

START NETWORK

Professionalisation, participation and relationships

REFLECTIONS ON ETHICAL ISSUES EXPERIENCED BY DEPP LABS: PART 3

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INTRODUCTION

This reflection piece by Kristin Bergtora Sandvik is the third 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. This piece is focused specifically on the Jordan lab (Mahali).

BACKGROUND

This article is based on my participation in a learning workshop facilitated by the Mahali lab in Amman (Jordan) in October 2018. It is based on my fieldnotes but also on 2017 and 2018 interim reports from the Mahali lab, pictures taken during the work11`shop to capture written output, and DEPP Labs project documents.

I consider some of the ethics questions that the lab was grappling with when reflecting on its previous two design sprints. This moment of reflection represented an important opportunity for the lab to 'fix things' and address ethics issues in its final innovation cycle, which began in late 2018. As before, all viewpoints are my own.

The Mahali lab recruited innovators from three Jordanian cities with substantial refugee populations: Amman, Irbid and Mafraq. Its programme has three separate, consecutive cycles, each ocusing on a topic (livelihoods, health, education) identified by refugee and host communities as priority issues. Each cycle includes a selection process that includes a hackathon, a bootcamp, a design sprint and finally the selection of successful innovators who move on to an incubator. During this process, the lab provides innovators with essential services and capacity building.

The lab is made up of a core of nine staff (from Jordan, Syria, Iraq and America), each with their own unique skill sets. It provides interns at various locations, a community committee, an external consultant, and judges for the design sprints and the pitches.

This reflection piece shows how the activities of the Mahali lab generate important ethical choices for those involved.

I look at how relationships produce ethics challenges, and I am also interested in how we think about the ethics of the steps the lab takes to mitigate its challenges, and the consequences of these steps. I then consider the measurement of success. Finally, I ask whether a culture of control is overtaking humanitarian innovation.

RELATIONSHIPS AS A HUMANITARIAN ETHICS CHALLENGE

The Mahali lab has grappled with three parallel sets of relationships: within the lab team, between the innovators and the lab team, and between the innovators and the community.

Relationships within the lab team

Resource issues

The first circle of relationships concerns humanitarian innovation as professional space, and how we balance culture and ethics. Anecdotally, innovation management appears to be a particularly labour-intensive form of humanitarian work. The Mahali lab has observed that running an innovation programme entails a great deal of innovation in programming as well as in project implementation. One of the workshop participants noted: 'I see Mahali as a black hole in a good way... we are pulling a lot of resources into this space.' Staff wellness thus comes high on the list of managerial responsibility.

Professionalisation

As the Mahali lab evolved, it raised questions about the meaning of professionalisation. Members noted that they had been on a trajectory from a typical 'business' approach to behaving more like traditional aid workers. As the lab adopted a 'more professional' NGO culture, there was less playing and 'no more paintballing'.

This development raises interesting questions about what it means to be 'professional' in the innovation environment and raises ethical issues around both public perception and institutional culture. For example, if we adapt innovation processes to fit with humanitarian culture, does this ethically require (or is it perceived to require?) that we remove 'frivolous' elements of innovation culture that are considered vital in the commercial space (such as paintballing to produce bonding or creativity)? Should we eliminate any non-essential costs? Or is this adaptation a natural and necessary evolution as humanitarians engage in community-based innovation work with communities in crisis?

Relationships within the lab team

Many of the problems faced by the Mahali lab are identical to those faced by traditional development and aid projects. Yet the innovation context engenders a particular set of dilemmas to identify and reflect on.

Ownership

During the Mahali lab's innovation learning journey, it became clear that calibrating the relationship between the lab and the innovators is challenging. If not done properly, the classic

problem of 'token participation' in development aid risks being reborn as 'token innovation'. In the self-evaluation, lab team members astutely observed that:

> "Mahali has to let go in order to ensure that teams are accountable, but that creates a risk of solutions not developing on track, or at the speed needed for the sprint. However, the more intervention the Mahali does, the less the [innovation] team has the space to chart their own course and take accountability."

This points to the question of ownership as central to everyday ethics considerations, because it triggers a range of priorities and organisational choices.

During the workshop, the lab team passionately discussed whose ownership matters and what fear of failure really refers to. They were aware that they needed to set limits on their own interventions and reflected carefully on when they remove decision-making power from the innovators, a move which could prevent community innovators from crafting their own solutions.

