Eur. Phys. J. B* **86**, 471 (2013). https://doi.org/10.1140/epjb/e2013-40829-0

8   https://www.helvetas.org/Publications-PDFs/Switzerland/Grundsatzdokumente-Documents-strategiques/Auf-einen-Blick-En-bref/Leporello_e_2019.pdf

9   Annual Report 2019, https://www.helvetas.org/Publications-PDFs/Switzerland/Jahresbericht-Finanzbericht-Rapport-annuel-financier/EN/Jahresbericht%202019_EN_web.pdf

10 Australia, Austria, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, Denmark, East Africa, France, Germany, Greece, Holland, Hong Kong, japan, Italy, Latin America, Luxembourg, Norway, South Asia regional association, Southern Africa, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, United Kingdom, USA, West and Central Africa regional association https://www.msf.org/how-we-are-run

11 https://www.msf.org/how-we-are-run

12 1) Medical Action First; 2) Witnessing; 3) Respect for Medical Ethics; 4) Defense of Human Rights; 5) Independence; 6) Impartiality; 7) Neutrality; 8) Accountability and Transparence; 9) An Organization of Volunteers; 10) Operating as an Association. http://association.msf.org/sites/default/files/documents/Principles%20Chantilly%20EN.pdf

13 https://www.redcross.ch/de/organisation/question-dargent

14 https://www.redcross.ch/de/organisation/question-dargent

15 XX

16 https://www.tdh.ch/en/about-us

17 XX

18 https://www.tdh.ch/en/entemoignageinnovation2019

19 https://www.tdh.ch/en/projects/simeson

20 https://www.tdh.ch/en/projects/graviteau-washing-your-hands-recycled-water

21 http://theresiliencecollective.org/

22 https://www.medair.org/what-we-do/, 30.07.2020

23 https://www.medair.org/what-we-do/, 30.07.2020

24 2019 Annual Report

25 2019 Annual Report

26 Drone Adventures is a non-profit organization founded in Lausanne – Switzerland in 2013

27 https://werobotics.org/

28 https://www.drucker.institute/news-post/announcing-2019-drucker-prize-top-ten-finalists/

29 https://www.medair.org/stories/looking-ahead-medairs-commitment-innovation/, 05.06.2020

30 https://www.epfl.ch/innovation/domains/t4i/tech4dev/