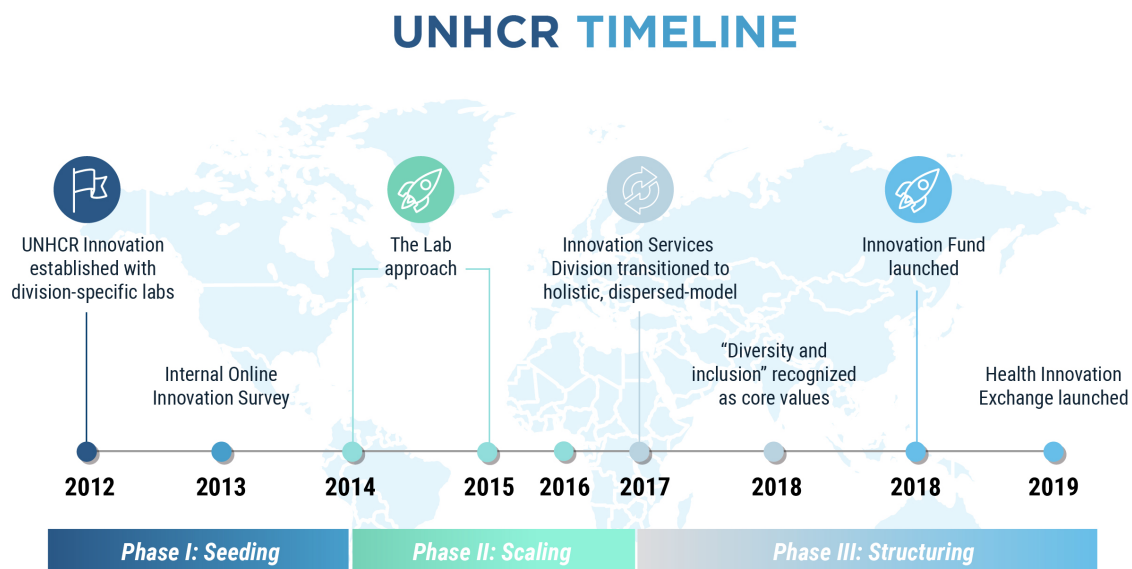


The United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR): UNHCR's Innovation Service

The United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) deploys nearly USD 4.5 million of member state contributions and private donations around the globe.¹ More than 15,000 staff drive UNHCR's mandate, which is "to safeguard the rights and well-being of refugees" by "saving lives, protecting rights and building a better future for refugees, forcibly displaced communities and stateless people." UNHCR's more than 900 partnerships "underpin UNHCR's engagement in inter-agency fora and processes, where mutual understanding and strong alliances help ensure that refugees, IDPs and stateless persons are adequately prioritized."²

The Organizational Innovation Journey



Phase I: Seeding

The Innovation Service (initially called the Innovation Unit) was established as an inter-divisional unit in 2012. At that time, the former UNHCR's High Commissioner, current UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, was interested in creating a space that could capture, harness and reward innovation within the organization. A small team was established with the aim of better understanding the sense of innovation at UNHCR and how innovation could be spread to the entire organization. The team consisted of four people including Chris Earney, who had been a Programme Officer at UNHCR for six years, and Olivier Delarue, who was previously the Head of International Corporate Partnerships and IKEA Foundation partnership founder and manager. The Innovation Service originally fundraised for its activities but over the course of its existence at UNHCR, the Innovation Service also began receiving core funding from the organization and investments from governments such as Belgium and Luxembourg.

¹ <http://reporting.unhcr.org/financial>

² <https://www.unhcr.org/partnerships.html>

The Innovation Service has gone through multiple evolutions as the team's understanding of innovation and its role in the organization has changed. If this were to be broken up into phases, the first phase, from 2012 to 2014, of the strategy, was painted very broadly and ambitiously with many goals set, including: funding and supporting innovation projects, a coordination group, thematically focused innovation "labs," private sector partnerships, a UNHCR Innovation Fellows network, and field centers for innovation. But the capacity of the team was stretched and not everything could be accomplished at once. By not being able to accomplish everything the team wanted to do right away gave the team its "first taste of failure," described Chris Earney, Deputy, of UNHCR's Innovation Service. Chris explains the development of the strategy into one that would start to shape the direction of UNHCR's Innovation Service:

From there, the founding members of what would eventually become the UNHCR Innovation Unit reworked the roadmap to adopt a more organically flowing one geared towards understanding what innovation in UNHCR truly meant. As with all innovation initiatives, they wanted to understand what the real challenges for driving innovation into all corners of the organization actually were. They started working closely with field operations in Southeast Ethiopia and the Middle East, in which the initiative's efforts mainly focused on working on innovative projects that the working group and field operations came up with, most of which failed. At the same time, the team started to put other structures in place, which included the Innovation Fellowship, a project-focused initiative that emphasized the value of a single innovator within an organization that has always been innovating, but not necessarily fostering it.

The Innovation Fellowship Programme focused on building UNHCR staff/affiliate's innovation skills and competencies in addition to supporting them to facilitate innovation with colleagues, partners, and refugees in their own operations and divisions. Over the course of the year, Innovation Fellows learn and use innovation methods, tools, and embed new approaches to complex organizational problems. They focus on problem-solving, ideation, and experimenting solutions to real-life challenges in the field or at Headquarters. They are the organization's ambassadors for innovation and lasting positive change.

The Fellowship is grounded in the idea that to have sustainable innovation you need to focus on mindset change and culture – to make innovation more accessible. "We believe the only way to achieve this is to change individual behaviors at all levels of the organization," explained Lauren Parater, Innovation Officer (Strategic Communications) at the Innovation Service. The programme encourages continuous learning, challenging assumptions, and perspectives, the value of collaboration and openness for failure and risk-taking. It is a mindset that leads staff to question if there is a better way of working, communicating, and thinking.

Phase II: Scaling

In the first phase, the focus of Innovation Service sought to invest in private sector partnerships and new collaborations that were primarily product or project focused. The objective was to learn from the private sector and bring new skills and knowledge into UNHCR's structure. In the second phase, this approach led to the

creation of thematic Innovation Labs and strong partnerships with the Vodafone Foundation, the UPS Foundation, the IKEA Foundation and others. The objective of the labs was to identify thematic challenges within the organization that needed an innovation focus. Initially, the Innovation Services team managed various innovation labs that were connected to specific divisions within UNHCR (for example, the Learn Lab – a joint venture of the Innovation team and the Education unit). Such an approach enabled the Innovation Service team to establish in-depth relationships with other units in the organization. As Chris explains:

This was an attempt at emphasizing both the project-driven and partnership-focused framework of the UNHCR Innovation Unit at the time, and it came out of the need to address the larger communication problem within UNHCR within in-house units, especially as it pertains to how people perceived UNHCR Innovation's role. There was initially a lack of collaboration between in-house units and the Innovation Unit at the time, as there was a perception that UNHCR Innovation was competing with other in-house units, as opposed to providing grounds for support.

But challenges arose with the lab model as the labs were too product centered and single minded on their particular thematic topic. Multiple challenges became hard to address and labs became siloed resulting in the strategy moving away from the lab approach by the end of 2016.³

Phase III: Structuring

By 2017, UNHCR's Innovation Service moved towards a more holistic model to support the organization (a systemic and multifunctional approach). This included changing the name from "Innovation Unit" to today's "Innovation Service," which was a signal that a director level individual had been employed to lead the team, but also showcased the role of team as a service for UNHCR staff to support innovation in the field and at Headquarters and to change the narrative around who gets to innovate in UNHCR. The aim was to nurture innovation already present within the various divisions, operations and teams that make up UNHCR.

This third phase saw a push towards interdisciplinary teams working together on innovation as the Innovation Service switched focus from innovative products to innovative people. It was no longer only about the ideas, but about further strengthening the process of innovation. Such a model enabled the organization to better understand the complexity of the challenges they were facing and how these challenges were linked/interacted with each other. While the Innovation Service team remained strong and has a dedicated office at headquarters in Geneva, the team equally focused on equipping field staff and offices to understand and apply innovation principles independently.

