

**UNHCR Innovation Service**

**Year in Review 2016**  
*Essay Edition*



## Year in Review 2016

**A**s the world is becoming increasingly complex, UNHCR must become more adaptable and agile. We must adapt to new systems, technologies, and innovations to be fit for purpose; challenging the status quo. The Innovation Service will assist UNHCR in achieving the Strategic Directions of the High Commissioner. UNHCR must continue to utilise an innovative approach to the growing humanitarian needs of today, and more critically – the future.

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At UNHCR's Innovation Service we capture and document how colleagues and refugees are innovating in the field. The Innovation Service also has a role to communicate with the rest of UNHCR, and provide insights into our work to the outside world. The Engagement team will support you in documenting the process of experimentation within the organization, including your successes, and even your failures. We aim to be as transparent and informative as possible and will support you in utilising numerous channels to share knowledge. These channels include the Innovation website, the intranet, social media, external publications, our crowdsourcing platform, UNHCR Ideas, and interviews.

As a service to the organization, we also want to support you in identifying and solving challenges inside and outside of the organization. Through the innovation process we can pursue systems and organizational change to make UNHCR more efficient and impactful for persons of concern. Or perhaps you simply have a new idea you'd like feedback on? Regardless - we're here to help.

**Email us at [innovation@unhcr.org](mailto:innovation@unhcr.org)**

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# Practical tips for innovating in UNHCR

The word innovation is ubiquitous and confusing to most. We'd use a different word if we could. So what are the first steps for including innovation into your day-to-day work at UNHCR? And what does it actually look like in practice?

It's easier than you might think.

We've outlined practical applications of the innovation process to help get you started. Try to innovate how you innovate, whether that's in your team, division, or entire operation. Employ some of the practical tips in this list and other ideas found throughout this publication. If you still have questions - drop us an email.

## **Be brave.**

Innovation is not an easy process but it is worth it. You will have to iterate and fail along the way - but use it as an opportunity to learn. Take the risk to try something new and it will pay off dividends in the end.

## **Ask the right question.**

You won't get an appropriate solution if you're not asking the right question. Defining your challenge is a crucial step in the innovation process. Keep it short and make sure it only contains one challenge. You can continue to tweak your challenge question until you've identified the right problem.

## **Engage refugees.**

Refugees are better at knowing what works for them and what doesn't. They are great innovators and full of their own ideas. Ask refugees for their feedback throughout the process - but explore opportunities to empower them as innovators themselves.

## **Ideate.**

Take advantage of other people's creativity and facilitate a brainstorming session with your team members, colleagues, and refugees to create new ideas. Invite people with a wide range of disciplines. Crazy ideas are welcomed and should be built upon.

## **Experiment.**

Innovation is never about silver bullets. Learn by doing. Try new things. Keep testing your original idea or process. Discover what works and what doesn't. Then experiment again.

## **Challenge your assumptions.**

Everytime we approach a problem, we bring assumptions that limit our ability to think about new solutions. Think critically about the assumptions underlying your innovation and then test them in a systematic way.

## **Collaborate.**

Work with other divisions, bureaux, external companies, academia, and others during the innovation process. Choose a partner with different skills and ideas. Go outside the usual suspects. Be flexible and open to different types of collaboration.

## **Embrace failure.**

Acknowledging that failure happens to the best of us, and using that opportunity to build the skills needed to learn from one's mistakes is key.

## **Copy someone else's idea.**

When is innovation simply imitation? Often. Look at promising practices that already exists elsewhere and apply it to your operation and context.

## **Launch a UNHCR Innovation Challenge.**

Ask UNHCR staff and members of the public to suggest great new ideas. Offer a prize or an incentive. Give people a clear focused goal and they will surprise you with novel ideas.

## **Innovate with everyone.**

Include targets for innovation within your team, division or operation. Measure these targets and the impact you've had. Don't just have one innovation focal point - include innovation into everyone's objectives. Before you realize it, everyone will be a champion of innovation.

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**Rumbidzai, Resettlement Assistant:**

*It's important to work with beneficiaries when problem solving, refugees have the best insights on solutions to their challenges, an "innovation by refugees for refugees" approach is important and empowering to the refugees.*

**Andrew, Senior Field/Site Coordinator:**

*I would like to see our agency culture and sense of identity improved – I feel that currently, both internally and externally, our culture smacks of arrogance, competition, and exclusivity. I would love to see a culture where staff do a better job of looking out for one-another (a sense of teamwork and community), partners see us as inclusive and deserving of our (self-imposed) leadership role, and we treat the inputs and opinions of refugees, partners, volunteers, governments, and others with as much value as those of our 'hyper-educated' colleagues.*

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**For more insights from our colleagues please visit:**  
[unhcr.org/innovation-year-in-review/](https://unhcr.org/innovation-year-in-review/)



This Syrian man and his dog travelled from Turkey to Salzburg together. The dog, which belongs to his brother, was previously turned away at the German border. Now the pair hope to join him in Germany. ©UNHCR/Florian Rainer



Recently arrived refugees are transported from Elegu to Adjumani, northern Uganda, where they will receive hot meals and accommodation. They fled their homes in South Sudan following renewed fighting.

©UNHCR/Will Swanson

## How to position UNHCR for the future

*Andrew Harper*

*Head, UNHCR Innovation Service*

The state of our world is filled with uncertainty and with questions revolving around what the future may look like. Where will the next refugee crisis occur? What will their needs be? What will be demanded of UNHCR, and how will we deliver on our mandate amidst ever more complex conditions?

As UNHCR's Innovation Service enters its fifth year, we are increasingly looking forward, too. We are looking towards the promise of evolving technologies, the possibilities of new partnerships, and the prospect of fundamental cultural change in our organization that values proactive, ground-up problem-solving.

In 2016, the Innovation Service began a transition. For the past several years, we made a real, tangible impact across several branches of UNHCR and in the lives of refugees. We explored ways to expand access to digital education and launched a Humanitarian Education Accelerator to support and evaluate educational innovations starting to scale. In emergencies, we improved communication and feedback, developed new translation technologies, and even tested the use of drones for mapping, analysis, and deliveries. We piloted non-traditional energy options and service models. Through our crowdsourcing platform UNHCR Ideas, we collected 1,300 concepts for innovations that would benefit persons of concern. Our initiatives responded to the need for changes in the way UNHCR approaches housing, education, protection, and livelihoods.

Now, the Innovation Service will also become an engine that will be proactive, not simply reactive, and change not just the way our organization approaches problems, but how it thinks about them.

We are shifting our focus further ahead—to the future of displacement issues and how UNHCR can be as agile, dynamic, and effective as possible in order to address them. Our focus extends to envisioning systems that ensure refugees have better control over their lives, more dignity, and a greater hope for finding solutions.

### **Positioning UNHCR for the future**

Displacement is on the rise and the resources to resolve it are increasingly constrained as countries and their budgets turn inward. UNHCR needs to position itself to be more effective and transparent with current resources and to be prepared to do more with less.

To do this, we cannot act alone and we will strive to be as inclusive as possible. The Innovation Service is talking to refugees, host communities, and our colleagues in the field to craft ground-up approaches for local and systemic change. When we truly understand what our field operations need in order to serve the displaced, we can help them identify solutions and find partners who can go hand in hand. Second, we're investing in the

Innovation Fellowship, and in so doing creating a safe space for exploration within UNHCR. Finally, to get big advances, we must be better at harnessing technology. Technology in itself is not innovation, but it is a tool that we can utilize to support our process. Rather than being apprehensive about what the future holds, we can use technology as a tool to prepare for it.

As displacement changes and UNHCR changes with it, our partners must evolve with us too. Legacy practices, procedures, and partners that were relevant 10 or 15 years ago may not be so today, and certainly not tomorrow. We cannot let ourselves be held back by what we did or did not do in the past. This kind of untethering can feel threatening, taking us out of our comfort zones, and challenging us with new ways of working. But disrupting our own status quo is the only way forward to ensure the humanitarian system can effectively address the needs of the displaced.

For example, mobile network operators, software suppliers, academia, and others present previously unavailable opportunities for UNHCR to magnify its impact on the ground. What many of these key partners bring are new ways to facilitate communication with refugees: automated language exchange, Artificial Intelligence, machine learning, biometric authentication and digital identification, and other emerging tools will help us connect with those we serve and have ongoing exchanges of information and ideas. The future of innovation within UNHCR will strive for more accountability and transparency for refugees, stateless, and displaced populations.

#### **Becoming the facilitator of 24/7 services**

The Innovation Service is committed to making UNHCR a more agile, efficient, and effective institution. We are also dedicated to empowering refugees so they have more control over their lives. We often disseminate information to refugees—at best. There is often little or no two-way communication and when there is, we rarely act upon it.

If we can identify these new paths towards a more dignified life, we know refugees would be better prepared to overcome boundaries, find their own solutions, and navigate the global humanitarian system for themselves.

The Innovation Service is starting to work towards this kind of empowerment. In 2016, we welcomed Connectivity for Refugees into our unit, and our staff are actively working to make the internet available, affordable, and usable for people of concern. They are also establishing new business models with private sector partners and starting to collect the data that will make the case for future collaborations between businesses and refugee communities.

Connectivity, which has already shaped the way we all live and work, is also changing the way refugees expect to interact with UNHCR. We need to figure out how to deliver services better and connectivity can help facilitate this. For example, UNHCR can explore digital registration and new avenues to help refugees access services like digital learning outside their physical environment. It's not just that UNHCR needs to be more agile; UNHCR needs to be the catalyst for a more agile response to refugees and other affected populations in crisis. It can be difficult to get traction for disruptive changes within the humanitarian system. But if we focus on a few core initiatives and demonstrate that they can work, we believe the buy-in and momentum will follow.



A young girl from South Sudan has her finger prints captured at the newly constructed Gure Shembola Camp in Ethiopia. ©UNHCR/Diana Diaz

### Adapting alongside refugees

For the Innovation Service, our priorities are always to the field. Today, we are providing operational support to challenges within emergencies, education, and energy. We're catalyzing the innovation environment within UNHCR, and connecting people, initiatives, and programs both within the organization and outside of it. We are nurturing and learning from innovations emerging from affected communities.

The next step is to anticipate the needs of the future – we must be proactive instead of reactive. To this end, we plan on providing deployable innovation support for operations looking at current, local challenges that can be addressed through a combination of problem-solving methods. We are taking concrete first steps towards setting up digital services for affected communities and exploring the possibilities of digital identities for all refugees.

We hope to work with thought leaders in crypto-currencies, biometrics, and use analytics to help us predict what the world will look like in the future. We'll work on standardizing data across humanitarian agencies — promoting interoperable systems which are human-centric and encourage sharing technology collaboratively instead of bespoke solutions for different populations. These opportunities are quite exciting, and we really have no choice but to grab them. We must be ready to adapt and change with an already evolving twenty-first century.

Refugees are already adapting. They're using the opportunities provided by Facebook, Whatsapp, Viber and many other platforms to communicate, as well as investigate new avenues for education, most of which are non-traditional. How do we facilitate life-long learning even when formal education opportunities are limited? We need to be asking refugees directly what their needs are, and what the systems that they trust are, rather than operating in a universe where we decide this for them. And looking broadly, we need to change the relationship from one where refugees are dependent upon us and instead improve their overall wellbeing. Refugees are not satisfied, and nor they should be, with their needs restricted to food, water, and shelter. They need dignity, a sense of hope for the future and the tools in which they can become self-reliant. They deserve that. And as they find ways to capitalize on a promising future, shouldn't we, too?



A boy trying to do a handstand in Nickelsdorf. Austria faced an unprecedented arrival of refugees in 2015 and 2016. ©UNHCR/Florian Rainer





Left: A young man from Afghanistan talks over the phone with his family shortly after reaching safely the shores of Lesbos, having crossed the Aegean sea from Turkey. ©UNHCR/Achilleas Zavallis

## Emergency Lab Case Study: Increasing two-way communication with refugees on the move in Europe.

### Define Challenges

#### Communicating with transiting refugees in their native language

The acute refugee crisis that unfolded in the Middle East and Europe caught the world's attention as massive flows of refugees and migrants from Syria, Iraq, East Africa and elsewhere pursued any path available to a safer and more promising life, after fleeing war and persecution in their countries of origin.

