

# Adapting Innovations for Impact: A Case Study in South Sudan

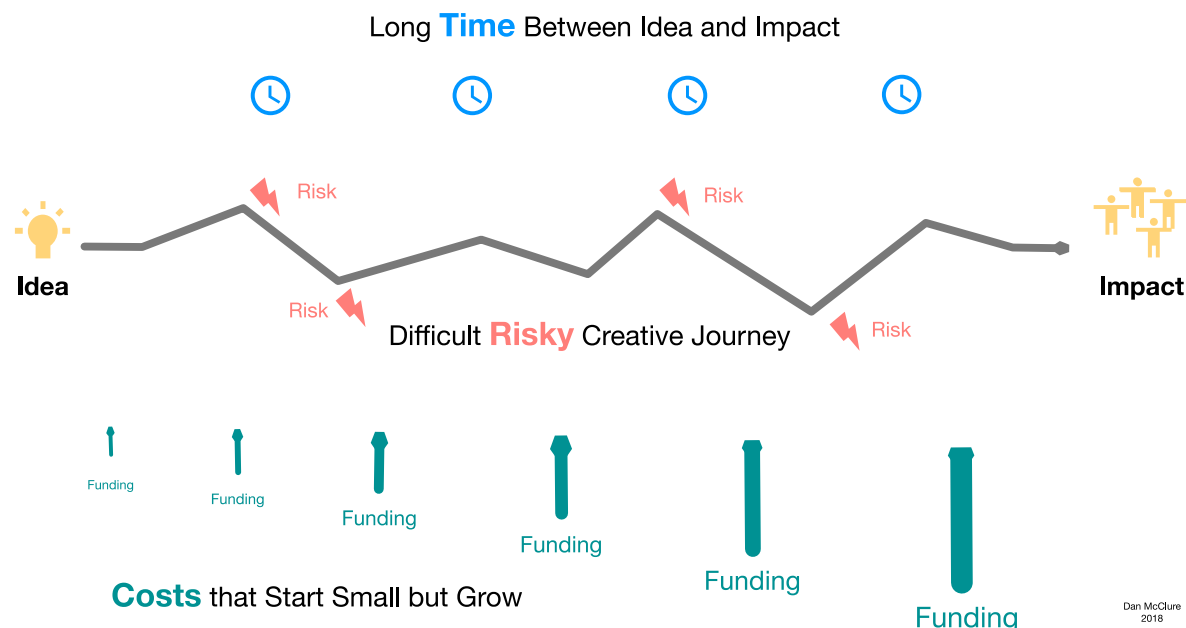
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## CHALLENGE

The case for innovation in the Humanitarian sector is well known, as is the importance of investing in new innovations and the need to adapt and adopt innovations that already exist to make wide-ranging improvements in people's lives. For a long-time, the focus of many humanitarian donors and organisations has been on creating new innovations in the hope of making significant change across the sector. This is an incredibly important focus, and area resources need to be allocated too. However, just as important, donors and organisations need to focus on the adoption of innovations that already work to create a significant change with people affected by the crisis. While this statement is obvious, the effort that goes into the adoption of innovations is often far less than the resources for creating new innovations.

The argument for adoption is clear. As you can see in the below picture, adoption is lower risk, lower funding, and less time, or alternatively, you could say, cheaper, faster and better – the very definition of innovation! Furthermore, the sector at large has a problem with scale. Many issues cause this, part of the challenge is that while there are many pilots (some of which show real promise), there is often a drop off of support and resources post-pilot. A focus on adoption across organisations would support strong pilots to continue onwards, learning, growing and were successful, scaling to create positive change in people's lives. Strong adoption pathways can create change outside a team, organisation, country, or region and help innovations that work flourish across the sector. Unfortunately, in a decentralized sector, great pilots can often go to waste with a lack of focus on innovation adoption.

