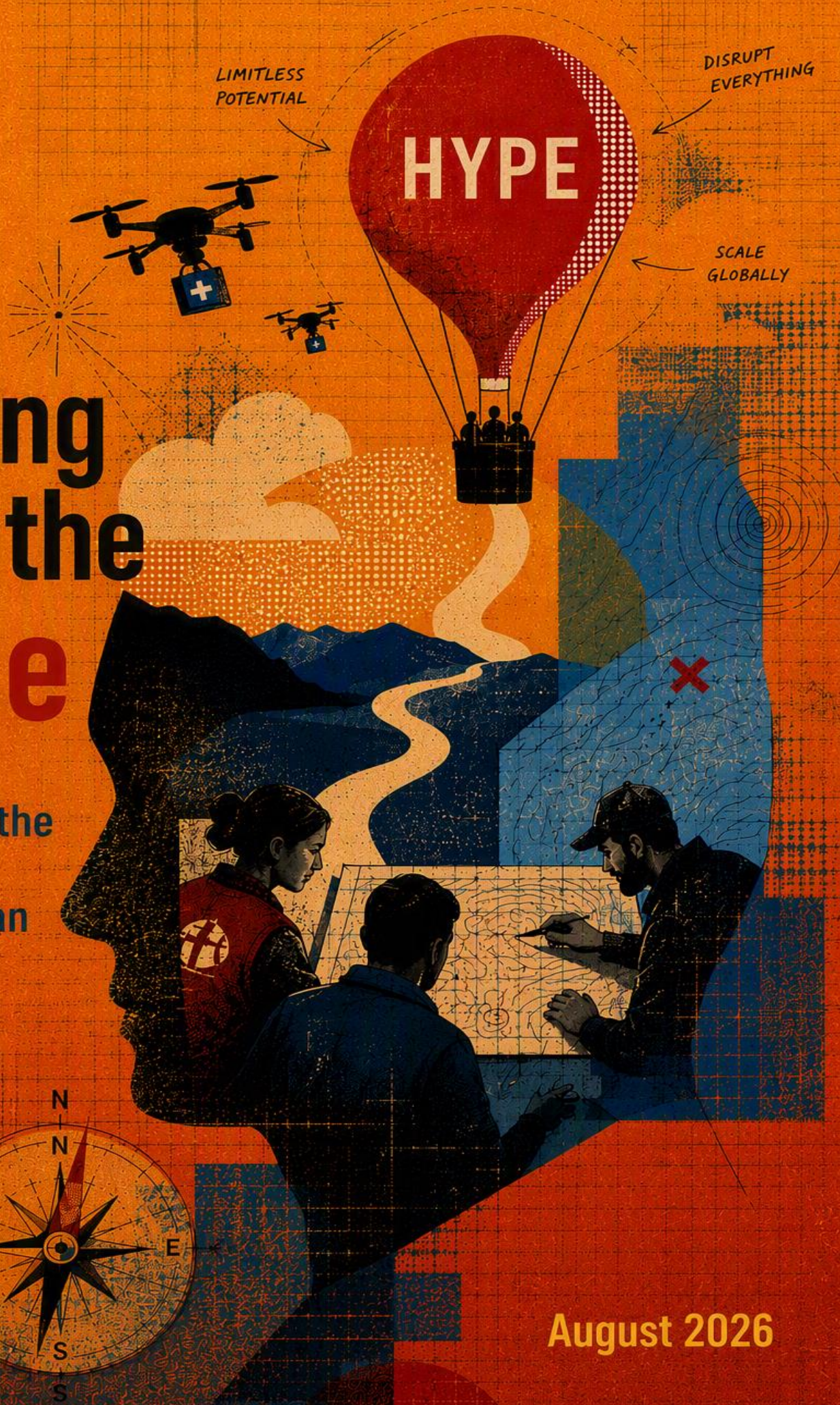


Getting Past the Hype

Navigating the
Future of
Humanitarian
Innovation



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Getting Past the Hype: Navigating the Future of Humanitarian Innovation

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Key Messages

- Technology hype becomes dangerous when a tool's perceived strengths are prioritized over real humanitarian problems and operational needs.
- Humanitarian organizations need to respond to larger and more complex crises, but they also must protect trust, stability, and accountability.
- Successful innovation requires *interpreters* who can steward priorities, connect technical teams with operational realities, and guide ideas from pilots to implementation.
- Collaborating with external technology partners guided by key humanitarian values can shape innovation around operational needs and ethical priorities.