Some days in November 2015 saw 10,000 new arrivals to the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. With this boom in the number of transiting refugees, UNHCR had to rapidly escalate efforts to assist and protect.

Refugees and migrants, speaking a range of languages, needed critical information. They actively sought updates and advice, but often found a range of often misleading rumors on social media. When new waves of refugees and migrants were arriving quickly, UNHCR field staff often ended up answering the same questions over and over again.

When political realities changed the landscape completely and refugees were no longer passing through borders within hours or days, UNHCR needed to once again adapt to a new situation.

In order to respond to the changing context in places like the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, UNHCR needed a wider range of tools to increase two-way communication with refugees. It needed a way to overcome the site's poor Internet connectivity, deliver helpful information in a targeted way, and capture user feedback—for a rapidly moving population and then later for a static one.

## Identify Solutions

### Loud speakers, digital displays, and an application

The UNHCR country team requested support from the Emergency Lab, which in its first year is focusing on facilitating communication with communities. The Lab is a shared resource between the Division of Emergencies, Security, and Supply, and the Innovation team.

The Emergency Lab started with a scoping mission in December 2015 to interview refugees about their journeys and their experiences at the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia border. At the same time, they listened to UNHCR field staff, identifying and analyzing the challenges they faced around effectively communicating with refugees.

The scoping mission showed that communicating in the languages spoken by transiting refugees was a priority—not just to disseminate information but also to avoid marginalizing those who did not understand English.

UNHCR partnered with Translators Without Borders in order to translate the most relevant information into Farsi, Pashto and Arabic, and to broadcast it over a loudspeaker system that had already been set up at what was once the main entry point from Greece to the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia.

The existing loudspeaker system was not a “smart” one—to change the message, local staff had to go back and forth to the locked container where the system was installed to use the microphone, make a recording, or play messages. The new system, which was set up with free, off-the-shelf hardware and software applications, could be remotely controlled via tablet from anywhere, including the capital, Skopje.

Digital displays were also piloted. The displays could provide important information that was also entertaining—these aimed to increase the dignity of anxious, waiting refugees. UNHCR contracted a company called Xibo and pioneered a centrally managed system that allowed different content to be channeled to different screens based on the population watching them.

Many refugees inside the reception center still preferred face-to-face contact with UNHCR, and given the massive influxes of people, there were not enough translators to help. The Emergency Lab worked with the field team to identify the most frequently asked questions and to develop the appropriate responses. These messages were translated into Pashto, Farsi, and Arabic with help from Translators Without Borders.

In collaboration with Google, Mercy Corps, ThoughtWorks and others, a mobile application was then developed called Translation Cards. The app organizes questions by topic into electronic “decks,” which staff can access on their phones or tablets. These simple audio-visual flashcards allow refugees to hear pre-translated answers to their common questions spoken aloud in their own language.

## Test Solutions

### Faster and more accurate communication based on needs

To address the connectivity challenge, a partnership was brokered with Telecoms sans Frontieres to provide connectivity for refugees in Gevgelija, on the southern former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia border, and also at a site in Serbia. Having a reliable and speedy Internet connection is key for refugees, who have reported using Facebook as one of the most trusted ways of communicating with their families. It also allows them to quickly access electronic documents that can help them with registration.

To test the usefulness of the new broadcast system and content, the Emergency Lab and former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia UNHCR staff carefully curated a playlist of messages that informed refugees about safety concerns and resources, provided facts about the registration process, and informed them of their rights and entitlements, with breaks between languages and times for quiet.

Refugees who listened found the messages put them at ease and increased their awareness and understanding. Among other things, the messages worked to assuage fears, direct crowds, and staff reported a visible calming effect on refugees who heard them.

The country operation found that being able to remotely change the recordings was very useful, and they found it easy to play targeted messages based on the fluctuating situation—removing messages in a specific language, for example, when people from that country were not passing through.

Staff found that including Macedonian in the translated messages was important for involving local aid workers, and ensured that government and military officials knew what was being shared with people on site.

To test the effectiveness of the televised information, UNHCR set up a large screen in a child-friendly space at the entry point to former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and started showing videos, cartoons and informational messages aimed at parents.

Children who arrived in the center were exhausted after long journeys, and were stuck inside during the freezing days of winter, so the child-friendly content streamed on TV screens allowed them to relax a bit and regain a semblance of normalcy in their lives. The initiative was very well received and the team put up 11 more TV screens at entry and exit points.

The Translation Cards app received good feedback as well, especially after modifications added culturally appropriate greetings and other phrases refugees wanted to incorporate into their interactions. One user even commented that it was the first time he felt connected to someone with a blue vest.

The cards enabled faster, more accurate communication. And the app freed up translators’ time to work on more complex work rather than responding to simple, repetitive questions that did not require specialized responses.

## Refine Solutions

### Adapting to a new emergency context

As refugees and UNHCR faced changing policies about which populations could enter former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, each aspect of the Emergency Lab's solution needed to be reconsidered.

The loudspeaker messages had to be adapted quite substantially as some nationalities stopped arriving. When the border closed entirely, it no longer made sense to broadcast short, repetitive messages to a population that may remain at the border for weeks. Similarly, the entertaining television material had to be reconsidered as refugees were now unable to move forwards. In short, the space changed from a space to transit, to one to remain in, and bide one's time.

Now that there is no longer a push to get out quick snippets of information while holding refugees' attention, the system has been adapted further – with a satellite connection for news and entertainment: Many refugees say the most important thing is to know what is going on at home and internationally.

The new situation on the ground also made some of the questions included in the mobile app less relevant. Refugees became more interested in receiving more information on for example, their legal options should borders remain closed.

In the context of such drastically different conditions, the Emergency Lab advised the country team as they designed and implemented an information and communications needs assessment that surveyed 107 refugees in the Tabanovce transit center. The assessment identified the information and communication needs of refugees, which the Lab helped analyze to uncover the most appropriate channels for information sharing.

For example, it found that 90 percent of the refugees said they preferred face to face communication with UNHCR, while many of them also said they used mobile communications apps Viber and WhatsApp. The assessment also revealed that some populations place great trust in UNHCR, while others trusted instead to other sources found on the Internet. Men were more likely to seek information about asylum and legal procedures while women were more concerned with support available for their families.

Moreover, the Emergency Lab worked with the team in former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia to build communicating with communities into its programming, further supporting the regional protection strategy, in large part by developing the tools to collect feedback and complaints face to face. The country team is now using two tablet-based feedback forms to gather and organize information and make sure that feedback is received and further acted upon, ensuring those who need to receive onward referrals do not fall through the cracks.

This initiative was linked to UNHCR's Information and Advice Desks—an interagency initiative to ensure coordinated access to information, feedback and referrals across sites.

Finally, field operation staff received training on recording, disaggregating and analyzing data collected through these mechanisms in order to create more responsive and productive messages and programs.

To support ongoing efforts to build better communication with communities, the Lab and the UNHCR team in former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia worked together to hire additional staff members to manage the technical equipment and provide network support. Terms of references were created, interviews were carried out together, and staff hired. The Lab and the field teams also worked together to help with onboarding and training on projects and tools.

## Scale Solutions

### Expanding Translation Cards to other country operations

UNHCR Innovation hopes to test Translation Cards in other relevant operational contexts. Other humanitarian organizations can also create their own card decks to better communicate with the specific populations they are working with, and further development on the app is now underway with this in mind.

Based on its experience creating content for the screens installed in former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, the Emergency Lab is collaborating with colleagues in other European countries that could benefit from producing similar packages.

For the country team in former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, information gleaned from the information and communication needs assessment is directing next steps for setting up more effective ways of communicating with refugees.

The Lab continued to work with the country operation to identify how other information and communications needs could best be addressed. For instance, they collaborated to develop messages for women's bathrooms that inform women and girls about how to alert UNHCR staff about protection issues they faced during their journeys or after arriving in former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia.

Although the Emergency Lab is no longer on-site, it still works together with the country operation with remote support. It will continue to provide guidance as needed, with the aim of supporting the country team provide the best service possible to refugees.

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A special thanks to Google, Mercy Corps, ThoughtWorks, Translators Without Borders, and UNHCR's country team in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia for making this project possible.



Left: Young refugee girls sit on the steps of an informal recreational space at a camp in Lagkadikia, northern Greece where more than 30 per cent of the population are children.  
©UNHCR/Achilleas Zavallis

**Salva, Senior Admin Programme Associate**

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*Working in admin and programme is not really a place where you win. Actually, it's a place where you fight because you are always fighting against the organization's strict rules and regulations...trying to find a way to improve it. I hope the organization will adapt to the 21st century in terms of the bureaucracy in order to be quicker and providing better support to refugees and IDPs.*

**Patricia, Policy Officer**

*One of the challenges I have found is that it is very difficult to find a balance between the interests of the organization and the interests of staff members. Of course, we know that we have to be in the field, we know that we have to rotate, we know that we have to be deployed to emergencies, and actually, we do want to do all these things. But also..we are human beings who have families or who want to have families, who fall sick or who want to grow in their career...so sometimes finding a balance between these things is a challenge.*

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Afghan girls attend their class at the school set up by Aqeela at the refugees village in Kot Chandana in Punjab province of Pakistan.  
©UNHCR/Sara Farid

Children play next to the water of the irrigation scheme at Hilaweyn camp in southern Ethiopia, where some 45,000 Somali refugees live.  
©UNHCR/Diana Diaz

# Investing in People, Not Projects

A look at UNHCR's experimental funding approach



## Investing in People, Not Projects

There were a lot of questions to be answered by UNHCR's new Innovation Fund. What could people in field operations come up with if they had a blank slate and the cash to carry it out? Would their ideas add up to actual gains for refugee protection and assistance?

Launched in June 2016, UNHCR's Innovation Fund is a resource that field operations can use to prototype or scale up good practices and test out creative ideas. The fund, created with an initial USD 3 million from the IKEA Foundation, has created a safe budgetary space that enables field operations to experiment and take risks without having to deprioritize other areas of work. The offer of support the Fund presented was an immediately popular one. The Innovation Fund received more than 100 applications in two weeks. Some were just fledgling ideas, while others were very well defined, and ready to prototype.

Chris Earney and Dina Zyadeh, who were leading the selection and disbursement of the Innovation Fund, say five years ago, the Innovation Service would not have seen such a high level of enthusiasm with regards to innovation.

"We recognize that UNHCR has always been innovating, but the added value of the Innovation Service is that we facilitate the provision of additional resources...whether it's funding or expertise from external partners that people need to succeed," says Zyadeh, the Innovation Office Manager. "The call for proposals illustrated how great the appetite for innovation is within our organization."

### What is innovative?

Something Earney noticed when he began reviewing applications for the fund was that everyone has a different idea about what kinds of projects are innovative. For some, introducing a new crop to farmers was innovative. To others, innovation meant launching a new food festival to help promote integration and acceptance of refugees in Europe. With field officers operating in so many disparate contexts, Earney says that varied understanding is a good thing, and encourages people to think about what innovation means to them

"Innovation is very personal," he says. "It is something that should be applicable to different operations in different ways, and it is about that creativity and ability to think differently about a challenge."

The Innovation Fund ended up allocating USD 1.2 million to applicants across twenty-eight countries. "Just to have the range of proposals that we received was mind blowing," Earney says. "Honestly, I was not expecting to have so many, and the range of projects and the creativity that was involved with all of them, if you take the local context into account...(was extremely) impressive."