The challenges of starting a new innovation:



A second major challenge is that innovation processes are often seen and implemented as a regimented 'project', which needs to be managed through the sectors' 'logical' project management approach  $a + b = c$ . We use log frames and reductionist thinking to plan out everything in advance, hoping we can 'know' how to make a social change based on simple evidence of a person affected by crisis needs. However, when we look at the contexts in which we work, many actors need to be involved in a change to make it work: governments, NGOs, individuals, education systems, landowners, local power holders, etc. Each with diverse needs and motivations. Each with their understanding of how the world works and their own parts of the puzzle they need to implement to support an outcome. For example, the government might need to change policy; the landowner may need to extend land use, so the water committee may need to change the way they support water use. A building or adopting innovation rarely fits into tightly organised project management. Rather to organise innovative social change, we need to plan and implement our work based on a more realistic view of the complex challenges and contexts we seek to work in and change.

## **SOLUTION**

To work on the challenge of effective innovation adoption the Response Innovation Lab with DANIDA and Innovation Ecosystem put together an Innovation Adoption Program, aptly named "Action for the Future". The course was focused on the question - how does the humanitarian sector practically adopt innovations for positive outcomes. This meant the program had to be short, with no huge capacity building investments, not too much time (everyone has day jobs), not overly expensive (there isn't 100K for working on adoption behind the couch somewhere), with people who work in the field, with what they have now, and with the humanitarian challenges they face. It also meant moving past the typical project management approaches and using systems innovation to explore what the challenges look like in the real world, and the best points of leverage to improve them. Save the Children South Sudan were interested in adding more innovations to their program and supporting further innovation capacity building for their country office and partners and so we went to South Sudan to work on some challenges.

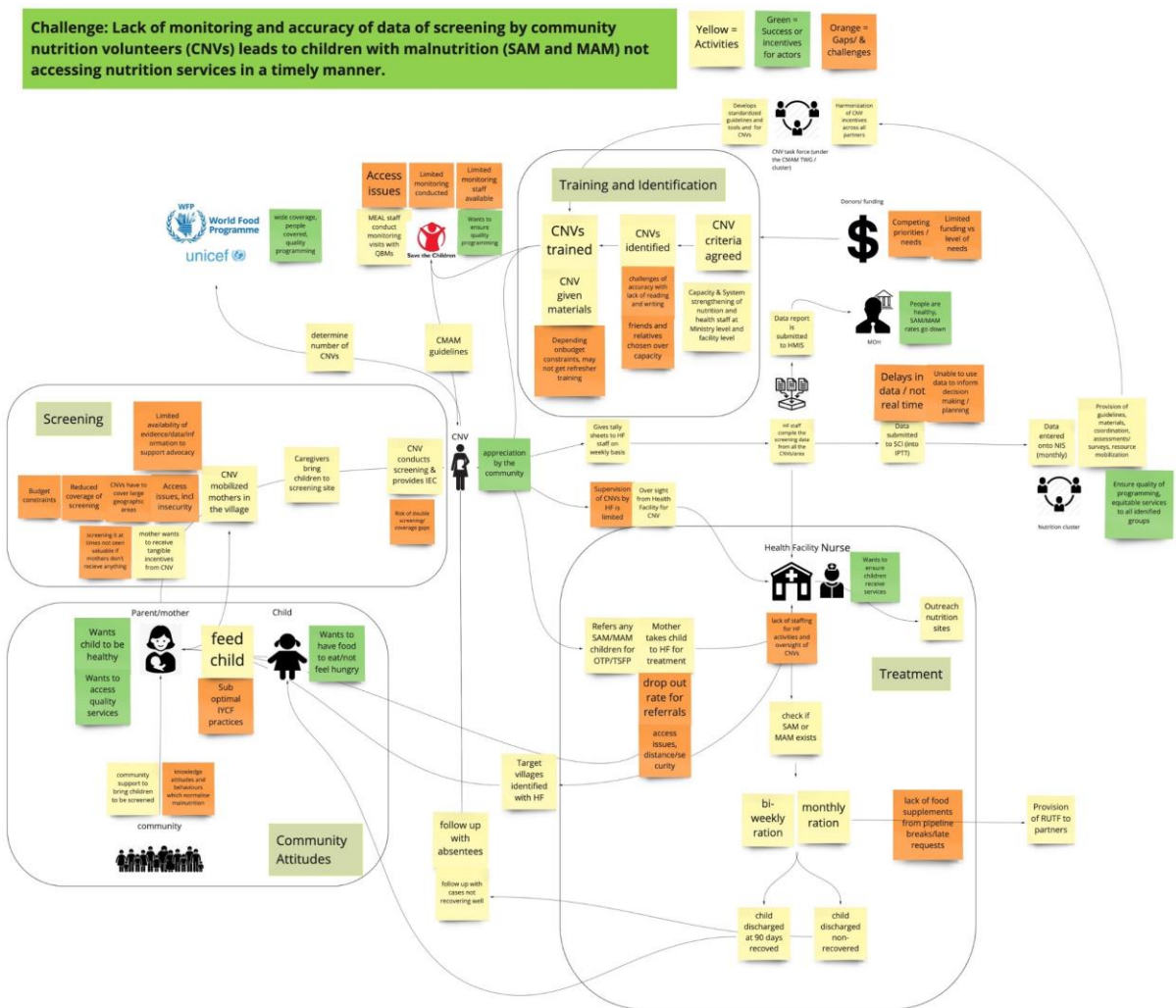
We held a 9 week innovation adoption course which had 4 thematic teams (Nutrition, Teachers Education, Educational Attitudes and Food Shortages) led by Save The Children which included their partners. The course was only 2 hours of face time a week (conducted virtually) with up to 2 hours additional work by the team lead if needed. Each group started by choosing a challenge which was important to solve in their work, and so we began.