They noted that cycles had to be completed within very compressed time frames, and this was a challenge. 'Innovation' differs from development in the sense that it is a highly structured process with pre-determined time slots for each activity. For the lab members it sometimes appeared that there was not enough time not to try to take over: not 'fail fast' but 'too fast to fail'.

Participation

A humanitarian ethics approach requires investment in participatory processes. However, participation is demanding, resource-intensive and not always successful. The lab team noted that 'ideas are not hard to get' but that the harder question is 'how do we bring in someone from a marginalised background?' and 'how come innovators are not innovating anyway?'

Barriers to innovation

It is a significant challenge for a lab to correctly identify the barriers that stop marginalised and vulnerable communities from being able to develop or scale their ideas outside of labs and to mitigate these barriers. It must be emphasised that humanitarian innovation in this context presents itself as a deeply structured, even scientific, process. This is very different from innovation 'in the wild', and contrary to any notion of innovation as something that 'just naturally happens'. Thus, it's clear that barriers based on multiple educational, linguistic and personal resource factors are an inherent part of the process.

Cut-off processes

A related but different challenge pertains to what innovation labs do with non-performing or dysfunctional innovators, and how cut-off processes might be structured. It was generally presumed that those demonstrating unsuitable attitudes, or indifference to innovation for its own sake, would get weeded out after the early hackathons. The Mahali team reflected on the

problem that individuals who were not willing to contribute might still enter incubation with their team. However, there were many reasons why a member of an innovation team would perhaps be less able to contribute to team work. As noted by lab members: 'we need to be transparent, set criteria'. Cut-off processes should be 'very measurable', and not influenced by personal preferences.

Capacity

Another issue concerned how the lab should deal with greatly varying levels of capacity and training needs. What should the lab do when, well into the innovation cycle, participants struggled to understand the innovation process? For example, teams might do 'prototyping' because it was required as part of the process rather than because they understood how to leverage it as a tool for feedback and improvement.

Innovation is hard and is a process that needs to be learnt. Innovation also requires a set of 'background skills', for example synthesis skills. Without such skills and experience, it's more difficult to translate insights into solutions. While some solutions were innovative and strong, the Mahali team found that other solutions lacked creativity and innovation in ways that suggested that teams may not understand what makes something innovative or didn't yet have the confidence or experience to develop something creative/unusual.

Motivation

A major issue for the Mahali lab has been that of motivation. What would innovators do without incentives and how long would they would stick with their solutions? The Mahali team grappled with this in several ways.

In the first cycle, the innovators were given a salary, and this was coupled with keeping records of attendance. In response, the innovators started to see themselves as employees, and comparing their own work to that of Mahali team members.

After that, renumeration was made in the form of scholarships and the explicit demands to be treated as an employee disappeared, along with an over focus on money.

This shifting constellation of 'love and money' corresponds to the question of what constitutes 'appropriate motivation'. The Mahali team carefully considered the ethics of asking vulnerable people to spend their resources versus making assumptions about what vulnerable people can't do. As one of the team members observed: 'there are three kinds of people… in it for innovation and problem solving. .in it for money… or both'.

After substantial reflection, the Mahali team has concluded that it is necessary to accept innovators with diverse backgrounds and levels of support needs and 'be at peace with people with different motivations'. However, in a mitigating step, the third innovation cycle only selected initial participants among those who had stated an interest in social impact in the online application form.

Relationships between innovators and the community: customers, partners or end users

The community represents a potential pool of customers, partners or end users. As noted in previous reflection pieces, community innovation requires careful reflection on who are the problem holders and what is their proper role in the process.

We need to consider relationships between the innovators and the community, and also how the lab facilitates this interaction. In the context of the Mahali lab, the dynamics of this relationship developed unevenly for different groups of innovators in the different innovation cycles. Seeing community engagement as an ethics priority, the Mahali team actively attempted to identify and mitigate challenges throughout the various innovation cycles.

Trust and engagement

The lab and its innovators had to grapple with various trust issues. During the first innovation cycle, a lack of engagement between innovators and the community was reported. In response, the lab set up a community committee halfway into the second cycle. The community committee represented the wider community, and each committee member represented ten community members.

However, lab team members noted that innovators did not take feedback from the community committee on board, there were no off-site activities and the community committee did not feel adequately respected. They concluded that, for the community committee to work properly, the lab and the innovators needed to make problem holders feel sought after and valued.

