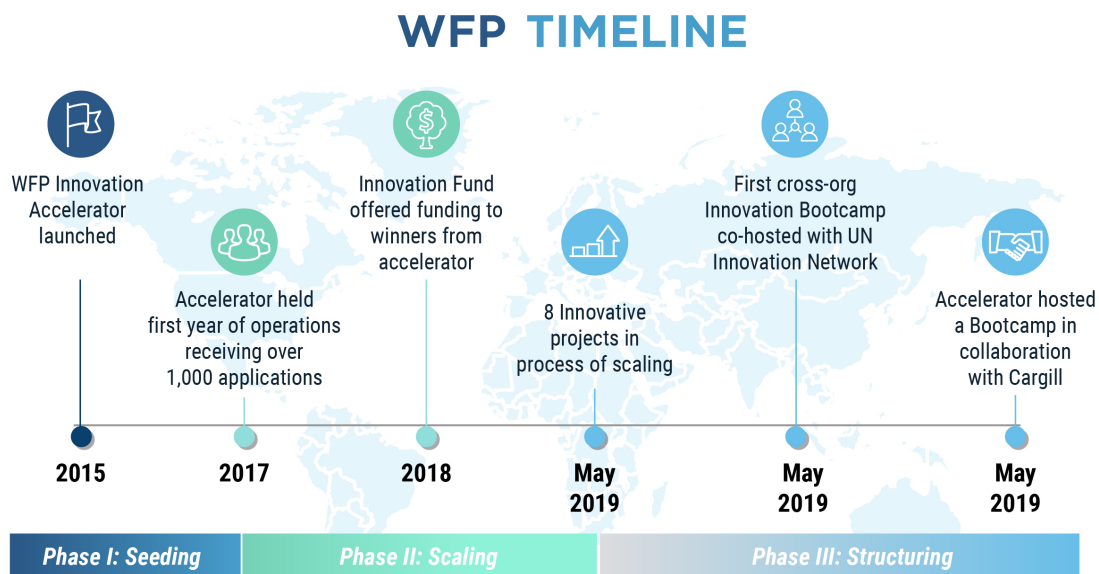




World Food Programme (WFP): WFP Innovation Accelerator

World Food Programme (WFP) is the leading humanitarian organization saving lives and changing lives, delivering food assistance in emergencies and working with communities to improve nutrition and build resilience, as a part of the United Nations. WFP assists over 86 million people in around 83 countries each year, and is funded entirely by voluntary donations. In 2018, WFP raised a record USD 7.2 billion, and has more than 17,000 staff worldwide. The agency has a robust corporate partnership strategy and works closely with other UN agencies, private partners, NGOs, and governments to deliver food aid and implement policies around effective and sustainable development.

The Organizational Innovation Journey



Phase I: Seeding

WFP launched its Innovation Accelerator in 2015 “as a platform to identify new ideas and approaches and nurture them into global solutions.”¹ The initial goals were to strengthen an innovative culture throughout WFP and to forge better connections with private, public, and academic sectors. There was initial support from both the Executive level as well as from within the operational arm of the organization. The Accelerator started as a small team of five people including Bernhard Kowatsch, Head of Business Innovation at WFP for five years before founding the Accelerator, and Hila Cohen, who has a high-tech law background and three years’ experience as a Project Manager and Communication Consultant at WFP prior to the Accelerator. As Hila explained, “It was important that we had a diversified team which included one or two people who knew the

¹ WFP Innovation Accelerator Annual Report 2018.



organization and diverse internal processes and also team members with an entrepreneurial background, as implementing innovation is a craft. The key is to have people who can do anything.”

Hila shared that, “We had to do everything at the beginning. Including finding an office.” The goal was to find a city with a sound ecosystem of good universities, big companies, while also being accessible. With initial funding from the German Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, the German Federal Foreign Office and the State of Bavaria, the Accelerator established its headquarters in Munich in large part due to the city’s strategic location as a tech center with a strong innovation ecosystem. The WFP Innovation Accelerator is a part of the Innovation & Change Management Division, which is based at WFP’s global headquarters in Rome.

The Accelerator created a ‘five pillar’ structure to push innovative ideas through to implementation:

1. Thought leadership to share learnings across the international organization ecosystem and beyond on successful innovations;
2. Innovation sourcing through online applications (for-profit start-ups, NGO start-ups, companies/NGOs/UN, WFP team), active sourcing (targeted startup outreach), and innovation challenges dedicated to WFP innovation challenges as well as challenges with external partners) to source creative ideas across the globe;
3. Innovation bootcamps to develop some of the most promising ideas;
4. Sprint programs to execute the developed ideas;
5. Innovation fund to scale the best ideas across WFP’s areas of work.

Phase II: Scaling

The Accelerator has received over 4,000 innovation applications since its inception, including 1,700 in 2018. The innovations supported by the Accelerator for scaling reached over 763,000 people directly in 2018 – a nearly 107 percent increase from 2017. Over USD 35 million was raised to support the same projects.² In 2018, the Accelerator hosted five bootcamps in Munich and brought in over 100 international organizations, including UN agencies, start-ups, foundations and corporates including the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Singularity University, XPrize, Cargill, German Aerospace Center (DLR), UnternehmerTUM, USAID and DFID Innovation teams.

Part of the WFP Accelerator’s goal is to bridge the gap between the worlds of startups and humanitarian aid. As part of solving the challenge of bringing these together, WFP’s Innovation Accelerator launched either innovation hubs or identified regions of focus in Tanzania, Lebanon and Kenya in 2017, in order to create spaces for testing and iterating projects in the field.