At the onset of the course, a pre-test survey was distributed to the participants to gauge their current knowledge, attitudes and practices regarding the use of innovation in their daily work. Of 13 respondents, only 2 claimed to have above average familiarity with basic innovation concepts (such as pivoting, business model and storytelling), none had above average confidence about knowing the right questions to ask before selecting an innovative solution and only 30% were aware of innovations relevant to their work. This information allowed us to refine the design of the course and provide additional support to the teams in helping them look for innovative solutions and ask critical questions.

## **Identifying the Challenge**

The first 3 weeks started with exploring the problem, creating a Systems Map of all the interconnected pieces of the challenges such as actors, activities, motivations, challenges and connections. Considering the different actors who are part of the challenge, and what the challenges looks like in the real world now and how that might change in the future. We used this time to really understand the challenge it's different 'parts' (actors, activities, power dynamics, motivations etc) and consider what that different points of leverage might be in the 'challenge system'. Below you can see the systems map of our nutrition challenge: "Lack of monitoring and accuracy of data of screening by community nutrition volunteers (CNVs) leads to children with malnutrition (SAM and MAM) not accessing nutrition services in a timely manner". "

When we started considering this challenge at the start, some thought that the volunteers needed some 'tech' and a database to get better data which would improve malnutrition rates. After mapping the challenge and considering how a database might be able to impact different parts of the challenge, it was decided that additional data may not lead to lower malnutrition, but rather an approach that worked with the nutrition volunteers, the families and the health treatment services were where the greatest gains could be made.