Jean-Laurent Martin, an Information Management Officer in Zaatari, Jordan, had already prototyped his idea when he applied to the Fund. He had spent a while reflecting on some of the problems in Zaatari camp; refugees there lacked opportunities for both education and cash for work, and wanted to participate more in the camp decision-making processes. And with 80,000 people in the camp, UNHCR, other agencies, and refugees themselves found it hard to get up-to-date and complete information about activities and services.

He believed he could simultaneously address these problems and more by training pre-selected refugees on geo-information management and letting them help design products used to make decisions in the camp. Having the funding was key. With \$48,000 from the Innovation Fund, Jean-Laurent Martin was able to create a computer/GIS lab with specific hardware, mapping software and generator, pay a teacher to provide training on GIS mapping to qualified refugees, and provide cash for work for those engaged on the project.

The Innovation Service provided technical advice, secure support, and plenty of feedback when it came to monitoring and evaluation—helping him draft smarter, more measurable performance indicators, for example. But it also gave him space to innovate. "We're in a specific context, we're in a camp, we have a lot of specific problems to solve and they know that and let you do the work," Jean-Laurent Martin says.

Refugees are now being compensated for the work they do collecting, analyzing and creating maps with information such as facilities, youth services, and other products that are reflecting Community needs or issues. Jean-Laurent Martin is confident that the refugees participating in the RefugeGIS project will be able to find better jobs in the future. Those refugees seem to think so too. Jean-Laurent says when they first showed up to apply for the training and jobs they seemed downcast and despondent. "I remember when I interviewed refugees for selection for training in information management," Martin says. "It's tough to be in the situation in the camp for years. They seemed sad. Now they seem much more hopeful and happy, excited about the future."

As for Jean-Laurent Martin, he's optimistic about the future of the project even after the Innovation Fund is no longer involved. After all, the project actually saves UNHCR serious money they would have paid to partners to collect, analyze, and map camp information. The team of refugees can do it at a lower cost with more accurate information and reap the rewards of community empowerment as they do.

### An experiment for UNHCR

If there were any doubts about the innovative approach of using a fund for projects in UNHCR operations, consider this: Neither the IKEA Foundation nor UNHCR had any confirmation that the approach would work. Beyond the fact that each project could succeed to some degree or fail, it bears recognizing that the whole process is a trial.

"This in itself is an experiment, and...people who participate in the Innovation Fund or even submitted proposals are part of a larger experiment, in order to see whether we are servicing the needs of UNHCR and our partners in improving assistance," Earney says.

In essence, UNHCR agreed to prototype the IKEA Foundation funded UNHCR Innovation Fund on itself. The approach itself was an experiment to understand the true impact of seed funding and creating a budgetary space for UNHCR staff to innovate.

“We will give feedback and analysis back to the IKEA Foundation and decide if this is something useful for refugee protection and assistance or whether it’s not, and we’re completely agnostic with this,” Earney says. “You have to practice what you preach, right? We’ll be the ones happy to be the guinea pigs.”

With this honest emphasis on figuring out what works, measurement is a huge piece of the puzzle. Each project must develop its own performance indicators, and the Innovation Service will collect overall data on the effectiveness of the fund. Then, something that intimidates some: complete honesty.

The Innovation Service plans to communicate total openness with the IKEA Foundation about the impact of its funding, the way it was managed, and how that can be translated into improvements.

“I want to see impact with the projects we’ve invested in,” Earney says. “I want to be able to measure the impact it’s had on refugee and host communities. I want to be able to provide our management with some pretty agnostic guidance on the utility of this sort of fund. And...if the data tells us there is impact - I want to see us do a better fund next year.”

That kind of relationship with the IKEA Foundation means it is truly a partner and not just a donor. And this kind of open, honest, and deeply connected partnership is itself a cultural shift for UNHCR—one the organization is becoming more open to.

“They want bigger impact on refugees’ lives with every dollar they invest,” says Earney. “They want to be involved in the projects, they want to be involved in the fund, and they want to have more of a role than just the money.”

### **Supporting refugee-led innovation and “a crazy idea”**

Juliette Murekeyisoni received a WhatsApp message from a Sahrawi refugee living in Awerd camp, with a photo of a house made out of recycled materials. A young refugee named Tateh Lehbib in one of the five camps in Tindouf, Algeria, where Murekeyisoni works as a Senior Field Coordinator, had constructed it out of plastic bottles filled with sand, egg cartons, and all sorts of other recyclables for his grandmother—as a way to ease the grinding summer heat and ward off the sandstorms, winds, and winter cold.

His construction looked solid, and as he had a background in energy efficiency, Murekeyisoni thought the young man might actually be on to something. “I need to visit this house,” she thought. Two days later, the call for innovation proposals came out from the Innovation Fund. Murekeyisoni got moving. She called her colleagues (the Shelter Officer and a Field Associate), asked them to come with her to visit the house, and spent the whole day asking questions and sweating in the 50-degree Celsius heat.

Together they went straight back to her house to draft the application into the late hours.

Murekeyisoni thought the young man’s idea was genius. It could mean building houses that would not succumb to the flooding that decimated mud adobe homes the year before. It could provide jobs for Sahrawi youth who are highly educated but strikingly underemployed. And it could work to clean the environment as refugees would collect recyclables for use in constructing these innovative new structures.

Murekeyisoni crossed her fingers and submitted her proposal to the Innovation Fund, the only option she saw for getting started on a project like this one. “If I ask for money for building a plastic bottle house, the office would have looked at me like I was crazy,” she says. “I don’t think I could have convinced my Head of Sub the Office at the time to allocate money for this project.” The Innovation Fund saw things differently.

“They’re looking for innovations,” Murekeyisoni says. “They are looking for new things - it doesn’t mean you have to do them properly 100 percent. It may work, it may not work. If it doesn’t work, ok fine. We tried.”

“With innovation, you have to start somewhere,” she says. “People will criticize, they will call you a crazy lady. But for me it didn’t matter...what is important to me is the outcome of the project and the confidence that this young refugee developed through the whole process. I am results-oriented and you never know until you try.”

The result of Murekeyisoni’s Innovation Fund-supported project was the construction of 25 homes. The team, which included 125 paid refugee youth, built them for refugees living with mental, physical, and/or other disabilities. The designs are now in high demand within and even outside the camp.

Murekeyisoni knows of two young men, who started a shop with the proceeds they earned from building these houses. They now have a sustainable source of income and are hoping to build a store out of plastic bottles.

Whether the overall project continues to be successful or not, Murekeyisoni is completely on board with the expectation that she’ll report back honestly. “I told Dina and Chris, we have nothing to hide. All the success and failures, I will tell you,” she says. “And this is innovation. It’s something you do: it may work and it may not work, but alhamdulillah, as they say here, this one was successful.”

Beyond her own initiative, Murekeyisoni is encouraged that UNHCR seems increasingly committed to a mandate that goes farther than just protection.

“Our normal way of working has been always to ensure that refugee are safe, have shelter, education, water, food and medication. For the last couple of years we’ve also been engaging refugees in planning of the activities and in decision making towards their lives,” she says. “We don’t tell our people of concern what to do. We listen to them and develop projects together, keeping their ideas and needs in mind.”

“The self-importance and dignity that refugees get, and feel, is just as important as giving them food and water to drink.”

### **Build capacity, don't replace it**

Starting to administer the fund late in the programme year posed a challenge, especially for such a small team. And given the bureaucracy of the organization, nearly every project struggled at some point with procurement or budgeting. Then there was the rigorous evaluation demanded of recipients, who had to develop their own set of key performance indicators.

But no matter the project outcomes, the Fund has already achieved something important in the way it has allowed staff to grow and develop, building their confidence and innovative problem-solving skills. Sometimes just connecting them to someone with good ideas and experience outside UNHCR has made a difference in the way they approach their work.

Murekeyisoni, for example, used the innovation approach she learned while working with the Innovation Service on an agricultural project in another community, and applied that to the recyclable housing project described above.

“It’s amazing to see how this has contributed to their development as staff,” Zyadeh says. “It comes down to people. You’re not only investing in the projects, you’re investing in the people who are implementing them.”

The architecture of the Innovation Fund was designed to build capacity, not replace it. The funding itself, however, poses more of a question.

“There’s a bit of a dichotomy here,” says Earney. “We want field operations to invest their own money in innovations; we don’t want it to be something that we run solely from Headquarters. But sometimes you just need to kick-start things.”

Earney hopes the Innovation Fund will catalyze an appetite for experimentation so that operations begin investing their own resources when it comes time to scale projects. If the innovation projects generate measurable value, they’ll have a strong case for continued resourcing in the future. The same goes for the Innovation Fund.

Tateh, the Sahrawi refugee leading the Innovation Fund project in Tindouf, stands on one of the houses made out of recycled material.  
©UNHCR/Innovation Service





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**Claude, Refugee Sports Coordinator**

*There was one major highlight and that was the refugee Olympic Team in August. There were ten from four countries, and those ten probably did more to help raise awareness with a positive story than anything we've done in my memory. There are many reasons why refugees are in the news, most of them, almost all of them are tragic. The recent flow of the last years with refugees trying to come to Europe in mass, as well as migrants, has done much to raise awareness of the refugee plight. But the situation with the ten athletes, these young men and women, was such a positive story that it was picked up by the world...the major story was that these young people, even though they were refugees are just like people who are not refugees, except they have gone through the hell that has made them refugees. They showed the world that you can do something if you put your mind to it.*

**Sweta, Executive Assistant**

*I think we have an incredible diversity of staff and an incredible diversity of ideas out there, that we don't necessarily always listen to enough. I think that younger staff in particular tend to have very interesting ideas, very out-of-the-box, creative, and pragmatic solutions to some of the issues that we are seeing. But what I find with UNHCR is that the longer you are in the organization, the more homogenized the thinking becomes.*

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Nine-year-old Syrian refugee Solaf practices Taekwondo at Azraq refugee camp.  
©UNHCR/Annie Sakkab



Left: A young South Sudanese girl stands outside their temporary shelter in Kalobeyei Settlement. ©UNHCR/Otieno Samuel

# Connectivity for everyone

As exhausted, fearful refugees arrived onto Grecian shores, the very first thing some of them asked for was an Internet connection. To them, water, food, and shelter could wait. Letting their loved ones know they had made it to safety could not.

A powerful tool for protection, education, livelihoods and health, connectivity can also make UNHCR operations more efficient, more cost-effective and ultimately more successful. Now a part of UNHCR's Innovation Service, Connectivity for Refugees is addressing three key challenges: making connectivity available, affordable, and usable. In so doing, it is figuring out ways to bring the digital revolution to displaced people, and to the humanitarians serving them.

“The disruption, the improvement in humanitarian work will take place as...populations of concern are connected because it will enable us to do our work more effectively,” says Alan Vernon, Connectivity for Refugees Project Lead. “It will enable us to share information more effectively, communicate more effectively, monitor more effectively, plan more effectively, track results more effectively- all of those elements will be brought to bear to enable us to be more effective in the way we work.”

## **A population desperate to connect**

Time and time again, refugees have demonstrated that connectivity is of critical importance to them. Refugees living in Tanzania sacrifice significant portions of their food rations in order to buy data. In the Dzaleka refugee camp in Malawi, people who cannot afford anything beyond their basic needs still walk to the center of camp with a single penny: enough to buy one minute of online time they can use to send a brief Facebook message.

“When refugees are compelled to leave their homes and families are torn asunder, communities get broken, people get split (up), refugees try to stay connected with their families,” Vernon says. They do so in whatever ways they can...So we shouldn't be surprised. In some ways what's surprising is that we haven't focused on this more.”

As the world becomes more and more connected—and dependent upon that connectivity—the humanitarian sector and those it serves have been largely left out.

Globally, refugees are 50 percent less likely than the general population to have an Internet-capable phone. While 20 percent of rural refugees have no access to connectivity, urban refugees often have access but cannot afford to get online.

In Nyarugusu refugee camp in Tanzania, Congolese and Burundian refugees roamed around with their mobile phones in search of high ground where they might be lucky enough to catch some of the sparse signal wafting in from surrounding host communities.