Introduction

The humanitarian sector is unique; it possesses different responsibilities and core concerns meant to drive beneficial impact and reduce global suffering. But, just like any other sector, it can be influenced by excitement and hype around new technologies. Buying into the exaggerated promise of technology is not a misinterpretation of responsibility. Instead, it is an indicator that humanitarians want to improve service delivery but lack direction in evaluating technology. With increasingly complex crises and tighter funding, organizations need to be careful about which technologies they choose and why.

This report explains how humanitarians, IT and data professionals, and crisis responders can avoid unrealistic expectations about digital tools. It asks how

organizations can choose tools that meet governance requirements, use resources responsibly, and create real impact. To do this, humanitarian organizations need to understand the current innovation ecosystem and identify governance problems that may stop useful technologies from being adopted safely.

No single technology can solve every humanitarian issue. More funding also cannot fix weak evaluation practices. Innovation is an iterative process requiring a careful mixture of expertise and experimentation. The right combination of these factors becomes increasingly important as humanitarian crises become more complex, and funding becomes less certain. In response, humanitarian organizations need a more strategic approach to innovation, balancing limited resources against the potential value emerging technologies may bring to operational environments.

Humanitarian organizations face a different innovation challenge than most sectors. Their work depends on trust, accountability, and stability, which means new ideas must be introduced carefully. Success comes from using innovation in ways that strengthen, rather than compromise, these values.

The Humanitarian Technology Paradox

It is natural to be interested in new technology, especially when so much information is available about it. However, aimless curiosity can become misleading when organizations start with a tool instead of a problem. Expectations create hype, and hype invites both financial and social investment. It creates a cycle wherein the more hype an actor can create around their newest tool, the more expectation its potential will create. The humanitarian sector is not designed to move quickly or constantly adopt new technologies. Instead, they rely on proven processes and tools that deliver reliable results. When lives are on the line, humanitarians trust what they know will function.

Although innovation debates often focus on specific technologies, governance is an under-explored issue. Governance helps organizations define incentives, maintain trust, and identify problems. In a humanitarian context, the question is not simply whether to adopt the newest technology. The question is when, why, and how it should be used.

This mindset shift helps organizations shed much of the hype that can cloud decision-making and turn themselves into navigators of innovation rather than trying to compete as innovation leaders. Humanitarians should judge new technologies through the lens of their core values, not the excitement surrounding them. Other sectors may see these values as constraints, but the humanitarian sector can use them as a guide for responsible decision-making.

Humanitarian organizations face a difficult balance. They need to respond to larger and more complex crises while protecting trust, stability, and accountability. Two things can be true at once; humanitarians can be cautious and still improve outcomes. This means using core values to decide whether and how to adopt digital tools. It also shifts the discussion away from funding as the main barrier to innovation and toward the need for careful governance. Strong principles help organizations avoid hype and choose solutions that both build impact and trust.

Identified Innovation Traps Causing Failure

There is no clear path for innovation. People often only understand it after enough small changes have accumulated and produced visible change. For humanitarians, the challenge is to keep improving while facing more complex disasters, changing demands, and tighter budgets. These pressures require the sector to innovate, but they also make careless innovation riskier. The following section explains four traps that can pull humanitarians away from real impact.

