

START NETWORK

# Local culture and everyday practice

## REFLECTIONS ON ETHICAL ISSUES EXPERIENCED BY DEPP LABS: PART 2

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# INTRODUCTION

This reflection piece by Kristin Bergtora Sandvik is the second in a three-part series that explore ethics questions faced by community-centred innovation labs. It is based on her experience as an ethics advisor to DEPP Innovation Labs, a two-year programme that manages labs in four disaster-prone countries (Bangladesh, Jordan, Kenya and Philippines). It looks at translating innovation 'culture' into local culture, and innovation ethics into 'everyday' practice.

## COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND CULTURAL CHALLENGES

One of the central questions for humanitarian innovation is what it means to 'localise' the innovation agenda beyond simply funding innovation structures in the field. Community engagement in the innovation context faces potentials and pitfalls that are similar in some ways to traditional aid encounters but that diverge from them in others.

For example, in contrast to traditional aid schemes, innovation labs engage in highly structured processes of 'selection' and 'deselection' of innovations – and with them, a highly visible processes of 'defunding'. How is this negotiated in the local context?

In the DEPP Labs programme, this was understood as a dual process of translation and adaptation: making a concept or a process both culturally and socially meaningful in the local context. Local labs began to work with the rationalities, programme tools and vocabularies of 'Silicon Valley' style innovation approaches , then went through a process of adopting, resisting, mediating or transforming them. The way they conceptualised problems and framed ethics issues also changed dynamically over time.

My first reflection piece focused on how labs dealt with choosing innovators, and their struggle to clarify the scope of community engagement. In this piece, I will reflect on some of the ethics challenges identified by the four DEPP Labs midway into their work. My reflections are based on a project workshop in Nepal in June 2018, preparatory communications for this workshop and the workshop report 'DEPPS Innovation Labs, All Hands Workshop Outputs 19–21 June 2018'.

At this mid-stage in the project cycle, each labs had taken a very different path: the ethical challenges faced by each lab were linked to the way their innovation cycle mapped onto the local cultural context. However, conversation between the labs also reveals that many of the challenges are similar.

I look at two clusters of ethics issues that the labs struggle with, and how they go about addressing them. The first pertains to the translation and 'localising' of concepts; the second to management as an antidote to failure. All viewpoints are my own.

# TRANSLATION AND MEANING-MAKING IN THE LOCAL CONTEXT

## FROM SILICON VALLEY TO LOCAL EMERGENCIES

The innovation toolbox was developed in a very different environment to that in which the DEPP Labs are operating. Concepts and frameworks that originated in Silicon Valley or Geneva need to be adapted for other cultural contexts – reshaped to regional, national or local norms, institutions, meanings and practices. This raises several questions.

How should tools such as '7 mindsets', 'incubation' and 'design sprints' be appropriated, resisted or re-invented?

What does 'innovation' as a sectoral buzzword mean for people who naturally innovate and adapt?

Is the concept of 'fail fast' legitimate in an emergency/disaster setting?

And how do these dilemmas correspond to the reverse need – to adapt innovation methodologies so that they take up the traditional humanitarian vocabulary of 'doing no harm', and the principles of being neutral and impartial?

## SELECTION ENTAILS EXCLUSION

An important issue is that of dealing with innovators who did not get through the selection process. Some of the most difficult issues faced in relation to the innovation teams have been innovators questioning the fairness of the selection process, demanding compensation for time and efforts invested and potentially threatening the lab's relationship with the community.

To address this challenge, some of the labs have chosen to make 'de-selection' a formalised and visible part of the innovation cycle. After a bootcamp, teams and individuals were selected, or deselected, based on established criteria, before the capacity-building and development phase could begin. Eventually, a set of successful candidates who move on to incubators were selected. Deselection took place for a variety of reason, for example that the presented idea was not innovation or not preparedness, or that the idea was good but didn't fit.

## WHAT CREATES AND CHALLENGES MOTIVATION?

A classic point of contention in aid projects concerns the role of motivation. A member of the Bangladesh lab (Udhvabani) noted that motivation remained problematic because innovators struggled to recognise their work as innovation. Translation into local languages is sometimes literal translation, but ownership and motivation is greater when the innovation process is explained and framed in a language used by the community in their daily life. However, the Philippines lab (Tuklas) found that some innovators were actually motivated by learning English, as a way to develop their professional skills.