Syrian refugees transiting Europe had smartphones, but no way of contacting family.

“What we were hearing is that technology is regarded by the people we are here to serve as a need as important as food or clothes,” says Nicholas Kourtzis, Connectivity for Refugees Coordinator for Greece and ex-volunteer as wifi engineer, who calls connectivity a “dignity catalyst.”

He remembers a 75 year-old Syrian man who arrived alone in northern Greece. He did not know if his family, left behind in Turkey, was surviving. Just ten minutes after WiFi was installed and activated in the camp, the man came up to the technical team to shake their hands.

“Thank you,” he said in gratitude. “You gave me, for the first time in many months, the opportunity to actually talk to my children and my grandchildren and see that they are alive and ok.”

“I don’t care that much if I don’t eat for a day,” another refugee in Lesvos told him, “but I can’t afford to stay without Internet for a day.”

### **The multiplying effect of connectivity**

The benefits to refugees are clear: Getting online is the only way to communicate with family left behind or gone ahead. It’s also one of the best ways for them to access trusted sources of information about the asylum process and its changing procedures.

Being connected also opens up opportunities for entertainment, something Kourtzis thinks should not be overlooked. Especially in crowded, cold sites, he says “people actually need entertainment as a means to make their lives better, to be able to cope more easily with the situation.”

But the benefits start to magnify when value-added services are made available. Many refugees, especially youth, use connectivity to educate themselves—learning a new language, continuing disrupted education, or mastering other skills they hope to put to use wherever their paths may take them.

A connected refugee population can procure energy through pay-as-you-go technology, access health solutions through mobile health applications; create opportunities for entrepreneurship, and smarter farming. Putting appointment management and alerts and updates online could

end the time-consuming practice of going around camp with a megaphone or asking refugees to queue for hours for nothing. Instead, they could schedule their own appointments, get notified about disease outbreaks, or send for medical help. When people eventually leave camps, information they find online can make them better informed and prepared.

And as the whole humanitarian system shifts away from providing aid in kind, connectivity is a huge enabler in providing refugees with more control and choice within their life. It enables refugees to take advantage of connected services for their own self-reliance and empowerment. “It treats them as normal human beings, and gives them some dignity back,” says Samantha Eisenhauer, Connectivity for Refugees Project Manager.

### **Leading an inevitable change**

The \$25 billion humanitarian sector continues to grow, and yet its way of working has not kept pace with the digital revolution. UNHCR and its own staff will realize the benefits of bringing connectivity to refugees in a host of ways.

“There’s little that we couldn’t do more effectively if we didn’t have both a connected population and the ability to take advantage of even yesterday’s digital technology,” says Vernon. “The reality is that digital technology will infuse every aspect of UNHCR’s work just as it’s infused the vast majority of the ways in which life is carried out in the rest of the world.”

From communicating with communities, protection monitoring, and keeping better track of basic service provision, connectivity only enhances communication, information sharing, and efficiency. The ability to collect better data will help UNHCR track, map and analyze issues faster and with more depth.

Moving to mobile money will enable refugees to prioritize their own needs and make choices. “That potentially enables us to use resources that might otherwise be spent on distribution that are freed up to support better education programs or better health programs,” Vernon says. “Information Technology helps us free up resources to where we can focus on the most value-added parts of the humanitarian services that are being provided.”

That’s an important goal, especially since there are more refugees than ever before, and funding is likely to ebb in the coming years.

“How can we be more efficient in order to actually deliver our mandate?” asks Eisenhauer. “If we do not embrace technology at some point, we will end up being irrelevant, and not stand up to protect refugees as we should.”

“There is no other way to go,” says Kourtzis. “Can you undo smartphones? Can you undo computers? Can you undo the Internet? The world is moving in that direction. The challenge for us as the humanitarian sector, and UNHCR as its leader, is to actually lead this, not be dragged by it.”

### **UNHCR’s Connectivity for Refugees**

Connectivity for Refugees, which moved under the Innovation Service in 2016, is seeking to address three key challenges: making connectivity available, affordable, and usable.

Though it started in the Information Communications Technologies Division, Vernon says that, “so much of what we want to do in Innovation is tied to having a connected refugee population that it made sense for it to be here.”

In its first year, it opened projects in Jordan, Greece, and Tanzania. Activities in Chad, Malawi, and Uganda are underway, and Ethiopia and Kenya will follow soon. Open projects have had early successes using connectivity coordinators in the field, who serve as advocates and build relationships with private sector partners, development actors, and governments.

Connectivity for Refugees is forging new partnerships and seeking smart investments, with companies from Mobile Network Operators and telecommunications businesses to technology giants like Microsoft, Google, and Facebook. But the partnerships are not forged in the typical model.

“We can’t assume that the private sector is waiting to write checks to give us sums of money,” says Vernon. “What they want to do is engage with us. They want to help solve the problem together, they want to apply their expertise and knowledge to the problem with us.”

So far they’re succeeding in doing that, and in connecting thousands of refugees.

In Tanzania’s Nyarugusu camp, refugees now benefit from three towers that provide 3G coverage throughout the area. It’s a far cry from the situation just one year ago, when businesses were either completely unaware of the camp or believed it was impossible for refugees to be customers.

Connectivity for Refugees Coordinator for Tanzania, Carlyne Akello says they presented the Tanzanian government with information about the kind of benefits connectivity brings to refugees, demonstrating how it could improve their livelihoods, raise living standards and eventually reduce the burden on donors.

They explained that the host community would also benefit from new towers that would provide them with faster, more reliable connectivity. They took network operators on tours of the camp to impress upon them how vast a customer base they had at their fingertips. It worked, Akello says: the companies were completely overwhelmed at the scale of the 28-kilometer camp that was filling up fast.

Through careful and persistent advocacy, Connectivity for Refugees explained that nearly 133,000 refugees lived in the camp, many for 20 years or more. Those refugees could be customers.

“They had ignored the camp for so long, but suddenly realized they were actually making a lot of business by improving services to the camp,” she says.

Mobile Network Operator Vodacom recovered its investment in less than three months, with its tower saturated with phone calls and a customer base up 200 percent.

One month after Vodacom built its tower a utilization report showed it was totally saturated at 180,000 calls per day. And more than 250 refugees were operating mobile money services, each one receiving around \$150 in commission every month.

“With that, we were able to tell them, ‘refugees are not just receiving, they are contributing,’” Akello says. “If you invest in them, you will be able to get back your money.”

With those improved services and additional towers, some refugees reported they’ve been able to speak with family members who were resettled in the U.S. for the first time.

A lot of refugees are now involved in mobile money entrepreneurship, like running charging stations where people can plug in their phones or selling low-cost internet time at community WiFi stations. Since they’re not allowed to leave the camp, some artisans are even hoping to start using the connectivity to advertise their handicrafts online.

More than 2,000 community health workers may soon have customized training courses that they can take on their phones. Bulk SMS systems may finally replace the outdated and inefficient current method of sending someone to walk around camp making announcements into a microphone.

“The initiative has really brought a lot of transformation,” says Akello. “Refugees have really been able to improve their lifestyle. With the improvement, in connectivity a cash transfer program by WFP is being piloted for the first time, since January 2017.”

UNHCR can now easily approach other partners and make the business case that refugees in Tanzania’s other two camps want and need to be connected. And the Tanzania operation will point out another set of potential clients: the 29 humanitarian agencies working in the camps who must currently work offline, and are searching for a more connected solution.

In Greece, a different context necessitated different kinds of partnerships. NGOs, a committed volunteer group, and a state enterprise that provides connectivity to educational and research institutions kept the focus on connectivity instead of profit. Without much of a budget, the coalition managed to connect 56 out of 58 official sites across the country by the end of 2016.

“I really value this partnership because it allows us to have very high-quality connectivity to very remote sites where we would have no other means of getting fast connectivity,” says Kourtzis. “And the most important thing is, it’s provided for free.”

Even if it weren’t, Kourtzis says connectivity doesn’t have to be expensive. Which is good, since he views it as essential.

“I think for such an important service as connectivity, which is considered by many as important as food and warm clothes, I think we, as the humanitarian sector, should be willing to undertake on as much of the cost as possible, before moving it on to the refugees, especially in situations where they have to rely on limited or no income” ,” he says.

### Bumps on a very promising road

Though connecting the world's unconnected populations is, by many accounts, inevitable, it is not without its challenges.

Affordability is the biggest obstacle for refugees who don't have livelihoods. Even those who don't earn money make a valiant effort and personal sacrifices to get online.

Cost plagues humanitarian actors as well.

"I think the opportunities are really endless and so big," Akello says. "But of course amidst all this, we are facing a number of challenges. That of funding: the need is simply enormous." In Greece, Connectivity for Refugees will need to figure out how to move from free service to paid services and maintain an elaborate and complex infrastructure. And it will need to find solutions to provide better and more accessible connectivity to urban refugees.

In Tanzania, the issue of connectivity is coupled with the challenge of getting reliable electricity, and some Mobile Network Operators still need convincing that the camps aren't going away anytime soon.

In any operation, Connectivity for Refugees needs to ensure that when connectivity is made available, UNHCR systems are set up to make use of it. "Refugees see the phone as a survival device, but we haven't built on that because we didn't see it that way," says Vernon. "It would be a pity and we should be disappointed in ourselves if we don't seize the opportunity to change how we operate."

This year, Connectivity for Refugees will continue to look for ways to enhance access to technology through connected community centers, where refugee and host community students and others can access educational materials, do research and gain computer literacy. It will build relationships with regulators, and advocate for refugees in places where they are not allowed to have phones.

Once current activities are obvious successes, they can think about replicating those models in other countries.

Eisenhauer and Vernon also hope they can increase UNHCR's recognition of how important connectivity is. Ideally, operations will find their own enthusiasm to work on connectivity even if they do so independently.

"We have creative teams in the field who may not have realized that this was an option," Vernon says. "We are working hard to liaise with different divisions to help them see the opportunity, and link existing initiatives in a more strategic way."

"In a few years," he says, "we won't be able to imagine how we could operate without having connected contact with these populations."



A man and woman ride a bicycle between different areas of the Kakuma Refugee Camp in Kenya. ©UNHCR/Will Swanson

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**Erica, Associate Climate Change Officer**

*I think there's a real opportunity to create positive change and create new protection measures for persons displaced in the context of climate change and disasters. There's a certain newness to this discourse that comes with on one hand, tremendous challenges and a lack of precedence, but on the other hand means there's a lot of potential for growth.*

**Tapio, Senior PSP Officer**

*I think we haven't necessarily been humble enough in acknowledging that there's a lot we can learn in terms of knowledge and know-how (from the private sector), but also technical solutions. It's always a long process in an organization like ours, it's not easy. It's sort-of promoting change through partnerships with the private sector.*

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# Migration, Mitigation and Maps

The predictive role of UNHCR's first Winter Cell



Left: Newly arrived refugees waiting to cross the Greek border into former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. ©UNHCR/Achilleas Zavallis

At the end of 2015, the UN Refugee Agency was concerned that the “size, speed, and characteristics of the movements” of refugees, particularly approaching winter, may result in adverse consequences for refugees attempting to reach Europe from Turkey. In response to these challenges, a small interdisciplinary team, comprised of five people, was requested to form the Europe Winter Cell.

The Winter Cell was established on 28th October 2015 by the Assistant High Commissioner for Operations (AHC-O), at the request of former High Commissioner for Refugees, Antonio Guterres. The Winter Cell was established as a cross-cutting, inter-divisional response to the emergency situation in Europe and reported to the AHC-O and the Operations Manager for the Europe Refugee Crisis. The team was housed within the Emergency Operations Room in UNHCR’s Headquarters in Geneva.