This lack of engagement was detrimental both to the community and the project. For the community, there were insufficient opportunities to share insights and feedback on the programme. For the innovators, the lack of meaningful participation and feedback made it difficult to identify actual problems and craft meaningful solutions.

In contrast, the most successful innovation teams had systematically logged a significant amount of community contact in Kobo and built these exchanges into their innovation process.

Sharing information about results

It was recognised that the notion of 'community transparency' should include the community's role as potential end user, as well as their awareness of the entire innovation process. As we have already seen, however, there is an issue of when the lab should 'let go': while the lab team can to some degree structure encounters, it can only encourage non-scripted interaction with the community and the community committee. This also raises the question of the community committee becoming a stand-in for community, with little actual sharing going on.

The lab team reflected on the absence of platforms or mechanisms for sharing results with the community, and the problems arising from this. The Mahali team itself did not visit the involved communities regularly enough to keep them updated on the results. It was acknowledged that failure to implement the solutions on the ground, and a lack of knowledge of the results, created a loss of trust between the community and the innovators.

WHAT DOES SUCCESS LOOK LIKE?

There are important ethical aspects relating to how success is measured.

Success for who?

On one level, success could be construed as ticking boxes, for example through compliance with planned cut-off processes or attainment of milestones or deliverables. But importantly, success is also tiered: success for the Mahali lab (solves the problem of participation) is different from success for the community committee (benefits from the solution, engagement) or from an innovation perspective (better solutions for the community).

Moreover, the individuals and teams participating in Mahali do not have a level playing field: they have different backgrounds, experiences and levels of education. Should these differences be taken into consideration or should participants be judged purely on their idea at that point in time?

Defining the problem

What counts as success also corresponds to how the problem was defined in the first place. As observed by a team member, the broader context is one where the displaced population harbors a sentiment of 'no trust towards NGOs'. The lab has actively used social media to garner community feedback, with some messages complaining that 'it's just going to be with this NGO like usual.'

Perceptions of success

Finally, perceptions of success correspond to previously made promises of impact. Team members emphasised that they had tried not to promise the community anything except giving them a problem-solving tool, and in that respect the lab was different from 'traditional' NGO activity. However, this type of framing needs to be carefully thought through: for example, it sits poorly with promises of 'long-term impact for the community'.

IS A CULTURE OF CONTROL OVERTAKING HUMANITARIAN INNOVATION?

A culture of control – over people, money flows and work streams – is increasingly observable in humanitarian innovation projects. While it can have a positive effect on accountability to donors and host-governments, this culture of control stands in tension to the basic tenets of innovation.

Results-based management and a focus on effectiveness are core trends in humanitarian governance. This approach is also quickly migrating into the domain of humanitarian innovation. This is interesting, because it creates a struggle for control that may collide with the principles of successful innovation: taking risks, flexibility, letting go, the ability to fail.

The Mahali lab found that more and more formal 'to-dos' were loaded onto the innovation cycle, such as trainings, reporting requirements and structured activities for involving community members. Some of this resulted from ethics concerns, for example, introducing a formalised community committee structure midway through the second cycle.

Another example was that the first and second innovation cycles had not explicitly considered the ethics problems arising as a result of individual innovator's behaviour. Recognising this gap, the lab integrated an ethics training component early in the third design sprint to mitigate the potential risk of harm created by individual innovator behaviour.

This ability to be flexible and adapt – every single change grounded in experience – is in itself a highly valued characteristic of successful innovation processes. However, the need to demonstrate results, effectiveness and accountability also created procedures and processes that burdened the lab and the innovators and maybe inhibited their ability to be agile.

FINAL REFLECTIONS

Traditional top-down delivery of aid is increasingly viewed as ethically challenging, both in terms of the failure to consult, involve and collaborate with communities in crisis but also with respect to the unintended consequences of any interventions. Bad consequences go against the imperative to do no harm, and aid with no meaningful impact represents a waste of public resources and trust.

As a novel approach to localising aid, the humanitarian community-based innovation processes run by Mahali and the other DEPP Labs represent system innovations in themselves. These new processes signify a continuation of the humanitarian ethical commitment to involving communities in identifying and developing solutions that are relevant to their everyday lives. They also contribute to our understanding of the ethics of humanitarian community-based innovation: an important issue for the humanitarian sector as it moves towards localising aid.

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