In 2018, UNHCR Innovation continued the transformation process started in 2017. Pivotal to this transformation has been recognizing and embracing "diversity and inclusion" as core values and area of work. In this context of change, 2019 can be considered as a cornerstone year for UNHCR Innovation Service. To this end, UNHCR identified three strategic priorities for current and future work.

- *Competency and capacity building* - In order to make innovation sustainable, it is necessary to ensure inclusiveness and diversity in the process: "We will step up efforts to foster an inclusive working

³ <https://medium.com/unhcr-innovation-service/our-innovation-labs-are-dead-long-live-innovation-865268675185>



environment and a respectful workplace where innovative thought is encouraged, and diversity is valued as a strong asset.”

- *Transformation for scale* – It is important to understand what is working and why in order to scale such approaches and ways of working to different parts of the organization: “Transformational changes are needed from within our bureaucracies to scale up, to scale out, to increase value in what we’re doing, to scale the process of scaling, to make innovations more successful for more people.”
- *Future thinking* – Our world is in a continuous process of change. UNHCR recognizes the need to take action and invest now for challenges that can emerge in the coming years and decades. In this way the organization would place itself in a better position in order to face future challenges and crises in the most efficient way possible: “Whilst we can’t predict the future, we can prepare for it – by ensuring that our organization can be agile and flexible enough to creatively respond to the possibilities that might arise.

Currently, the Innovation Service’s team (composed of thirteen people across three offices – Geneva, Budapest, and Nairobi with one more being hired in Panama) work both to build competencies and innovation skillsets, as well as strengthening innovation efforts in HQ related functions, such as HR, finance and administration. The Service supports UNHCR operations based on the defined challenge. Assistance can be provided for capacity building on innovation methodologies, to supporting experimentation as well as to capturing promising practices on innovation. Initiatives the team is working on cover focus areas such as artificial intelligence and machine learning, innovating around institutional challenges, connecting refugee populations, public-interest communication, and communicating with communities - all with a focus on changing behaviors or mindsets for how the organization solves problems.

The Innovation Service also opened the second iteration of UNHCR’s Innovation Fund of 1 million USD. The objective of the Fund is to provide a safe budgetary space for colleagues to experiment with new ideas and test assumptions around a project within their team. Beyond financing and ideation support, the Fund also provided mentorship and community building capabilities to those teams involved. Contributions needed to fit into the four thematic areas of: data and artificial intelligence; inclusive intelligence; simulation and modeling; and storytelling and culture. The Innovation Fund also took a team approach, where diverse teams were necessary to apply.

The Innovation Service prioritizes thought leadership across innovation in IOs, publishing several articles a month highlighting learnings from innovation processes, projects, and efforts across UNHCR’s global footprint. Communication has been an essential tool enabling innovation to flourish and to change behaviors and mindsets. As Lauren Parater, explains “The team is also experimenting with public interest communication as their main means of communication, which applies a science-driven framework and approach to better understand UNHCR’s function in the humanitarian field, drive innovation more quickly, and create behavioral and cultural change. To date, a big part of the innovative work UNHCR is pursuing is based on communication. For example, in the past couple of years, through techniques such as storytelling, a lot of efforts have been put



in challenging master narratives around innovation (e.g. that innovation is not just about technology and male individuals) and refugees.” A key principle behind the team is that everyone is a communicator and has a role to play in influencing how the organization communicates and shares stories of innovation.

Challenges and looking forward

The evolution of the Innovation Service team at UNHCR is one characterized by constant creation, testing, and experimentation - focusing on how to best create value for the organization and refugees. UNHCR has been a champion of learning from mistakes and consistently reiterating solutions to ensure they are effective across the organization. Some of the key success factors that have affected the stability of the team include hiring people from outside the organization and creating an identity that is very much a part of UNHCR but keen to challenge the status quo. Some of the key challenges that the team has faced involved creating a broader understanding of innovation and how the Innovation Service could help facilitate change in the organization. There have been few “short-term” wins in the process but after over seven years in existence the Innovation Service has seen that long-term vision is key and many of the seeds planted through initiatives such as the Innovation Fellowship Programme are showing visible effects on the organization.