As UNHCR advanced the Winter Cell’s objectives, its focus, resources and methods quickly evolved. Initially, the Winter Cell was intended to exist for a 4-month period before it was extended until the end of 2016 as the Intelligence and Analysis Unit as challenges and needs were identified beyond the initial period of the Cell, housed within the Regional Bureau for Europe. The team was eventually dismantled in June of 2016.

## **The importance of an interdisciplinary and non-linear team**

One of the strengths of the Winter Cell was a non-linear structure to the team.

Non-linear team in this context means that the team is built based purely on deliverables, rather than ‘roles’ as we traditionally build teams. The main benefit of a non-linear team was the rapid delivery of services in areas where the team works in with several unknown variables, unpredictable outcomes and seemingly chaotic environments.

Team members being drawn from various UNHCR Divisions allowed for the incorporation of a wide range of expertise and easier organizational communication into the team. In turn, this led to further support in terms of technical expertise and tools.

An additional benefit of team members on loan from globally-oriented sections was to have access to the wider geographic spectrum of the European crisis extending from country of origin to country of destination.

The team remained adaptable, with all members supporting one another if and when others were redeployed to other pressing needs, either within Europe, or elsewhere. By the beginning of December, a core team remained, which comprised of the Head of Cell on loan from UNHCR’s Innovation Service, a Camp Coordination Camp Management (CCCM) Officer, an Information Management Officer, and a Designer, with close support from the Innovation Data Lab Manager who was loaned from Innovation when required.

Both the Information Management and the CCCM Officers, who work with data and camp management were considered essential for the principle running of the team, not only for the core competencies they possessed, as we were dealing with connecting heaps of data, data-based decision-making and on-site needs, but even more so for their aptitude, attitude, flexibility, and commitment. Additionally, invaluable interns joined the team over the course of 2016.

Once the Winter Cell was dismantled, the remaining team members, being multi-disciplinary, retained the scope as it was originally designed, however, as it was incorporated fully within the Europe Bureau, difficulties were experienced in maintaining the inter-departmental collaboration. An attempt was made to identify departmental focal points that the team would work through as required however, due to a lack of formally allocated responsibility, this did not prove consistently possible.

### **Approach**

The team approached the objectives using tactics, innovation methodologies, and approaches drawn in part from lessons learned from the Innovation team:

### **Management structure**

As a multi-disciplinary team, the team retained a relatively flat structure and was based on consensus and agreement, taking each individual's core competencies as expert opinions. Broad parameters and directions were agreed upon. The Head of Cell found or created resources and consulted with senior management, providing the team with the space and tools required to meet the objectives of the Winter Cell.

### **Weekly lessons learned**

As the Winter Cell was a new and unique practice for UNHCR, the Cell undertook the task of producing lessons learned on a weekly basis. This served two purposes: 1) to document decisions and mistakes made in order to save others time, should anything like the Winter Cell be reproduced or replicated in future; and 2) to provide the team a space in which to openly discuss issues/problems, but also the opportunity to express how things should or could change moving forwards, in order to constantly improve.

### **Prototyping and rapid iteration**

The Winter Cell used low-fidelity prototyping to test concepts and assumptions to gain end-user feedback. As much as report-based, reports were prototyped with, among others, the AHC-O and other senior management, from the first day. Feedback was used to iterate products and processes. The team did not consider any product to be final but rather a new iteration, and always something to be improved. As the products began to be shared more widely, feedback surveys were incorporated into products, and a number of online tools were used to glean feedback from a wider range of consumers. The Winter Cell followed a simple innovation process that facilitated this adaptability:

*Problem-setting/challenge definition;*

*Prototyping;*

*End-user feedback;*

*Iteration;*

*Finalization, production.*

### **Partnerships formed where no expertise exists in-house**

Wherever a lack of expertise existed in-house, or within the team, the Winter Cell reached out strategically to external partners in order to seek out the right knowledge, products, skills, or services in order to meet the objectives of the Winter Cell, in the shortest timeframe possible. Over 20 potential partners were consulted and several experts were consulted in order to provide strategic advice to the team. These included inter alia Oxford University, FrontLine SMS, Grey Area Inc. consultancy, the UK Meteorological Office International Disaster Risk Reduction Programme, the UK Met Office Innovation team, the World Meteorological Organization (WMO), the national Meteorological Services of Austria, Croatia, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Greece, Serbia, Slovenia, Turkey, the International Maritime Organization (IMO), the Assessment Capacities Project (ACAPS), and Microsoft.

### **Online collaboration tools**

Within the team, online collaboration tools were used, including Google' online tools, Slack, Dropbox, Asana, CartoDB, ArcGIS online, and Github. Slack was extended to the emergency at large. Whilst there was initial interest, active users remained at around 15 people. For members of the team, Slack was a success in reducing emails and retaining a high degree of collaboration, this, and other online tools, helped us to create and edit work collaboratively, and in real time. Benefits of collaborative and 'open' communication and work systems are not only about reducing the number of emails but that information is shared in ways that brings the culture of collaboration, ownership and recognition to effective levels.

### **Team reviews**

Online tools were used to reduce email traffic and to increase efficiency. Due to the flat structure, the team also required spaces for collaboration and analysis. A daily review process was built into the team by way of a route map adapted from the London Tube map, in order to focus the various approaches and skills on the analysis that would be passed onto Senior Management. The map was used to identify potentially high-risk points between the Aegean Sea, and northern Europe.

### **Consultations and parameter setting**

The team had regular consultations with the former High Commissioner, the AHC-O, the Director and Deputy Director of the Regional Bureau for Europe (RBE), the Deputy Directors of the Division of Emergencies Security and Supply, as well as the Director and Deputy Director of DPSM. These began on a daily basis, then as and when required, eventually with reduced consultation and guidance. The consultations were essential in outlining parameters, focus, and relevance.

### **Why design was critical to the Winter Cell's process**

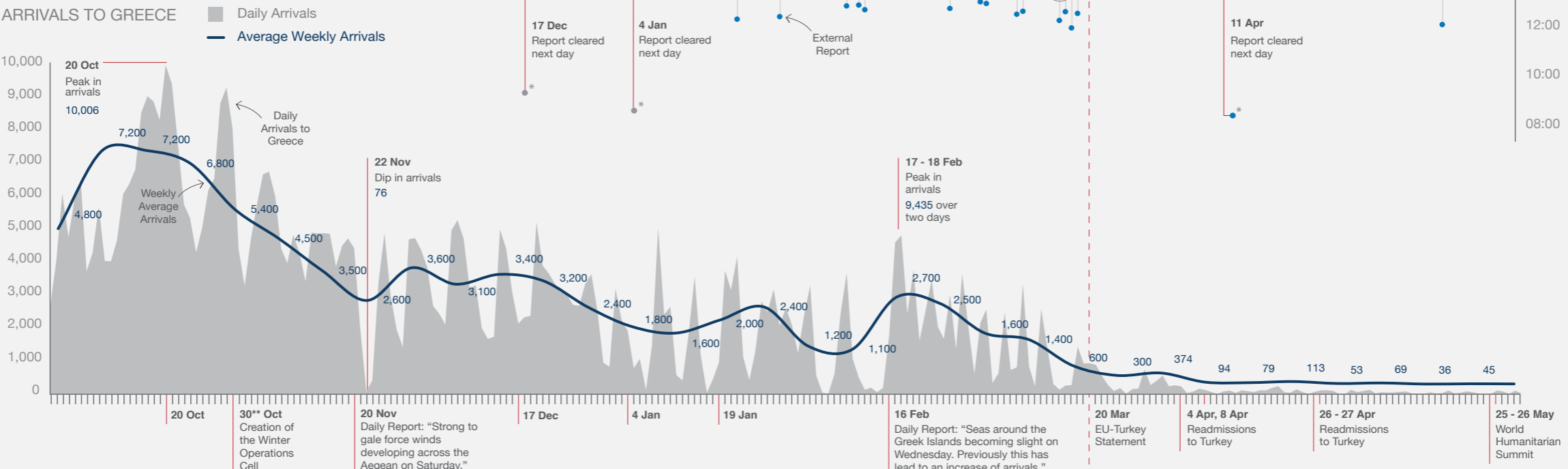
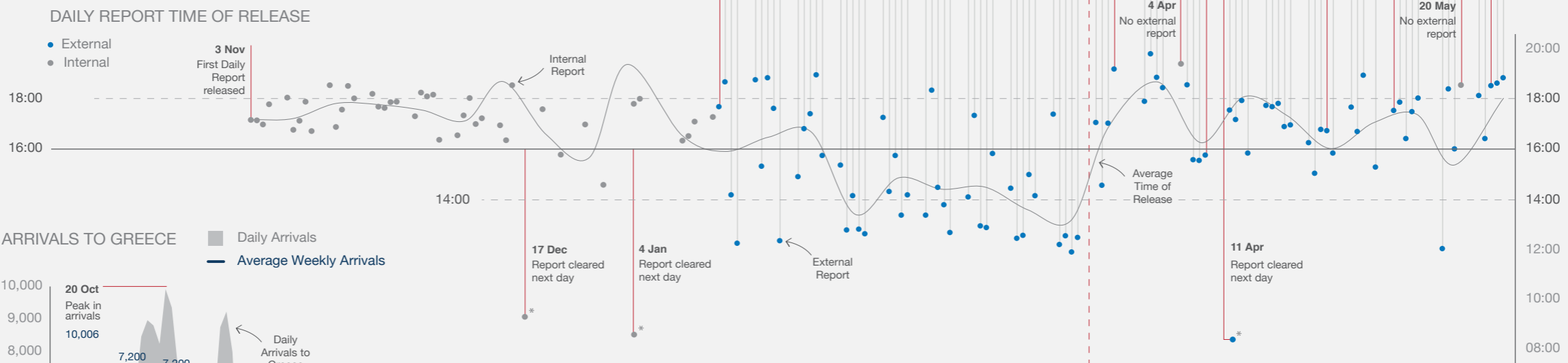
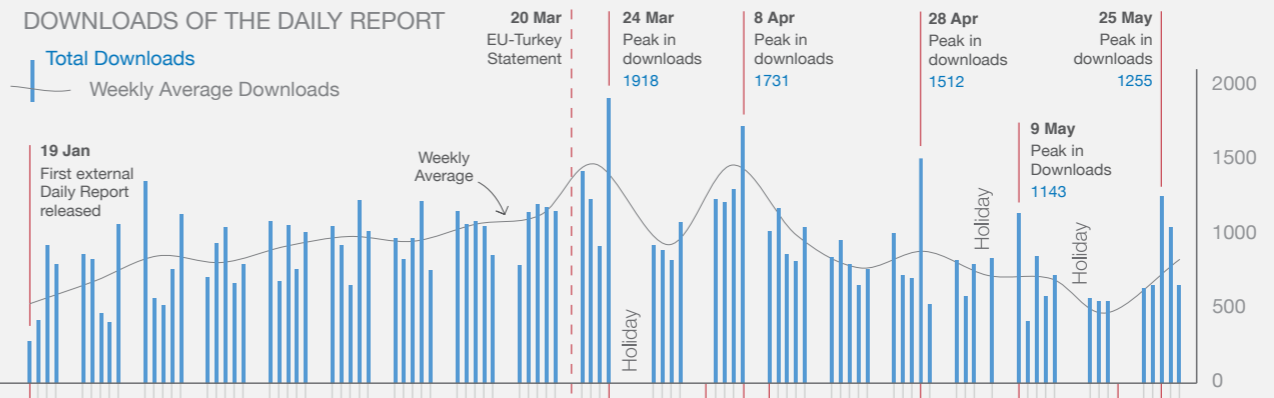
Design was used in a strategic manner to make a wealth of complicated and intertwined information and data as consumable as possible to a broader audience which included the Senior Management of UNHCR. Secondly, the incorporation of design thinking and processes served the efficiency and productivity of the team. UNHCR in the traditional sense, uses design to 'make things pretty', improving the layout of documents. In Winter Cell, design was used as a production method, and efficient work process where 'design' was both the driver and vehicle for content and messaging.