Phase III: Structuring

Projects are selected on the basis of six evaluation criteria: the level of innovation, the potential impact the idea could have if it is scaled, the strength of the team, the presence of any methods that potentially allow scaling, to

² WFP Innovation Accelerator Annual Report 2018



what extent the project fits WFP's corporate strategy, and if the project is generally inclusive. As Hila explained, "Ideas need to be core to WFP work."

For ideas that successfully passed through the innovation sourcing phase, the Accelerator holds five-day "Innovation Bootcamps" to refine the project ideas and match the context to the reality on the ground, especially if the idea came from outside of WFP. WFP has also brought in private sector experts to advise and coach attendees.

Selected teams may advance to a 3-6 month Sprint Programme, which enables projects to prepare to receive and implement funding. In such programmes, selected teams were asked to apply human-centered design and lean startup methodologies, two of WFP's innovation principles. Chosen teams from this programme receive up to USD 100K in funding, as well as the opportunity to work directly with WFP staff to implement the initiative on the ground, and reach a proof of concept or develop prototypes ready for implementation. Teams receive financial support, guidance and space to bring their solutions to life, and access to WFP's global network of partners and resources. As Hila explained, "The goal was to take these innovations and make them operational for WFP."

A passion and focus for the Accelerator from the beginning has been the use of frontier technologies to support innovation. The WFP Innovation team, however, has stressed this as a reminder that not every innovation has to be 'high-tech' – technology and innovation are different concepts, and in many of the locations where WFP works, high-technology solutions are not always practical. Currently, the Accelerator team counts more than 30 people, with a mix of a private sector startup background or having worked in innovation teams of private sector entities and a mix of team members with on-the-ground humanitarian field experience, including fostering innovation in developing countries.

As of spring 2019, the Accelerator was in process of scaling eight innovative projects through three main channels:

1. By embedding the initiatives into WFP core processes;
2. By scaling country to country through WFP field offices;
3. Through tapping into 'innovation hubs'.

All three methods have involved on-the-ground collaborations with various stakeholders, tapping into WFP's passion for implementing innovation through partnerships. Scale-up and WFP Country Office and Divisional buy-in were key activities for the Accelerator. Bernhard told us, "Scale is why we exist." But often this was also the more difficult part of the work. As Hila explained, "We thought innovation would scale automatically but it does not work that way. Each context is different." The Accelerator has worked in the field with WFP Country Offices to localize the initiatives and operationalize them to the specific needs. As Hila describes, "The exit for us is either when the innovation is adopted at the corporate level, is spin-off, or becomes funded."

The eight scale-up projects to date include:

- *Building Blocks*: deployment of blockchain to make cash transfers faster, cheaper and more secure;



- *Farm to Market Alliance*: making markets work better for smallholder farmers by partnering with different stakeholders;
- *H2Grow*: soilless hydroponic solutions in emergency and development contexts;
- *Scope Coda*: seeking to bring a data revolution to improve the nutritional and health outcomes;
- *EMPACT (formerly Tech for Food)*: connecting young adults affected by conflict to income opportunities in the global digital economy;
- *Dalili*: tool supporting WFP cash-based transfers by providing all key retail information to recipients;
- *ShareTheMeal*: enabling donation with few taps on the smartphone;
- *Post-Harvest Losses (PHL)*: enabling farming families to drastically reduce post-harvest losses.

In total, over USD 69 million was raised by the eight initiatives scaled through the Accelerator. By spring 2019, the Accelerator had hosted 120 teams and 16 bootcamps (with 8-12 teams per bootcamp and 3-4 people per team). Total number of applications received over the lifetime of the Accelerator by spring 2019 was over 4,000, including internal and external applications.

The fourth pillar of the Accelerator, thought leadership, focuses on assisting WFP staff to integrate concepts of human-centered design (design and test starting with the end user) and lean startup (iterative experimentation) into their regular work streams. The goal is to identify and leverage game-changing trends for products or services through collaborations (e.g. Singularity University, XPrize, Initiative for Applied Artificial Intelligence, Google Launchpad, etc.). The Accelerator regularly publishes blogs and articles around topics relevant to the innovative design process and disruptive innovations regarding solutions for ending global hunger.

In March 2019, the Accelerator co-hosted with UN Innovation Network the first interagency Innovation Bootcamp. The bootcamp brought together teams from eleven different UN Entities for a weeklong bootcamp in the Accelerator's office in Munich. Each team was mentored throughout the process by an expert from within the Accelerator, and the week culminated with a high-energy three-minute pitch from each team. The goal was to catalyze projects across the UN through training and networking. The event not only showcased the Accelerator's expertise as a host of Bootcamps and Sprint events, but also highlighted the potential for the Accelerator to leverage its knowledge to help the UN ecosystem achieve the Sustainable Development Goals.³

Challenges and looking forward

While many innovation structures can often be challenged by the rules of any organization, the Innovation Accelerator saw the structures and processes of the WFP not as something that needed to be circumvented, but rather something that could be used to achieve their collective goals, especially the shared purpose of tackling SDG2 - Zero Hunger. As Hila explains, "First, we are part of the organization. That means that you need to talk to all the units to get buy-in. For this, you must stay patient and optimistic and explain exactly 'the what' and 'the why.' People need to see the value you are bringing to the organization and how your model fits the organization's greater goals." The team strongly believed in showing their results at all activity levels: bootcamp level, project level, innovation challenge level. The goal for the Accelerator was to continue reinforcing its position as an innovation facilitator within the World Food Programme through showcasing their results and

³ <https://innovation.wfp.org/blog/how-un-innovation-network-seeks-acceleratesdgs-innovation>



bridging the divide to start partnering with other organizations, using their innovation expertise to help the greater UN ecosystem achieve the SDGs.