1. Chasing the shiny new object

It is natural and exciting to focus on the potential new technologies may bring to the humanitarian sector. Yet, excitement often overlooks the necessary policies that ensure transparency and guarantee it will solve real issues in a response. By pursuing every new tool, humanitarian organizations risk distracting themselves and missing the technologies that may have a true impact on their work. Innovation for its own sake can waste resources and weaken donor confidence. Instead, humanitarians should begin with their workflows, products, and where relevant,

the people they directly involve. This problem-first approach puts operations needs before technological hype.

2. Pilot Purgatory

The humanitarian sector does not lack ideas for pilot projects. It suffers from a lack of pilots that successfully scale into stable and long-term institutional capabilities or actually shut down. Humanitarian organizations rightly prioritize responsibility and accountability; while these are strengths, they also make it harder to accept uncertainty, learn from failure, and scale new ideas. Successful innovation requires more than testing proposed solutions; it requires ownership, maintenance, and sustained support once a pilot moves towards implementation. Because humanitarian organizations often prioritize predictability and donor and community trust, they may be reluctant to expose failure or take risks. When failures stay hidden and promising pilots have no path to adoption, good ideas can remain stuck between experimentation and implementation.

3. Off-the-Shelf and Off-the-Mark

Humanitarians often have needs that general-purpose tools were not designed to meet. These tools may be easy to access and learn, but they can force humanitarians to define problems around what the tool can already do. This creates a situation where impact may be confined by the prefabricated tool. Because the humanitarian sector is not usually the primary customer, issues such as data governance, privacy, and transparency may not meet humanitarian standards. Over time, organizations may become too dependent on general-purpose technology providers and lose leverage over ethical and operational priorities. Without any meaningful input into how tools are designed, governed, and scaled, humanitarians risk security and privacy problems today and weaker control over their priorities tomorrow.

4. A Lack of Innovation Interpreters

Innovation often fails when technical teams and user communities do not understand each other. A technology may enter a humanitarian project before the real operational need has been translated into clear requirements and capabilities. This gap requires people who understand both digital tools and internal workflows.

These innovation interpreters can connect users with technical teams, translate operational needs into practical requirements, and help small proof-of-concept projects grow into useful tools. They also steward new ideas and give them ownership, direction, and informed support inside the humanitarian sector. In this role, they help organizations turn complex needs into shared understanding and guide ideas from experimentation to implementation.

These barriers to innovation do not appear one at a time. They can build on each other and create larger problems that are difficult to navigate. Still, many of them share the same root cause: technology is often chosen before the humanitarian problem is fully understood. The digital ecosystem will continue to grow more complex, so humanitarian organizations need stronger structures for making technology decisions. Rather than trying to lead the technology race, they should build on their strengths: field knowledge, operational data, trusted relationships with communities, and ethical commitments to dignity and privacy.

Practitioners to Innovation Navigators

The traps identified above do not mean the humanitarian sector needs less innovation. They show that it needs a better way to manage innovation. Having a more structured view of technology is the first step to resisting overhype. This means acting as innovation navigators, or groups that define real problems, connect outside experts with field knowledge, and judge whether new tools are useful, ethical, and sustainable.

The humanitarian sector can keep up with innovation by shifting from doing everything internally to guiding outside collaboration. This means building relationships with private technology companies, startups, universities, researchers, and scientists who have technical skills but need humanitarian knowledge to build useful tools. In this model, humanitarian organizations help define the problem, provide context, and set the standards for privacy, trust, and usefulness. The goal is not to outsource responsibility. The goal is to shape technology so it fits humanitarian needs.

Firstly, humanitarian data is uniquely valuable because of its scale, variety, and context. Its most important feature, however, is the care taken to protect the people behind it. Humanitarian organizations collect and record large amounts of information, applying strong privacy standards to protect anonymity. This data can help external partners build better tools, but only if shared through strong privacy, governance, and interpretation standards. Humanitarian datasets offer valuable insight into community needs, logistics, and historical trends that would otherwise remain unclear to outside actors. This grants contextual awareness to those who do not immediately operate within it. In this way, humanitarian data helps outside actors understand the realities of crises and the perspectives of local communities and practitioners.