This figure illustrates the distribution of products developed by the Winter Cell team over time. Two products were issued regularly throughout the duration of the team's existence; the Daily Report and the Daily Email summarising the country reports. During the period of 30 October to 7 January, these were issued seven days a week, which along with an average of four Real-time Updates per day, marked a phase of continuous information collation and production. The advent of weekly weather bulletins created in partnership with the UK Met Office in December supplemented the flow of information in support of the response to the winter-induced emergency in Europe. In January and February, products related to social media monitoring were developed and tested, the content of which ultimately evolved into an addition to the daily report. Beginning in April and May, daily

updates (Monday - Friday) were drafted. Diverse products, including scenarios and other analysis products were developed by the team, including site profile overviews, winterisation reports, route analysis and alternative route scenarios, among many others. The variation in quantity of products is attributed to the number of staff assigned to the team, as well as the evolving contextual dynamics, compounded by a shift from an operational to an analytical focus.

The Cell began to notice the effect of the various clearance processes on consumption of the Daily Report. This figure shows that the time of day reports were released had an impact upon the number of downloads - both unique and other - from the data.unhcr.org web portal.





### Winter Cell Product Example

The Daily Progress Graph (previous page) illustrates the distribution of products developed by the team over time. Two products were issued regularly throughout the duration of the team's existence; the Daily Report and the Daily Email summarizing the country reports. During the period of 30 October to 7 January, these were issued seven days a week, which along with an average of four Real-time Updates per day, marked a phase of continuous information collation and production.

The advent of weekly weather bulletins created in partnership with the UK Met Office in December supplemented the flow of information in support of the response to the emergency in Europe. In January and February, products related to social media monitoring were developed and tested, the content of which ultimately evolved into an addition to the daily report. Diverse products, including scenarios and other analysis products were developed by the team, including site profile overviews, winterization reports, route analysis and alternative route scenarios, among many others. The variation in quantity of products is attributed to the number of staff assigned to the team, as well as the evolving contextual dynamics, compounded by a shift from an operational to an analytical focus.

The Daily Progress Graph shows that the time of day reports were released had an impact upon the number of downloads - both unique and other - from the data.unhcr.org web portal.

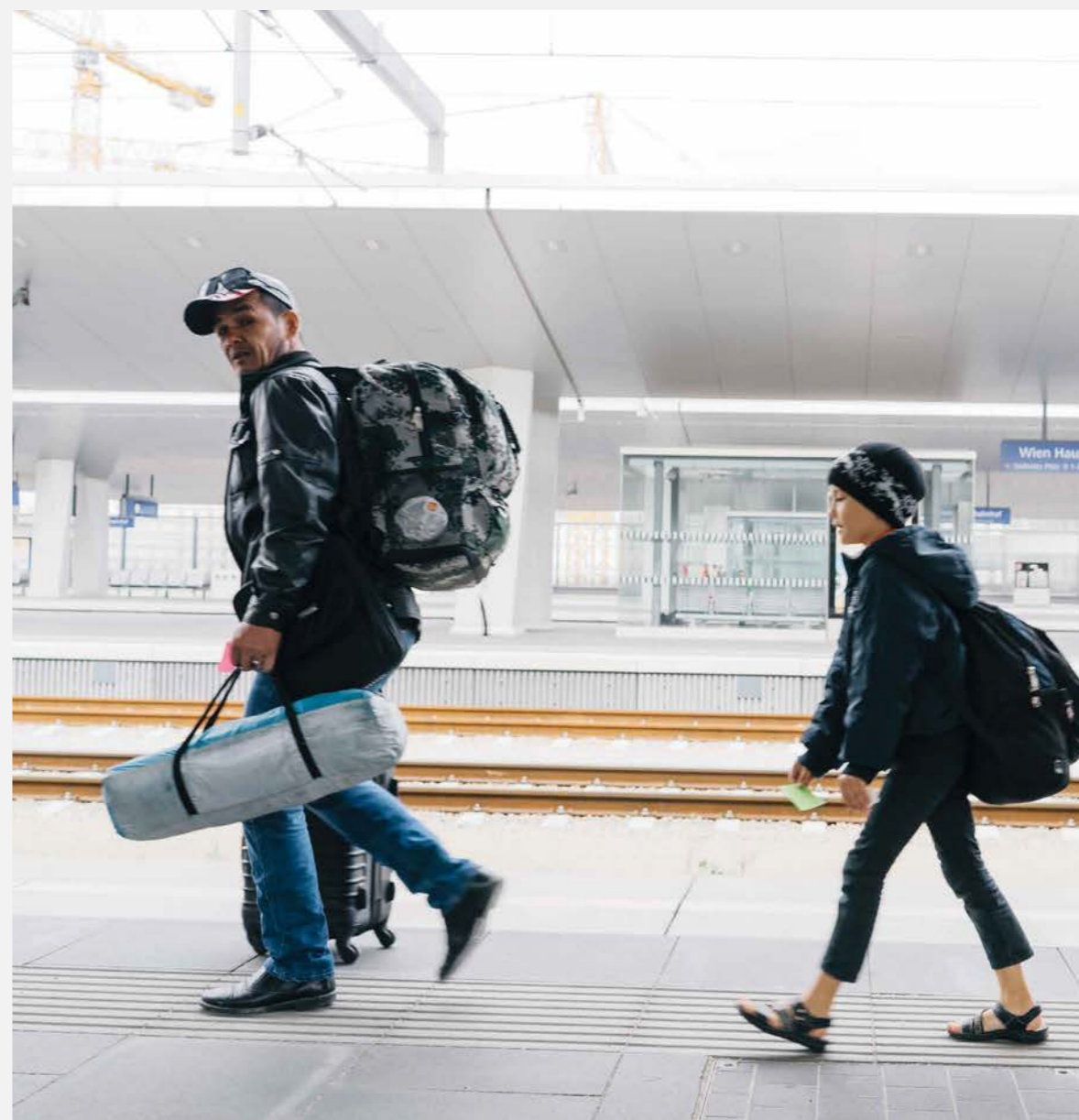
### Bringing predictive decision-making to UNHCR

The Winter Cell was geared towards facilitating proactive decision-making, rather than reactive. As the UK Met Office collaboration was in full swing, at the daily morning weather briefings, ideas were thrown around the team that lead to an insight of the ability to predict weather patterns against people flow. Expanding on this insight, the team drew together further data points into the mix, eventually resulting in the team creating a model that would give foresight on population flow trends to the Greek islands. This approach led to the basis for what today is the effort to build population movement simulations in the Horn of Africa, by the Innovation Service

### The Future

UNHCR's Winter Cell, although short-lived, was one a successful effort to steer UNHCR towards a more data-driven organization, where collection, analysis, and application of data was used in a proactive manner within an emergency.

It was also an opportunity for UNHCR to identify where the roadblocks are within the organization to move quicker to meet the current and real time needs of refugees.



Refugees walk towards a train headed to Dortmund, Germany.  
©UNHCR/Florian Rainer

# From UNHCR Zimbabwe, the coming of refugee innovators

## Treating the symptom – not the root cause

Change is hard. This was one of the first lessons that Rumbidzai Mapolisa, Senior Resettlement Assistant based in UNHCR's Harare, Zimbabwe office, learned during her UNHCR Innovation Fellowship journey. Once selected for the Fellowship, Mapolisa knew immediately she wanted to focus on issues linked with aid dependency and disempowerment in Tongogara refugee camp in Zimbabwe.

Mapolisa was confident she already had the appropriate solution that would be at the center of her Fellowship. She had an idea to create a one-stop platform (web based marketplace/ecosystem) to showcase refugee talent, skills, and stories. The digital platform she envisioned would transcend the restrictions on employment and movement as refugees would trade online right from the camp. The platform would keep the refugees current and connect them to global village.

"I observed that refugees in Tongogara camp were forced to rely on aid and this had a debilitating effect on their productivity thereby creating a dependency syndrome. For most of them going on resettlement to the USA became the only viable option. They were living in a state of limbo awaiting the "American dream" and for many life would resume once they reach the shores of America. The web based platform was meant to connect them to the rest of the world as well as let the world know about them.. I believed my idea was so brilliant and that obviously once we deployed this platform, it would revolutionize the refugees' lives. but after going to the Innovation Fellowship workshop, one of the first things they taught us was not to be married to our ideas and to test assumptions. Following the innovation process made me re-think my approach," she says.

The Innovation Fellowship encouraged her to start engaging the community, to ask them what they wanted, and empower refugees to be innovators themselves. It wasn't long before Mapolisa was championing this bottom-up approach and advocating for a refugee-centered design in her operation.

"I was treating the symptom instead of the root cause of the problem. We have to recondition our minds when thinking about humanitarian aid and the challenges refugees face. Changing this mindset is extremely difficult."

Inspired by her initial lessons learned, Mapolisa recognized the opportunity and need to bring this approach to her colleagues in the field. Change wasn't an easy path but it was one she was steadfast in expanding outside of her Fellowship experience.

## An operation ripe for innovation

This new approach soon expanded beyond just Mapolisa's Innovation Fellowship. Her curiosity and unwavering commitment to refugee-led innovation had soon spread across UNHCR's Zimbabwe operation. Two colleagues, Kennedy Chimsoro, an Assistant Programme Officer, and Esther Kirimi, a Protection Officer, played an integral part in catalyzing innovation at the operational level alongside Mapolisa.

The Fellowship fed into what the Zimbabwe operation is doing now - a catalyst to expand what was already happening on the ground. The operation started strategically incorporating the innovation methodology at a small scale and gradually implemented these new ways of working into their day to day jobs. "Through Rumbi's guidance and assistance in trying to escalate the innovation approach...we have now mainstreamed this in our country operations plan," explains Chimsoro.

In 2017, UNHCR Zimbabwe will have embedded this refugee-centered design and innovation process in their programming cycle – a first for the organization.

### **Strategically bringing the innovation process into the operation**

The Zimbabwe operation is now using this innovation approach for multi-year planning and to address the simple fact that funding is lower due to the growing demands of humanitarian resources. "Innovation is becoming even more necessary in terms of identifying workable, practical solutions that can assist in programme implementation whether it's at the planning stage, the needs assessment, or during monitoring. With regards to the Strategic Directions of the High Commissioner, the innovation approach is quite critical," says Kirimi.

UNHCR Zimbabwe is not just looking at the one-year planning cycle to understand how to embed innovation within their operation; the staff in the operation are looking much farther beyond that. They wanted to ensure that innovation touched all levels of their country operation. This multifunctional approach to innovation now involved the entire Zimbabwe office, even outside of their innovation focal points that have been identified. "If you talk to people in admin, in programme, in protection, they all know about innovation. We are hoping that we can keep utilizing it in the different steps of our programme cycle."

Including innovation in their country operations plan was not the only step to create this shift. They are also bringing the innovation model into how they view partners. The operation hopes this new approach can help diversify their partnership base, and therefore feed into their mobilization framework. Internally and externally, they included innovation within all their stakeholder engagement meetings to confirm that innovation was included within their objectives to feed into the result based framework.

"We try to simplify innovation so it's not just this big concept that we have to implement, but we break it down into small components that feed into the results-based framework and then into the activities, outputs, and overall objectives," says Chimsoro. "If you are looking at this programme cycle, one of the key things we have started to do is incorporate innovation into our resource mobilization."

Another area the team has utilized this approach is through rethinking needs assessments with the refugee community. Refugees are being engaged outside of the traditional focus group discussions, usually reserved for insights into how to build their programming. They are exploring new ways to include refugees directly in monitoring and programme implementation, and giving them a role over and above what UNHCR normally does in terms of financial verification and issues of performance. This focus of empowerment, two-way feedback, and self-reliance is at the core of UNHCR Zimbabwe's innovation methodology: always start with the community member themselves.

"I believe the more refugees become self-reliant, they are able to innovate, the better the protection environment will become. The more you truly engage refugees and more importantly, listen to them, I believe, we will undoubtedly have better protection in the camps," says Kirimi.

