

## Roundtable on Innovation and Intrapreneurship in International Organizations

Hosted by: Prof. Dr. Tina C. Ambos (UNIGE) and Katherine Milligan (Schwab Foundation), May 9, 2018

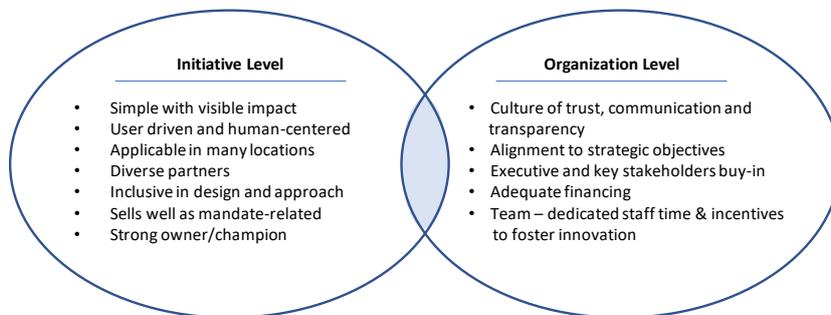
International organizations (IOs) are embracing social innovation strategies as a way to renew and remain relevant in today’s shifting environment. While IOs are different, they all launch initiatives – defined as an “innovative” product, process, or policy – and are increasingly seeking to share insights and best practices. We gathered 16 participants across 13 organizations to focus on identifying and analyzing factors that help these innovative initiatives scale and deliver impact. Six key takeaways emerged from this session, and research insights follow.

**Key Takeaway 1: Innovators within IOs are asking to learn, be challenged, and be heard.**

- Broker for honest **knowledge sharing** between international organizations: both on process and organization frame aspects
- **Accountability** on what organizations know and do.
- Innovators **need to be challenged** in a constructive way in order to advance innovation in IOs.
- **Extend the conversation** to include decision makers as well those impacted on the idea of innovation.
- **Concrete strategy** with key recommendations to organizations including frameworks and specific experience/toolkits shared from our research.

**Key Takeaway 2: In order to succeed, innovative initiatives must manifest certain key factors.**

*“Ask for forgiveness, not for permission!”*



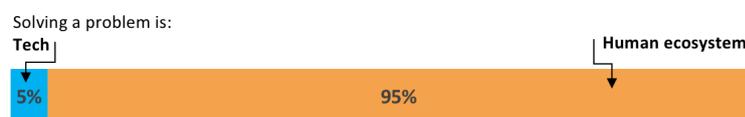
Based on the discussion, as a group we identified “success factors” at two levels, which provide a fertile ground for successful initiatives.

These insights align with the research initiative initial findings.

**Key Takeaway 3: Technology and innovation are not the same thing.**

*“The type of technology is always important but more important is the human ecosystem around that technology [...] The most difficult part is understanding the needs of the user and how to leverage, whether it is a technology, or a process, or a product, to meet those needs. And that has a lot more to do with the design and the conceptualization of the solution.”*

Technology by itself will not solve problems and does not equate to innovation. Tech is often the easiest part of the solution design. The harder and more critical parts are realizing the needs and tendencies of end users and achieving impact targets.



Innovation is also distinct from modernization: both are necessary, but

should not be conflated. We need a consistent definition of what innovation means in our organizations – whether it’s actually termed “innovation” or not.

**Key Takeaway 4: Resource reallocation is a must-win for successful intrapreneurship.**

*“How do we meet that increased demand for work in a much more agile way, in a much more effective and responsive way, when we are a typical big bureaucratic organization that spends an extraordinary amount of its budget on administration?”*

*“UN Agencies were not designed to focus on innovation. We are not a venture capital and our rules and regulations are not built for that. When you want to start to infuse a innovation culture, the question is how do you use the existing infrastructure that you have.”*

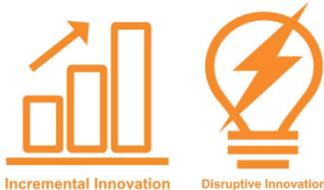
Organizations across the board are shifting their resources to focus on becoming more end-user driven despite acknowledging that innovation is expensive and not all initiatives will succeed. The consensus is that this shift needs to be led from the top but pushed from the bottom. The result is a fundamental change not only in resource allocation, but also in the cultural fabric and incentive system of the organization to give people time to work on their ideas.