The issue of motivation was also intrinsically connected to renumeration. The Kenya lab (Maarifa Kona) observed that, although the innovation labs were going to be community driven, stipends were crucial. Both the Kenya lab (Maarifa Kona) and the Jordan lab (Mahali) experimented with labelling financial support for innovators in a way that would enhance motivation and acknowledge the nature of the effort ('work') and provide some security in a risky venture, while avoiding creating expectations of 'employment'.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF TALKING ABOUT FAILURE

'Failing fast' is a staple of the innovation vocabulary. All projects identified the need to be clear in advance about how the process would work, and the potential for funding being removed, so that expectations were clear. At the same time, all labs noted that there were cultural restrictions on 'admitting failure' or assigning failure. This meant that making 'failure-talk' possible became an important translation activity.

As a mitigating strategy, the Jordan lab (Mahali) embarked on what they describe as 'celebrating failure' by encouraging their innovation teams to design their own learning from failure rituals.

In a parallel move, the Philippines lab (Tuklas) – which at this mid-point in the programme cycle juggled 40 innovation teams— decided to set up a committee for identifying unsuccessful innovations, in order to formalise the process. Having put a lot of thought into not breaking relationships, the importance of honesty around failure and pitching a conceptualisation of failure as 'an opportunity to try again', the lab judged it fair to remove funding after showing ideas to the whole community and soliciting their feedback.

This translation approach provides a clear and transparent picture of when 'projects have to end'. While this may entail some degrees of loss of face, this approach also acknowledged the trade-off with spending lots of money on projects which are not working, which is not ethical either.

# THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MANAGEMENT AND INNOVATION FAILURE

## AVOID THINGS THAT DON'T WORK

By this point in their lifespan, the labs had assembled lists of activities and messages that didn't work. and practices that would contribute to dysfunction. These included:

- not explaining innovation processes properly
- not clarifying ideas and expectations
- sending untrained researchers (the innovators) out into the community.

Misunderstandings and loss of motivation arose on the part of all stakeholders. These problems are familiar to any aid practitioner and community activist, but at least two aspects posed particular management problems: the requirements for short time frames and flat governance structures.

## BALANCING TIMEFRAMES AND CONTROL

The time pressure which is an integral feature of the innovation cycle – and the DEPP Labs – means that inconsistency of progress in labs can rapidly evolve into a 'death cycle'. The challenge for the labs is to judge why relationships between innovators, the labs and the community – and between innovators –become 'hard'. Failure might be caused by lack of clarity in communications, lack of lab support or support spread too thinly.

Importantly, the labs noted that judging too fast is an exercise of power. Time pressure can create exclusionary processes, where a team of innovators may suddenly be told that they are 'out' without really understanding why. Labs have given thought to the line between evaluating/monitoring and cutting off teams.

One response explored by the Kenya lab (Maarifa Kona) was been to change their own personal roles, to focus on individual mentoring. This enables labs to monitor progress and identify the challenges encountered by the innovators, but it also requires labs to continuously re-assess questions of ownership, their own involvement and the imperative to 'let go' that is foundational to the innovation process.

## LEADERSHIP AS PROBLEM SOLVING?

Discussions about these practical problems regularly entailed reflections on the nature of leadership –and lack thereof – in humanitarian innovation processes, and how this affects the management of the innovators and the realisation of project objectives.

Leadership in its formalised form is a function that is not seen as 'natural in innovation', because having someone in a leadership role may inhibit innovation from other team members. Leadership training is avoided, as it would 'inject power into the process'. However, several labs noted that, culturally, older males will inevitably feel themselves called to fulfil a leadership function. This suggested a need for a more formalised way of managing innovators and structuring power.

Designating a leader would serve as a management tool for the labs. The Kenya lab (Maarifa Kona) experimented with 'founders' who would be given formalised responsibilities, and one lab member suggested the technical term 'focal points' for these people.

The Jordan lab (Mahali) reflected that having a designated leader would serve as a management tool for them, as well as potentially breaking with cultural stereotypes about gender relations. However, they were unsure of what kind of decision-making power these leaders would have, and were concerned about the risk of inserting 'leaders' into the innovation process without fully understanding social relationships.

# FINAL REFLECTIONS

A lot of ethical questions do not have an easy answer. As observed by the Jordan lab (Mahali), there are 'things we didn't know we didn't know.' The labs invariably compete with many other projects and activities that participants engage in to help their community – and to survive. It is hard to have a whole team of people with difficult life circumstances pull together, because people drop out or participate less than planned for a number of reasons: they are resettled, they get married, they move their herds where it rains or when a natural disaster happens in the middle of prototyping.

The DEPP Lab teams are not always able to understand or correct problems. What they can do is to think about why exclusion happens and mitigate for the future.

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