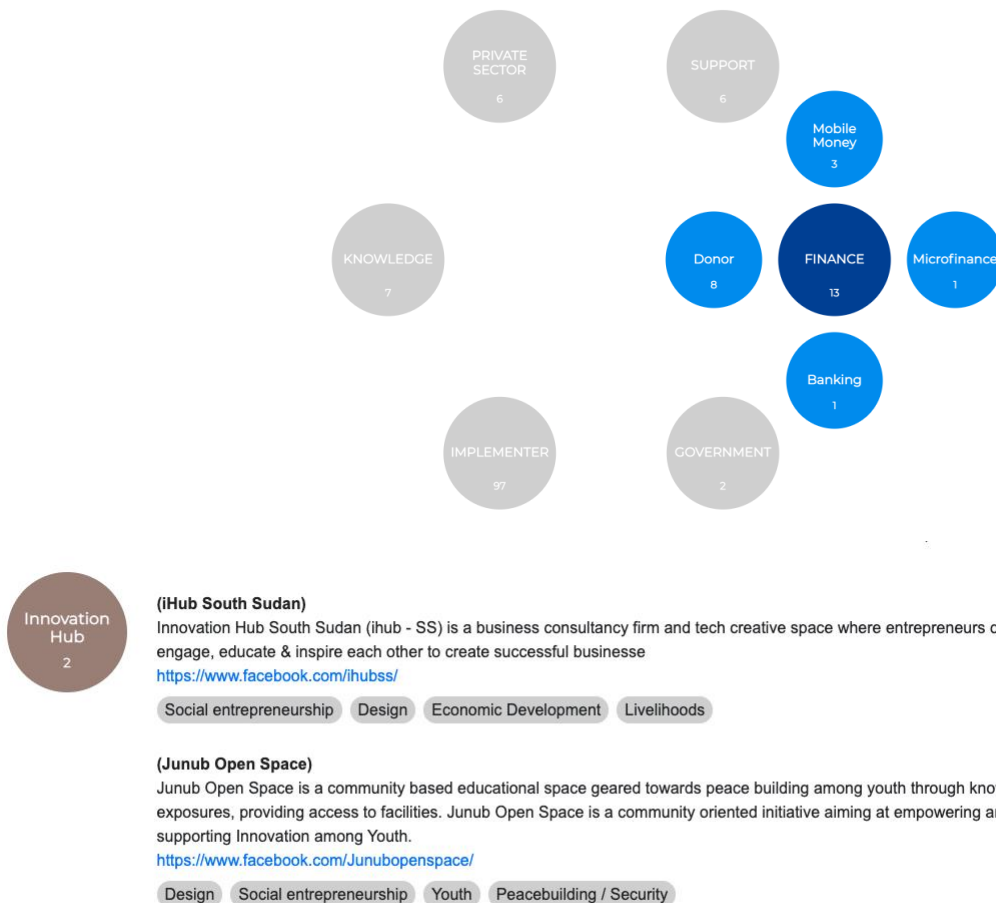


[Click to see in more detail.](#)

The next three weeks were spent focussed on finding an innovation to adopt, which included:

- Researching innovations that were relevant globally and locally
- Meeting as many actors as possible who may have innovations that meet the challenges or know people that might have relevant innovations
- Mapping the innovation ecosystem in South Sudan (both actors and innovations)
- Hosting an event in South Sudan to bring diverse local and regional actors together to discuss the challenges and innovations they were aware of, innovation support in South Sudan (mentoring, labs, funding etc.), and other interesting innovation initiatives.

### Example of the South Sudan Innovation Ecosystem Map



In these three weeks, we found 23 global and local innovations that could be useful for the 4 challenges. We went back to the map and discussed how and where they might fit into the problem and what kinds of impacts they could have. We delved into the innovations and asked questions like:

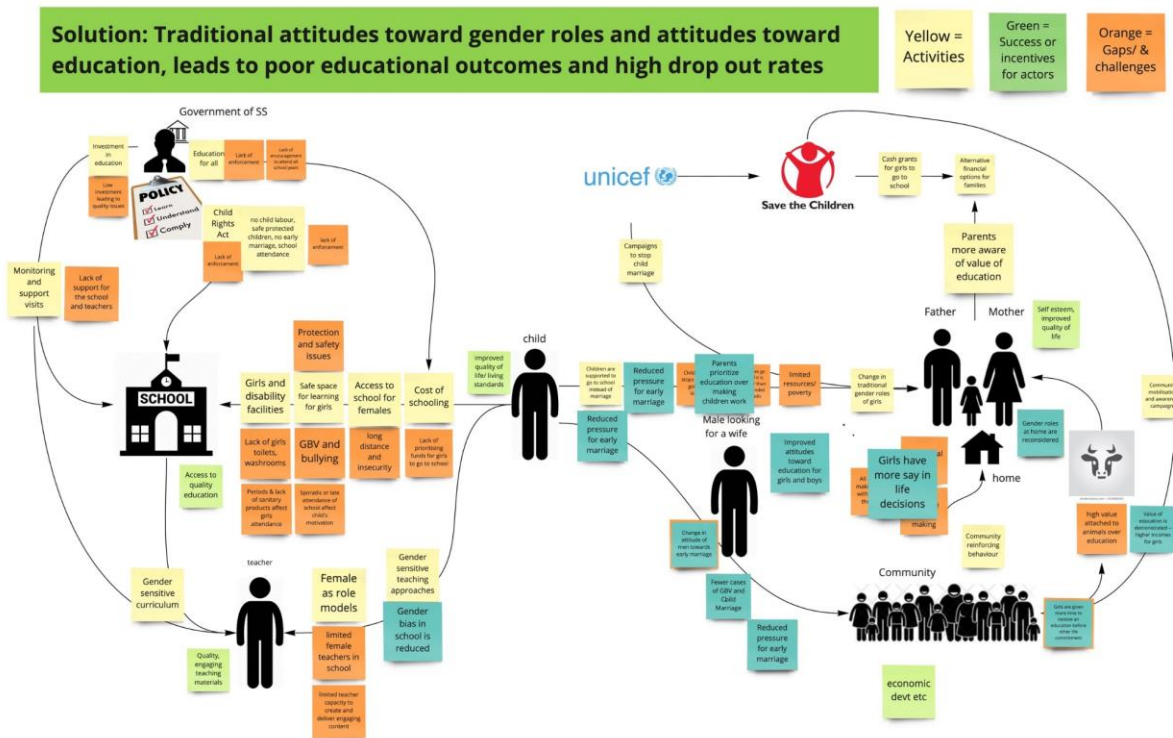
- What impact would this innovation deliver?
- What are the negative consequences?
- Can this idea be done better (for this challenge, in South Sudan)?
- Is the idea feasible, and is it complete for this context?
- Will it be sustainable?
- Is the idea designed to adapt and grow in South Sudan and for this challenge?

Based on these questions and further interrogation of how the innovation fits into the challenge, each team chooses an innovation they wanted to move forward.

## Designing the Solution

The next two-weeks were spent designing the project for implementation in South Sudan. Especially 'designing' the adoption process. For some groups, nothing needed to change for their innovation to be adopted; some groups choose multiple innovations and combined them for greater impact on the challenge. For one group there was an innovation chosen alongside a different kind of program model that was already common practice. This is also included drawing a systems map of what the challenge looked in the future once it was solved. This helped teams think about what they wanted the 'outcome' of adoption to look like, what were the effects on the challenge, system, and the challenge. With this 'solution map' teams could work out better ways of monitoring the adoption process to see if the innovation was making the changes they had planned, whether other elements or changes were needed in the innovation or projects, or whether the outcomes they imagine could be stretched further, changed or improved in other ways.

The Solution Map of what the world would look like once the innovation was implemented



[Click to see the chart in more detail.](#)

## Challenge Maps

Click to see more of the identified challenges, and how the teams are defining and building solutions:

- Education Teachers (Zakaria): [https://miro.com/app/board/o9J\\_kjRV3Wc=](https://miro.com/app/board/o9J_kjRV3Wc=/)
- Education - Attitudes (Jacob): [https://miro.com/app/board/o9J\\_khtzvCo=](https://miro.com/app/board/o9J_khtzvCo=/)
- Nutrition (Israel): [https://miro.com/app/board/o9J\\_kjRQVhE=](https://miro.com/app/board/o9J_kjRQVhE=/)
- Resilience (Eshete): [https://miro.com/app/board/o9J\\_kjRcxlc=](https://miro.com/app/board/o9J_kjRcxlc=/)

## Taking Action for Impact

In the last week, everyone gave a 'pitch' to the group. Action plans were written for the next steps of the project, which included sustainability, program management, governance, and sources of funding. Unlike other programs, I have been part of all the teams left motivated to implement their innovations.