The team argues that the benefits of this engagement approach are two-fold. Through prototyping solutions led by refugees themselves, UNHCR will in turn save costs by not providing solutions that refugees themselves aren't interested in. "In the end, using this innovation approach is good for the refugees, it is also good for the organization, and in terms of how we are effective in carrying out our daily activities whether it's in programming or admin," explains Mapolisa.

Despite the end of her Fellowship year, Mapolisa is still focusing on the issue of dependency in the camps but looking at it with an innovation lens. And now with her entire operation on board to tackle the challenges.

"UNHCR in Zimbabwe is very committed to promoting innovation in our operation. The team is exploring innovative solutions for service delivery and employing the innovation process to engage persons of concern towards self-reliance". It is our pride and joy and we hope to see more innovative solutions from our persons of concern. I credit our Innovation Fellow, Rumbidzai Mapolisa for her concerted efforts in starting this process for us, and facilitating innovation in our operation," adds Mr. Robert Tibagwa, UNHCR's Representative in Zimbabwe.

### **Moving from dependence to dignity**

It's hard to ignore the cultural shift in how UNHCR Zimbabwe is working with refugees on the ground. They are trying to move away from what Chimsoro describes as the "dependence syndrome." A key aspect of this shift is activating the "creative confidence" of refugees and creating the space for them to identify their challenges, their own solutions, and be empowered enough to implement these solutions.

"I think the innovative approach we're going towards achieving is a real change of mindset with refugees and other people of concern to ensure they become more proactive and not only depend on UNHCR for assistance," explain Chimsoro.

Despite the strict structures of UNHCR's programming cycles – that can often leave little room to innovate – UNHCR Zimbabwe was committed to finding a way that the process could be mainstreamed at the operational level. "We would want to inspire innovation by refugees and for refugees. What we are doing at this level now is including this within our programming cycles, and creating a structure for this type of activity to continue strategically," says Mapolisa.

Many of these changes came down to one word for the team: dignity. The refugee-centered approach, they believe, will not only have higher success for UNHCR but much better impact for refugees in the end. "We're actually listening to the refugees. So inherently our desire is more empathetic, it is more relevant, it's more useful to them, it's more life transforming." Mapolisa, Kirimi, and Chimsoro are optimistic that one day this approach could become the norm for not only UNHCR but for all organizations working in humanitarian aid.

### **Change is not without pain points**

As other operations look to replicate the good practices surrounding innovation in Zimbabwe, the team believes there are some crucial lessons learned. One of the first major challenges was buy-in with the operation. This lack of buy-in was partially because innovation itself was a bit of a mysterious term – did it mean technology or bringing in new apps for refugees? There was a lot of confusion surrounding the elusive idea of “innovation” that they had to address. “People sometimes don’t quite understand what innovation is,” explains Mapolisa. “How is it different from how we’re doing things anyway? How is it going to benefit persons of concern? If people haven’t seen what it is, it’s a bit difficult to relate to it. And some were concerned that in many ways we would be reinventing the wheel.”

Mapolisa highlights that the big takeaway from this process is that one must keep trying to innovate, even if you think you may fail. This can often require you to “innovate around how to innovate” within your local context. “You have to be flexible and keep re-thinking strategies to achieve your desired outcome. You have to find a way to win, to keep working at it, and explore how you can tie creativity to existing solutions.”

The need for buy-in and acceptance of the process was required at all levels – including the refugee themselves. The UNHCR Zimbabwe operation ensured that refugees understood not only what the concept meant but how it could be used to empower the communities where they live.

“I think sometimes the word innovation just sounds so big and complex that it scares a lot of people away,” explains Kirimi. But when UNHCR staff explained the opportunities for innovation with the refugee communities, they become extremely excited at the prospects. “Once they understood that we’re trying to tap into their ideas, their talents, their skills, they were very interested in the approach. Some of them even started telling us about the innovative things that they were doing before they became refugees.” she says.

Through giving refugees this space to experiment with innovation and more importantly, feel like their ideas were being listened to, the team began witnessing a mindset shift in the camp. “After coming into the camp and relying on UNHCR for so long, they almost forgot how to be innovative. But once we bring the discussion to the table, we see the excitement...people start telling us ‘oh we can do this, we could do this, we used to this, I have a skill for this, says Kirimi. She highlights that it’s important to explain how innovation benefits communities not only in the short term but also emphasizing the longer-term effects of such programming. But the question to follow is always: “I may have an idea. But what’s next?”

Unfortunately, like almost all other UNHCR operations, UNHCR Zimbabwe is facing more funding cuts as needs grow across the world. The team acknowledged the importance of managing expectations, as they do not have the capacity to take every new idea forward. But they are hoping innovation can provide an answer to this challenge as well.

One way the office is addressing this problem is adapting their partnership approach at the local level for UNHCR. This includes reaching out to private sponsors and non-traditional partners to come and work with the teams in the camp. “What we are trying to do is identify

some of the skills and ideas that young people have, and link these young people to private companies, innovators, or institutions that would be interested in their ideas as opposed to UNHCR taking on that responsibility,” Kirimi explains. “So now we are walking hand in glove with the different partners to make this happen.” adds Chimsoro.

For other UNHCR staff and operations interested in recreating this model, Chimsoro says that it’s also important to recognize that innovation is a continuous process. “We are still in the present. I think that’s the good part about innovation. It’s not a magic pill that you take and simply have all the right solutions. The dynamics will change each time.”

The operation is now taking these principles of innovation and continuously applying them to new and old challenges so that it becomes more of a mindset for staff. “The moment people start to change the way they do things, then they start to adapt to new approaches” says Chimsoro. This recognition of innovation as a theory of change, instead of just a set of activities, will ultimately be the main driver for behavior change for staff in the field. UNHCR’s Zimbabwe operation is convinced that this mindset shift will also be the catalyst for larger changes in how we view humanitarian aid and refugee themselves.

### **The traditional approach is no longer enough**

The key to scaling this innovative mindset to other operations will start with questioning the status-quo of how aid is delivered. There are more needs, more people, and less funding available.

“The multi-year, multi-partner approach is something that you simply cannot do without incorporating innovation. Even just looking at traditional way of approaching donors is now different. They are requesting different types of modalities which include innovative methods that are sustainable. It is obvious that the traditional approach is no longer enough,” argues Chimsoro.

In today’s world, people are displaced for an average of eighteen years – a number expected to rise over the next decade should displacement trends continue. “We see refugees being born in refugee camps, having children in refugee camps, and dying in camps,” says Kirimi. She argues that the three durable solutions for refugees, voluntary repatriation, local integration or resettlement are no longer enough.

“We know those three solutions are not the only solutions that we should look at. Now more and more we’re talking about finding solutions, permanent solutions, away from the traditional three solutions that we’ve always, as UNHCR, talked about. Now we’re challenged because we have more people becoming refugees and less people finding solutions. Few are getting out of this cycle.”

UNHCR Zimbabwe recognized that focusing on empowering refugees to become self-reliant may be another solution to explore. Through this process, UNHCR can then reduce assistance as refugees become self-sustaining and to move simply to targeted assistance of the most vulnerable.

“In most operations, we are satisfied as humanitarian workers knowing that you know we’ll give food, water, clothing, health and that’s it. But can we rethink solutions? Innovation gives us an opportunity to change our perspective as the UN, as aid workers and humanitarian workers, to actually begin to see refugees on an equal footing as real agents of change. They can actually take their destiny into their own hands and stand on their own two feet and come up with ideas and ways of solving their problems even better than we can” says Kirimi. Creating this change across the entire organization will take time, but if UNHCR Zimbabwe can measure the impact of this approach – it may be the spark to catalyze a new wave of transformation within UNHCR.

“For me I think that embracing innovation within UNHCR, especially adopting this bottom up approach where we allow refugees to be innovators, I think it’s going to have a great impact in how we deliver. It will have a great impact on how effective we are in actually delivering our services to persons of concern,” argues Chimsoro.

UNHCR Zimbabwe and the team behind the operation are leaders in this area, with a willingness to not only try new ideas but to rethink how we are operating in the field and the humanitarian system. They believe that we cannot leave innovation out of emergencies and that we must shift the very core of how we interact with refugees as our beneficiaries.

But Mapolisa, Kirimi, and Chimsoro are quick to highlight that it won’t be humanitarians who will be the leaders solving the great problems of tomorrow. Mapolisa is eager to expand on this idea, “I’m hoping that in Zimbabwe, the refugee innovators will come up with groundbreaking solutions that will change the whole of the humanitarian sector. The potential is there, we just need to give them the opportunity.”

“They are the real innovators,” she says.



An asylum seeking woman is seen at Tongogara refugee camp.  
©UNHCR/Tsvangirayi Mukwazhi

## Why innovation starts with the right mindset

As Simeneh Gebeyehu looked around the table at his colleagues, he had no idea how they were going to deliver water to the thousands of refugees in Tongo refugee camp who were facing a critical shortage. He saw no options. But Gebeyehu had recently completed an Innovation Fellowship. He knew there had to be a way. “I will never forget the challenge I faced on that day,” says Gebeyehu, an Assistant WASH Officer in Assosa, Ethiopia. “Had I not participated in the Fellowship in 2016 I wouldn’t have responded in the way I did.”

Gebeyehu had learned a process that starts with identifying a problem, generating and prioritizing ideas, prototyping then iterating and collecting feedback, and eventually implementing them. During his Fellowship, he’d created a briquette-making project that turned camp waste into energy-dense briquettes for use as fuel, which helped to waste management, and can create strong bond between host and refugee communities while living together, and furthermore the operation is on the way to saving thousands of dollars each month. Using the same approach, he took a plan to construct latrines for 15 households and turned it into one that delivered 882 slabs where refugees participated to construct their own full latrines.

His colleagues were on the same page. They’d participated in an innovation workshop that gave them the basics of this new kind of thinking and problem solving. At the same time, it is extremely important to launch innovation workshops for refugees and host community members so that they can be innovative in solving their problems by their own. So together they turned their attention to the water shortage at Tongo. Gebeyehu came up with several ideas on his own and management backed one: the idea of installing piping and generator-powered pumps. It was successful, and refugees got water.

“We managed to mainstream innovation,” Gebeyehu says. “Our operation is now fully mainstreamed with the innovation approach and I can already tell you the success of the coming year will be due to that.”

There are so many problems to solve in the world of refugee assistance, from massive geopolitical challenges to frustrating individual obstacles. UNHCR Innovation Fellows identify one and find ways to address it. But beyond their focus on implementing a project is something bigger: the adoption of a new process. And even bigger, a change in UNHCR’s very culture.

“In order to get sustainable innovations and make the organization better you do need to focus on mindset and culture. Organizational culture is not something to be dealt with when everything else is done, but it is a foundation of everything. It is about how organization’s people interact and work,” says Emilia Saarelainen, Innovation Fellowship Program Manager.

“The mindset UNHCR Innovation is trying to foster is challenging assumptions, changing perspective, value of collaboration and openness for failure and risk taking. It’s one that leads staff to question if there is a better way of working, of communicating, of thinking.

“Innovation mindset is not rocket science- in theory at least,” says Saarelainen. “It’s about looking outside and seeing what’s out there, experimenting and trying things out, working together with others and continuous learning. You need people with passion and willingness to change.”

For Fellows, the Innovation Fellowship is just the first step.

“The project is important, but... But even more importantly...the process Fellows go through is an opportunity to try out new things without a fear of failing, and engage more people in their innovation activities,” says Saarelainen.

### **Spreading the innovative approach**

Alpha Amadou Diallo, an Administration/Finance Officer in Abidjan, Cote D’Ivoire was not in a position that would typically innovate around protection issues. But what he learned during his Fellowship gave him the confidence and the passion to contribute to the problem of responding to the needs of stateless people.