Secondly, data alone is not enough. Humanitarian organizations also need to leverage and share field expertise with third-party actors. Teams that coordinate responses understand operational needs, past pilots, and the reasons that some projects succeeded or failed. This knowledge and experience can guide technical teams as they design and scale new tools. Local community involvement is especially important. Shifting towards a bottom-up approach coordinated by the humanitarian sector helps ensure that solutions are built around real problems rather than forcing problems to fit existing tools. It also helps humanitarians connect external expertise with the local relationships and practical knowledge needed for responsible innovation.

Thirdly, humanitarians need a way to bring their values, operational realities, and governance standards into the development process. Stewarding responsible validation builds trust by asking whether a tool is useful, sustainable, and able to uphold humanitarian values in practice. Humanitarian organizations understand the risks of crisis response and the standards that must guide disaster relief and mitigation. They should play an active role in testing tools gradually, identifying risks, and evaluating technologies before deployment. Crises cannot be treated as innovation sandboxes; failure is too risky and can cause real harm, especially when tools delay or complicate existing workflows. By stewarding validation, humanitarians can help ensure that tools are tested against ethical, operational, and sustainability realities they face in the field.

Increasing the flow of knowledge through access to humanitarian datasets and expertise protected by their values is the pathway to better innovation. Humanitarians

possess decades of operational knowledge and vast networks with local communities; these are their unique strengths and would be very difficult for outside actors to replicate. When humanitarian organizations provide data and expertise within a strong value system, they can help external partners create tools that serve real needs. Those partners can also apply lessons learned from humanitarian work to other areas of their business.

Charting the Path Forward

This model creates an active role for the humanitarian sector and makes them more than just users of technology. Instead, this collaborative approach would make humanitarians innovation navigators involved in the shaping of technology. This structure has precedent in large institutions, including NASA's Center of Excellence for Collaborative Innovation (CoECI).

In 2005, NASA's Human Health and Performance Directorate (HH&P) experienced a 45% cut to its annual budget. Its funding fell, but the need to solve its problems did not. Instead, the directorate needed to rethink how it governed innovation. The traditional approach was primarily concerned with internal development and facilitating external grants, but it started exploring more open alternatives.

Collaborating with external expertise brought new perspectives to long-standing issues, enabling researchers to view challenges from different angles. NASA held internal and external research competitions focused on priority projects. This process proved successful, so NASA established the CoECI and the NASA Human Health and Performance Center (NHHPC) to continue the model and facilitate collaboration between industry, academic, and non-profit actors.¹ NASA's experience shows that large, risk-conscious institutions can transition to collaborative innovation ecosystems and make progress on complex issues.

¹ Davis, J. R., Richard, E. E., & Keeton, K. E. 2014. Open Innovation at NASA: A New Business Model for Advancing Human Health and Performance Innovations. *The National Aeronautics and Space Administration*. <https://ntrs.nasa.gov/citations/20140017007>

NASA and humanitarian organizations are not identical, but both are involved in coordinating diverse actors around complex and high-stakes problems. To encourage cooperation with third parties, humanitarian organizations can offer academic and private actors opportunities to advance research, develop responsible tools, and explore new operational settings. For the humanitarian sector, these partnerships would be guided by strong privacy and governance priorities. By coordinating internal and external challenges, hackathons, partnerships, and the sponsoring of research projects, humanitarian organizations can define real problems and encode trust within solutions that are local, useful, and sustainable.

Recommendations

To respond to these identified innovation traps within the humanitarian sector, the following recommendations offer four practical shifts presented in the order they should be pursued: preparing for external collaboration, auditing the state of pilot projects, identifying priority challenges with their associated datasets, and organizing innovation interpreter roles.

