

Organizing Innovation in International Organizations: From Volunteer Labs to Idea Vaults

Hosted by: Prof. Dr. Tina C. Ambos (UNIGE) and Katherine Milligan (Social Entrepreneurship Expert)
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Thank you again for attending the workshop last week and we are pleased to share the key insights below. We look forward to any feedback or comments and hope to see you soon!

“Sometimes we need to accept to put a little bit of chaos and instability back in our jobs.”

Insights on organizing innovation from UNOG’s Corinne Momal-Vanian:

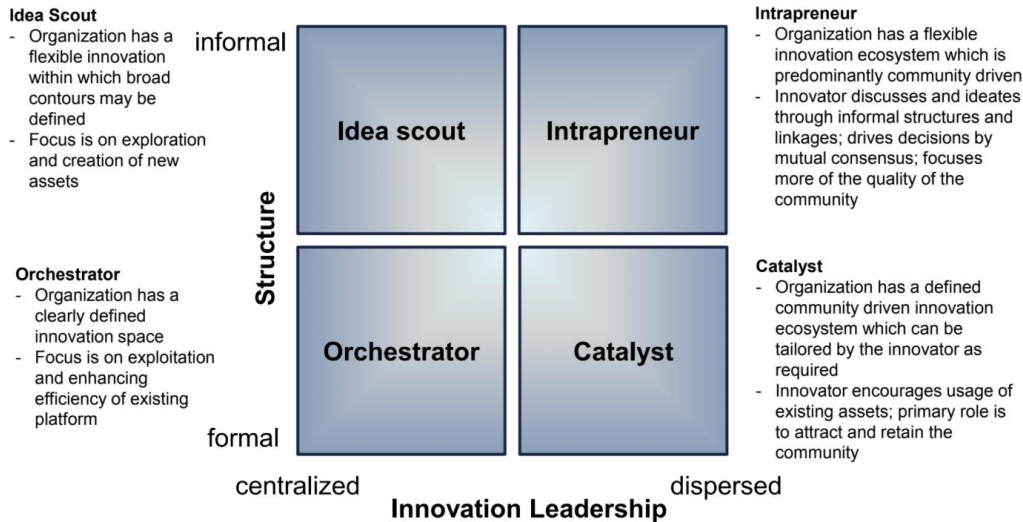
1. **Strong drive from the top:** role modeling from the top to do things differently inspires the whole organization
2. **Break the hierarchy and structures:** hierarchy and structures have the potential to stifle ideas; innovation is facilitated by people from different parts of the organization; they need to be heard
3. **Partner with external actors:** partnering with external actors is key in order to widen scope and share strengths
4. **The two faces of innovation:** innovation is not just finding a solution to a problem we already know about but also a solution to a problem that still needs to be discovered; sometimes seeing a solution in action inspires creativity to enhance our work even before we identified that a problem existed.
5. **Allocation of time and resources:** innovation is not just about IT and digital solutions but also the way we work, requiring deep thought and collaborative work
6. **Demystify innovation:** resistances and criticism from those not doing innovation are always there but once people see that innovation is not just for the young or the tech savvy, they will be more open
7. **Timing is key:** Finding the right balance between incubating ideas in small working groups and outreach to the broader community is key; Often the wider audience will be more engaged once a prototype is available to demonstrate the concept

Insights on organizing innovation from UNAIDS’ Pradeep Kakkattil:

1. **Lead from behind:** be the enabler for others to really shine; rather than taking up space as an office of innovation, create space for others to propel their ideas to fruition
2. **Institutional identity is not to be forgotten:** when getting started, you need put at the core of the process your own mandate and internal identity. Play to your own strengths
3. **Play the function of the challenger:** revamp the way people see innovation internally
4. **Planning and setting expected outcomes is a killer:** it is important to start looking at what you have done so far and not just having in mind the expected outputs; we need to have a broad direction without following specific indicators, the journey towards innovation requires continuous adjustments.