“At the end of the day, I learned hands-on what human centered design is and I think I can better embed it in everything I do,” says Alpha. Alpha put his skills and knowledge from the Fellowship to work in tackling the lack of an organized and responsive referral system for stateless people. “In my day-to-day work I try to take this innovative approach: never guessing what people want but asking them, and then truly taking what they say into account.”

With help from the Innovation Service, Alpha brought what he learned during his Fellowship back to his colleagues. And they listened.

Faced with an outdated inventory system, Alpha suggested to the operation’s IT Officer that he come up with a creative solution to manage low-value items. Alpha was impressed when the staff member went to stakeholders and asked what issues they were having and developed an application that allowed them to manage low-value items. “When he came up with it I asked him what process he followed, and it was exactly what he had learned at the workshop,” says Alpha. “And he wasn’t even there as a participant! He was there to help us with IT and the computers...But this guy understood that the first step is understanding the needs of the people you’re trying to find a solution for.”

Fellows are expected to engage people back at their operations and share what they’ve learned about approaching problems and addressing them. But the Fellowship does not dictate how they should do so.

“We don’t talk a lot about the cultural or organizational change itself,” Saarelainen says. “We do talk about innovation and the elements of it, such as role of end-users and experimentation and why they are so important and a crucial part of innovation. Initially we walk through the

process, and then by actually going through the innovation methodology and implementing this, they hopefully recognize the value of it as a tool.”

Alpha certainly took the message to heart. He calls the Innovation Fellowship and the follow-on work “a journey of improvement.” And he sees it as a journey to be taken with others. He organized a workshop to train all of his project’s stakeholders on innovative approaches they could take forward in creating the referral program for stateless people in Cote d’Ivoire. And it worked. Coworkers in the operation have already used the innovation process Alpha showed them to identify innovative solutions to problems that had previously needed them. As an Administration and Finance Officer, Alpha is not in a position that would traditionally have a leading role in transforming protection systems. But as UNHCR culture evolves to value and propagate innovation, job titles may have no bearing on who can bring new ideas to the table and galvanize support to make them realities.

Alpha says he feels an obligation to spread the innovation culture, especially as he hands his project over to his colleagues to finalize the plans for data analysis and protection and collaborate with partners to put referral mechanisms in place.

“Now the burden is on my protection colleagues to pursue the project,” he says. “I just laid the foundation for them.”

### **A senior cadre of innovators**

The promising thing about investing in these Innovation Fellows is that one day, they will be in more senior positions and have the opportunity to spread this mindset even further. As the Fellows take on greater and greater management responsibilities and are able to exert more influence in the organization, they will carry with them the skills, tools, and innovative mindset they’ve already begun to develop.

“As I’m growing with UNHCR and gaining more influence, I’m trying to coach my colleagues, teammates and people I supervise and make them understand that this approach, for me, is more effective,” explains Alpha. He sees his co-Fellows doing the same. They’re all struggling; it isn’t easy in an organization as old as UNHCR to create a cultural change. But the Innovation Fellows seem to agree that although transforming organizational culture is hard, it’s possible.

“I think of myself as part of a new generation of UNHCR managers,” Alpha says. “Slowly but surely as new colleagues are being recruited...we have the opportunity to show them a different arc. To show them from the get-go how things work here and let them know we’re all about change and innovation. We don’t want to stay still. We want to make the most we can with the least.”

### **A focus on people**

Many of the Innovation Service’s contributions come in the form of technology and partnerships, two areas where stagnation can lead to underperformance, inefficiencies and missed opportunities. Both are critical. But according to Saarelainen, they’re not enough. “How do you actually create a mindset?” asks Emilia Saarelainen. “If you want innovation you need to focus on people and that’s the very basis of the Fellowship.”

“What is the value of that technology if it’s not really adopted and utilized in the organization?” she asks. “You need the people to have that mindset to first of all look for those technologies or solutions and understand that there is something more outside our organization...(that)... might work in our operating environment as well.”

And if they don’t? The Fellowship aims to instill in participants that failure is okay too.

With this innovation mindset, uncertainty is not something to shy away from, as Antonio Di Muro discovered as he worked on improving internal communications in his Bari, Italy operation.

“An idea can generate other ideas,” Di Muro says. “And being involved in an innovation process also implies accepting the idea of not knowing completely in advance where you are exactly going.”

The willingness to take steps down an unfamiliar path is not yet shared by everyone at UNHCR.

“In general terms, I see there is a lot of interest for innovation in the colleagues directly in the field and a lot of support from high level management,” Di Muro says. “But at a global level, there is understandably some sort of caution in the middle management since innovating also means the risk of investing in something which, in the end, could fail.”

But through his Fellowship, Di Muro concluded that UNHCR has an obligation to take calculated risks. He has become an advocate for innovation within the humanitarian sector, which has long felt itself cushioned by a lack of competition.

“Beneficiaries of our service do not have the opportunity to choose whether or not to use our service; they are in need of it, sometimes desperately in need,” he says. “However, the mere fact that our beneficiaries are not paying for our services does not mean they don’t deserve the best possible service, and a service capable of adapting to changing needs in a changing world.”

Innovation Fellows like Di Muro are playing a leading role in creating the organizational change that will allow UNHCR to adapt along with it. But he and the others recognize that it will take time.

“The organizational change comes through behavioral change,” Saarelainen says. “And it’s not easy. It’s very slow. It’s also difficult to measure. It’s not often a quick return on investment where you see an immediate result.”

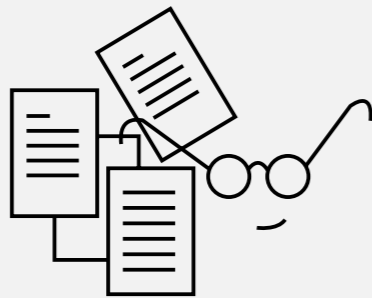
“And,” she says, “it’s needed.”



Woman in Hagadera Camp, Dadaab.  
©UNHCR/Sarah Hoibak



## A brief innovation glossary



### **Creativity:**

The use of imagination or original ideas to create something new.<sup>1</sup> Tendency to recognize or generate ideas.

### **Imagination:**

The ability of the mind to be creative or resourceful.<sup>2</sup> Imagination is the heart of creativity.

### **Invention:**

A new, unique or novel idea, device, method, process or discovery.<sup>3</sup>

### **Inventor:**

Someone who comes up with new ideas and concepts that may or may not lead to innovations.<sup>4</sup>

### **Innovation:**

The implementation of a new or significantly improved product (good or service), process, a new marketing method, or a new organisational method in business practices, workplace organisation or external relations.<sup>5</sup> Innovation is an application of invention so that it creates value.

### **Innovation process:**

We have a five-step process: 1) Define the challenge; 2) Identify solutions; 3) Test solutions; 4) Refine solutions; 5) Scale solutions. The process is not linear and it is not considered complete, as we seek to continually iterate.

### **Prototyping and testing:**

A prototype is a small-scale, tangible representation of an idea or solution (or part of it) that people can directly experience. Prototyping allows you to communicate your idea or solution to others in an interactive way, try ideas out quickly and gather feedback easily. The prototype is tested to make sure it is fit for the purpose and users' need. Based on the feedback, the prototype is improved and tested again.<sup>6</sup>

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1 Oxford Dictionary.

2 Oxford Dictionary.

3 Strategic Management of Technology and Innovation. CTI Reviews.

4 Lean Ventures, Seedcap AB.

5 OECD.

6 TD4Ed – Teachers Design for Education

**Radical (or discontinuous) innovation:**

Innovations with features offering dramatic improvements in performance or cost, which result in the transformation of existing markets or creation of new ones.<sup>7</sup> New to the world.

**Incremental innovation:**

An improvement in performance, cost, reliability, design, etc. to an existing product or process. New to the organization, but not to the world.

**Disruptive innovation:**

An innovation that transforms an existing market or sector by introducing simplicity, convenience, accessibility, and affordability where complication and high cost are the status quo.<sup>8</sup>

**Design Thinking:**

A discipline that uses the designer’s sensibility and methods to match people’s needs with what is technologically feasible and what a viable business strategy can convert into customer value and market opportunity.<sup>9</sup>

**Human-Centered Design (HCD):**

A design and management framework that develops solutions to problems by involving the human perspective in all steps of the problem-solving process. Human involvement typically takes place in observing the problem within context, brainstorming, conceptualizing, developing, and implementing the solution.<sup>10</sup>

**Social Innovation:**

A social innovation is a novel solution to a social problem that is more effective, efficient, sustainable, or just than current solutions. The value created accrues primarily to society rather than to private individuals.<sup>11</sup>

**Piloting:**

A pilot program, also called a feasibility study or experimental trial, is a small-scale, short-term experiment that helps an organization learn how a large-scale project might work in practice. A pilot provides a platform for the organization to test logistics, prove value and reveal deficiencies before spending a significant amount of time, energy or money on a large-scale project.<sup>12</sup>

**Ideation:**

7 Innovation-3  
8 The Clayton Christensen Institute  
9 Tim Brown CEO, IDEO  
10 Wikipedia.  
11 Stanford Graduate School of Business.  
12 Techtarger (2017). Pilot Program (Pilot Study).

A structured process to generate a lot of ideas, preferably in a relatively short time frame. There are many different ideation techniques, e.g., brainstorming and empathy maps.<sup>13</sup>

**Brainstorming:**

An idea generation technique. Brainstorming combines a relaxed, informal approach to problem solving with lateral thinking. It encourages people to come up with thoughts and ideas that can, at first, seem a bit crazy. Some of these ideas can be crafted into original, creative solutions to a problem, while others can spark even more ideas.<sup>14</sup>

**End-users:**

Individuals who ultimately uses or are intended to use a product or service. End-users are the starting point of the innovation process.

**Facilitation:**

Facilitation is about taking a leadership role in innovation process (instead of content). The facilitator remains “neutral” meaning he/she does not take a particular position in the discussion. Innovation facilitators help to unleash the creative potential in people who own the content by creating and managing the environment so that each individual is able to contribute their best.<sup>15</sup>

**Product innovation:**

Changes in the things (products/services) which an organization offers.

**Process innovation:**

Changes in the way in which they are created and delivered.

**Position innovation:**

Changes in the context in which the products/services are introduced.

**Paradigm innovation:**

Changes in the underlying mental models which frame what the organization does.<sup>16</sup>

13 Lean Ventures, Seedcap AB.  
14 Mindtools.  
15 The Creative Problem Solving Group, Inc. Understanding the Role of a Facilitator  
16 4Ps of Innovation by ©2005 Joe Tidd, John Bessant, Keith Pavitt

**Contributors:**

**Carolyne Akello**, Tanzania Connectivity for Refugees Coordinator

**Jennifer Brookland**, Freelance Journalist

**Kennedy Chimsoro**, Assistant Programme Officer

**Antonio Di Muro**, Protection Associate

**Alpha Amadou Diallo**, Administration/Finance Officer

**Katie Drew**, Innovation Officer (Emergencies)

**Christopher Earney**, Deputy, Innovation Service

**Samantha Eisenhauer**, Connectivity for Refugees Project Manager

**Simeneh Gebeyehu**, Assistant WASH Officer

**Andrew Harper**, Head, Innovation Service

**Esther Kiriimi**, Protection Officer

**Nicholas Kourtzis**, Greece Connectivity for Refugees Coordinator

**Rumbidzai Mapolisa**, Senior Resettlement Assistant

**Jean-Laurent Martin**, Information Management Officer

**Juliette Murekeyisoni**, Senior Field Coordinator

**Lauren Parater**, Innovation Community and Content Manager

**Hans Park**, Strategic Design and Research Manager

**Emilia Saarelainen**, Innovation Fellowship Program Manager

**Robert Tibagwa**, UNHCR's Representative in Zimbabwe

**John Warnes**, Innovation Technology Officer

**Alan Vernon**, Connectivity for Refugees Project Lead

**Dina Zyadeh**, Innovation Officer Manager





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[innovation@unhcr.org](mailto:innovation@unhcr.org)

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