1. Build external collaborative and open innovation structures

- a. Outline needs and requirements for co-created projects. Create criteria that focus on your identified priorities and the governance standards that protect privacy, responsibility, and transparency.
- b. Connect with private sector CSR teams, academic departments, and research centers leveraging structured opportunities ranging from challenge calls, student capstone projects, joint research projects, and technical sprints. Resulting partnerships should be tied to defined problems and include expectations for governance, handover, and long-term maintenance.
- c. Leverage humanitarian values to guide validation, data access, and implementation. Throughout any third-party partnership, ensure that humanitarian values remain central to decision-making.

2. Perform an internal pilot audit

- a. Audit and document active, stalled, informal, and proposed pilot projects, identifying owners and documenting the project's status, characteristics, and current issues.

- b. Create internal go/no-go criteria to identify which projects should be scaled, redesigned, sustained, or closed. Draft criteria dependent on the operational environment and establish standards that reflect the values of the organization.

3. Create a visible profile of priority challenges for the humanitarian organization

- a. Identify and publicize the main priorities and problems faced by the organization. Doing so enables humanitarian organizations to think critically about their problems and put their mission into a well-defined and distributable profile.
- b. Prepare datasets associated with priorities. Cleaning, standardizing, and accumulating stored data facilitates coordination with future partners. This also serves as an opportunity to reevaluate your data context and define access rules, quality standards, and cybersecurity priorities.

4. Create innovation interpreter roles

- a. Identify individuals of varying seniority in current workflows who can best translate field needs into technical requirements. They will translate needs, track pilots, coordinate partners, and escalate decisions while operating within management.
 - i. Chosen interpreters are meant to sit in on all procurement discussions and act on behalf of the parties they liaise with.
- b. Draft a yearly report of key priorities for field and operational teams administered by interpreters. This communicates lessons learned from successful or failed pilot projects and partnerships and shares statistics on the state of innovation outputs for donors.
- c. Operate as liaisons between the field and local actors with both the operational humanitarian employees and the third-party partners. This ensures a feedback loop between all parties involved and balances the different perspectives required for successful experimentation and implementation.

These recommendations are such that they do not create entirely new departments. Many of the thoughts and ideas behind this structure to foster open innovation and innovation interpreters already exist within many organizations. Instead, these points

collect and organize these functions and place them as an organizational priority. They begin with practical steps: making priority problems visible, assigning staff to translate needs into requirements, auditing existing pilots, and setting clear standards for external collaboration. Success is not determined by the volume of pilots but rather in an organization's ability to scale, redesign, sustain, and deliver impact to those that need it most.

Appendix

Appendix A: List of Individuals Interviewed

The authors would like to extend our deepest gratitude to the individuals who took the time to meet with us, answer our questions, and share stories, guidance, and wisdom around innovation within the humanitarian sector and the unique requirements of technical tools for coordinating disaster relief. Having conversations about the ways in which the humanitarian community is approaching the future of innovation was both inspiring and eye-opening. As this report is based predominantly on the input of the interviewees, it would not be possible without them.

This paper does not represent the views of the interviewees unless explicitly stated. The authors have drafted the paper based on a combination of literature review and input from those interviewed, who shared their perspectives in their own personal capacity.

Raphael Bonnaud	Relief Applications
Luis Capelo	Modal Labs
Jennifer Chan	Northwestern University
Olivier Cottray	Esri
Miguel Hernandez Rivera	Personal Capacity
Tino Kreutzer	KoboToolbox
Heather Leson	Canadian Red Cross
Mark McCarthy	Personal Capacity

Laura Walker McDonald	ICRC
Kenny Meesters	Tilburg University
Lars Peter Nissen	ACAPS
Gisli Olafsson	Gridland Consulting
Emmerson Tan	Financial Empowerment Partners
Cecilia Utas	LEVmer
Jennifer Wilde	Wilde Advisory

Appendix B: Artificial Intelligence Disclosure

All ideas, concepts, and recommendations are original, but artificial intelligence supported the editing and refining process. AI tools were employed to ensure that the ideas were communicated clearly and done so in a way that would allow diverse audiences to understand the report's findings and arguments.

Appendix C: Additional Sources

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