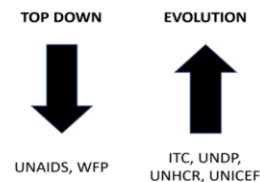
Insights from the iZi Hub Research:

Organizing innovation is a complex task. Most organizations are overwhelmed with the question “where to start” and “how to prioritize” their innovation efforts. Our research identified the key **organizing principles** and **patterns emerging** from organizations as they move along their **innovation journeys**. Innovation structures can be both formal and informal; while the innovation leadership can be centralized within the HQ in a team or dispersed throughout the country offices of an organization. Innovators or Units may play multiple of these roles, but it is important to be conscious of their different enabling criteria and strengths:



Our in-depth study of six cases, showed that innovation structures have evolved differently: Some **were driven from the top** while others emerged in an **evolutionary fashion**, either through the passionate bottom-up push of teams or individual innovation champions. Many started out as **volunteer labs**, with only ITC maintaining such a structure over time as others have moved towards **mandated innovation roles**.

Top Down vs Evolutionary



Volunteer vs Mandated



Initiative Level



- Applicable in many locations
- Defined goals from start
- Diverse partners
- Linked to IOs mandate
- Simple with visible impact
- Strong project owner
- User-driven, human-centered

Organization Level

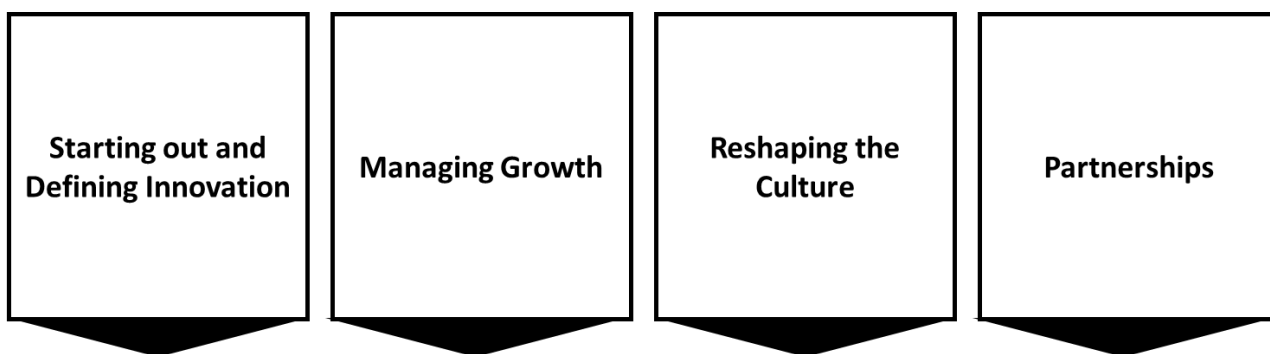


- Adequate financing
- Alignment to strategic objective
- Culture of trust and transparency
- Dedicated team or staff time
- Executive and key stakeholder buy-in for innovation

Linking initiatives to structures: initiatives can scale and deliver impact only if the organization has processes providing for **strategic preparedness and cultural acceptance** of innovation.

The Innovation structure acts as a bridge between the strategic implementation and culture change – effectively acting as change managers and innovation facilitators within the organization.

From the round table discussions: Four emerging themes for key challenges to organizing innovation



- Focus on questions rather than solutions
- Map the process of what is already happening in the organization
- Prioritize the initiatives

- Monitoring capabilities and timing
- Dealing with increased attention
- Maintaining agility throughout the growth process
- Harnessing buy-in across the organization
- Becoming sustainable in access to funding, resources and interest

- Balancing the team space and the individual
- Harmonizing methodologies and data to fully exploit the potential of the network.
- Overcoming institutional and bureaucratic hurdles by identifying the points of resistance
- Bringing the leadership on-board to prioritize strategy and funding for innovation

- Bring experts in the room so to turn ideas into process: the lack of ability to make change potentially discourages individuals.

Looking forward together: solutions to these challenges lie in our network as we iterate along our innovation journeys. “We are on this journey together!”

Thank you to all the participants who were able to join us for this workshop:

Tina **Ambos** (UNIGE)

Corinne **Momal-Vanian** (UNOG)

Sarah **Bel** (UNDP)

Klas **Moldeus** (UN Water)

Ben **Simmons** (UNEP)

Mohammed **Ba** (ITU)

Olga **Algayerova** (UNECE)

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Lisa **Campbell** (UNOG)

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