## OUTCOMES

The outcomes of this project were especially interesting. On the downside, we were not able to collect enough responses in the post-test survey to measurably gauge the progress of the participants in their knowledge, attitudes and practices regarding innovation. However, we followed up with the teams a month after the workshop ended to see if there was still motivation for the projects to continue, or whether like many innovation initiatives, the inspiration failed when life set in.

One month after the workshops finished:

- One project was already funded, with the other three projects seeking funding
- A donor had requested concept notes for the three projects, which hadn't yet been funded for their consideration.
- Feedback from participants that they enjoyed the system's innovations and were already thinking about how they can apply it in their programs now or in new project designs.
- One of the organisations who had attended the innovation event was working on hosting a second event with the same participants. There was agreement among some participants that they would like to meet monthly.
- Furthermore, one of the workshop participants worked with the Save the Children Somalia office and was already planning on implementing the workshop in Somalia.

The outcome is not the kind we normally see from innovation courses. We would generally be proud of outcomes such as: 4 viable innovation projects designed or capacity for innovation built. However have 4 teams who want to move forward with their projects, with one already funded and another office already planning to host an event in their country, feels like exciting outcomes. We will be checking back in to see the outcomes of these and how they relate to impact, which is the biggest question.

So what was different about this from the regular design sprints:

1. We used a robust **adoption process**: Implementers chose the challenges they struggled with and choose innovations they could implement now to improve those challenges.
2. We used **systems innovation** to consider challenges and their solutions as they exist in the real world, rather than post-it-note ideation sessions. In doing so, this promoted the South Sudanese innovators to consider the depth of the challenge they were dealing with, what they would need to make innovation work, and the highest impact solutions for the real complex world.

## Encountered Challenges

As with any initial application of a new methodology, particularly in a context such as South Sudan during a global pandemic, we came away from experience with some useful knowledge on what to improve in the future.

- **Timeframe**: Given the travel limitations imposed by Covid (combined with the existing difficulties of travel within South Sudan), the entire training was conducted virtually. As a result, we decided to space the work over 9 weeks to be time for reflection and "homework" between relatively short Zoom sessions. Stretching the time in this manner, however, pretty much

guaranteed that participants could not attend all sessions. It was also overly optimistic to think that staff with extremely demanding responsibilities would also have the unstructured free time during which to conduct research and analysis;

- **Overestimating knowledge of the ecosystem:** Participants were given relatively little time to identify solutions that had been tested or were being piloted in South Sudan, under the assumption that field-based staff would have fairly easy access to colleagues at peer organizations. In a context such as South Sudan, where staff turnover is high for expatriates and civil society is extremely fragmented into small local CSOs rather than national actors (among other challenges), information is not always easily shared. Our project likely missed some promising ideas that had been trialed by smaller organizations and not well-publicized.
- **Limited analysis of the solutions:** In part, because it took more time than expected to survey the available solutions in South Sudan, the teams did not thoroughly analyze how the innovation they plan on piloting will address all the elements present in the challenge map. While this can be made up at the pilot design stage, it would have been a good learning exercise to spend more time on the Solutions Map.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Balance duration with intensity:** Even if held virtually, the timeframe for the entire project cycle should be significantly reduced to a maximum of 4 weeks. This would mean holding at least two sessions a week and setting aside structured time for the teams' follow-up. That timeframe should make it more likely to keep most participants highly engaged while still providing enough time between the various sessions for attendees to digest the lessons and think about how they may apply to their programming.
- **Do not wait to engage external entities:** Before the event the start of the sessions, the organizers should connect with known innovation resources in the country and begin to identify other actors likely to be interested in sharing information and knowledge. Country Office leadership should also be asked to engage more in this outreach to facilitate the mapping and provide contacts for the technical teams if needed.

## WHAT'S NEXT?

- There are now considerations to host this program in other countries (with Save the Children or other organisations), to adopt innovations to improve impact.
- The curriculum will be tweaked based on feedback received in South Sudan and adaptable to contexts where in-person meetings are possible.
- The mapping tools will also be reviewed to identify ways to better present both the ecosystem actors and the solutions surveyed.