Shift to innovative culture:  
**Led from top**



**Pushed by bottom**

**Key Takeaway 5: Disruptive innovations and incremental innovations require different structures and incentives.**



*“The most interesting innovation has almost been killed by the management. To the point that we have to protect it. Because it really challenges your strategy and organization. How the organization creates a parallel structure to protecting the innovation.”*

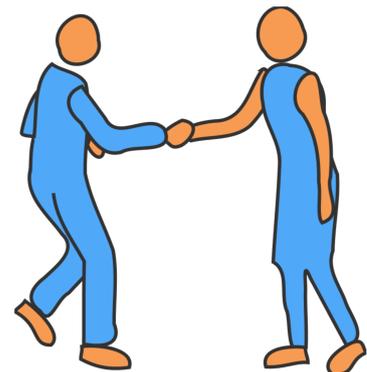
Alignment of innovative initiatives to the organization’s mission is critical, as is alignment with executives and teams innovators are trying to work with; however, the work of innovators is also to challenge status quo, seeking to transform the org and not just fit it. While both incremental and disruptive innovation are important, it is the (often accidental) disruptive innovation that makes the greatest change to the organization. The two require differently structures in the organization. Some IOs are moving away from defining innovation in thematic buckets and towards a general innovation model including incremental innovation while also leaving a part of the organization to work on radical ideas.

**Key Takeaway 6: Building sustainable partnerships is essential to acquire the necessary knowledge, resources, talent, and tools for developing innovative initiatives.**

*“[...] That is not a sustainable model. Nor is the model where we all do things in parallel. I have seen so many of the exact same initiative happening across different organizations. The space between the entities is as important as the entities themselves, and the culture within those entities of course will make that that happens. But it’s really that ecosystem, in a local context, as well as in a broader context. “*

*“So that we’re not running the same projects across organizations, failing in the same ways, and not moving forward.”*

Many organizations have found that partnerships are everything in innovation. Yet, the knowledge on how to make partnerships work is still scarce. The biggest impact comes from working together not just with the private sector but with other organizations. The idea is to let people experiment, create pilots, and either succeed or fail – all while learning from both scenarios and sharing the experiences throughout the ecosystem.



## Research Insights

### Background

While IOs are embracing innovation, many still struggle to inspire intrapreneurial behavior.

This research initiative aims to:

- Determine **which factors help intrapreneurship thrive in IOs**
- Help IOs **learn from each other to implement best practices**

The journey of an innovative initiative (product, process, or policy) can be split into three phases:

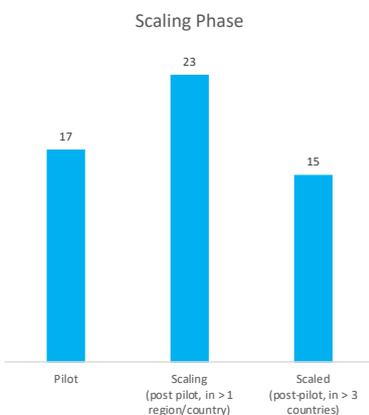
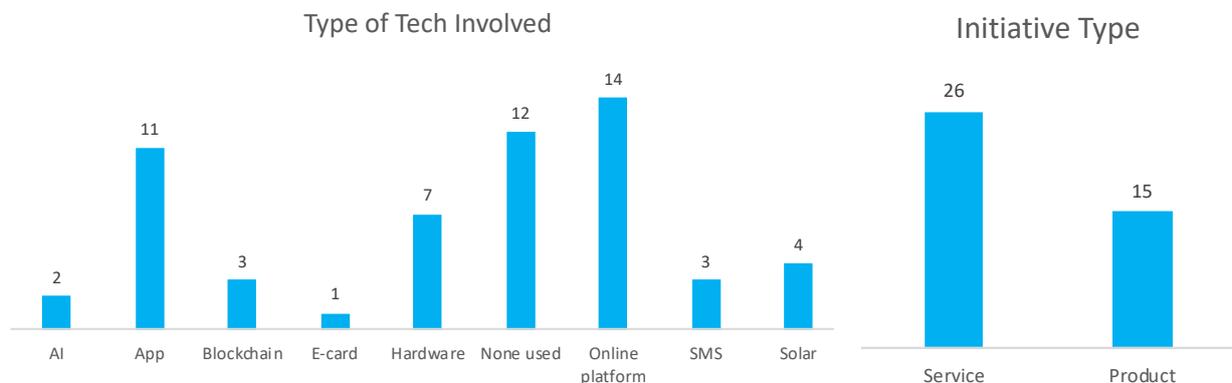


Analyzing innovation at the initiative level allows us to compare similar units (all IOs have initiatives!) across organizations. We are particularly focusing on initiatives that are:

- **Bottom up** – innovation arises from field staff / field office
- **Scaling** – innovation is in scaling phase and has successfully completed a pilot
- **Delivering social impact** – innovation is achieving desired outcomes in the field

### Initial results

We have conducted 25 interviews across 15 IOs. Current database contains 57 initiatives with the following demographics:



While all IOs are different, we found certain overarching themes in successful initiatives:

- Strong idea champion
- Buy-in at executive level at HQ
- HQ support with resource allocation
- Fit with IOs particular mandate
- Clear goals and metrics in place to measure outcomes

For more information on our research and future events, please contact [smsomerville@iomba.ch](mailto:smsomerville@iomba.ch) or [Katherine.tatarinov@unige.ch](mailto:Katherine.tatarinov@unige.ch).