

Overview of the H2H Accelerator

Program Design and Delivery

Background

In 2022 H2H, working with USAID, pioneered a fast moving program to support innovative program development by H2H members. A competitive selection process resulted in three initiatives being selected for a four month combination of coaching and funding. The program concluded with a face to face meeting in March 2023, where all the teams, H2H staff, and the innovation coaches met in Geneva.

The participating programs spanned a wide range of subject domains:

ADAPT – The “Adapt” group focuses on developing original strategies for climate adaptation. The team has historically been an informal collaboration of three organizations based in France, India, and the UK, with different areas of expertise and types of work. This loose structure was sufficient as they worked to build donor interest in challenging projects for climate adaptation (a neglected area compared with climate mitigation). However, when they saw a big jump in engagement, scaling their impact required integrating their different contributions in a more strategic way. During the accelerator, they worked to clearly define and describe their complex value proposition and way of working together. They have now bought together a creative approach that draws heavily on local learning, high level expertise, and flexible multi-actor governance.

LPLP – “LPLP” is also a collaboration of different organizations. Their focus is enabling local procurement of humanitarian needs from local producers. This is an extremely complex ecosystem that involves integrating the work of a wide range of actors ranging from international aid organizations to local manufacturing operators. They pursued two areas of work in the Accelerator. Having successfully explored the challenge using an informal collaborative structure, they moved to define a more structured organization that could powerfully convey the complex nature of their challenge and the varied paths for building out this new aid sector capability. Alongside this work, they developed hands on insights and evidence from an on the ground pilot in Kenya, which provided a broad systems view of all the pieces needed for local procurement to work in practice.

Relief Applications - Relief Applications is an example of how practical experience in aid sector action can help guide appropriate technology development. The Relief Applications team has developed a very easy to use set of tools that allows small to medium sized non-profits to assemble sophisticated data handling and analysis technologies. This has the potential to break down the wall that makes advanced tech difficult for smaller nonprofits to adopt. However,

simply having good tech is not enough to drive broad adoption. During the Accelerator the Relief Applications team explored how to move beyond technical development, understanding and addressing other factors that influence adoption of their systems. They expanded their plans for adoption support and tailored their narrative to focus more strongly on the complex needs and challenges of organizations adopting the tools.

Note that all three of the program participants dealt with complex strategy and scaling challenges. In each case success required pushing outside existing practices in the aid sector success and developing ways for multiple parties to work together in new ways. As a result, even though their subject domains were quite diverse (climate, purchasing, data technologies), addressing these shared themes was key to moving the complex and original solutions to scale.

The Evolution of Innovation Labs – Moving Beyond Simple Solutions

Over the last decade, the Aid and non-profit sector has broadly leveraged innovation labs as part of strategic efforts to develop new ideas and practices. On one hand, this active support for innovators demonstrates an encouraging level of commitment to innovation. However, the practical value of innovation labs has often been limited by the innovation practices and types of innovations the labs support. For many years, the common practice has been to design labs around Silicon Valley models of product innovation, where discreet products or services are developed based narrowly focused problems.

This approach is well suited to innovations such as designing a new cookstove technology or even creating a new class curriculum. However, when labs focus on innovators who target specific issues and narrowly defined users, they are often poorly positioned to address more complex challenges (like adapting to climate change, enabling local purchasing in humanitarian response, or leveraging data technologies in small non-profit organizations).

Complex challenges dominate aid today. High impact innovations have many interdependent actors, difficult tradeoffs, and shifting dependencies. As a result, innovators need to step back and take a ‘big picture’ approach to their innovations. To be relevant, labs need to adapt their approach to support these more complex innovation challenges. (For more on this shift, see a 2020 paper written for the DEPP Innovation Labs by Dan McClure, one of the innovation coaches¹)

The H2H Innovation Accelerator – Focusing on Complex Innovations

Given that they often fill pioneering roles in the Humanitarian sector, it is not surprising that H2H and its members frequently tackle challenges that push beyond conventional approaches to aid. These are actors that help the sector take on hard issues that don’t have easy answers and are difficult to address within the traditional system.

While the H2H Accelerator did not originally target innovators working on these complex challenges, the selection process nonetheless produced three winning programs that shared an underlying ambitious complexity. They all needed to integrate many moving parts, so that people, organizations, and technology could work together in new ways.

Focusing on organizations that were tackling complex problems became a key feature of the Accelerator. Paraphrasing one of the innovators at the workshop, they said “If having innovators with complex challenges wasn’t part of the Accelerator’s original selection criteria, it should have been.” Having a cohort of programs all working on complex innovations made it possible to intentionally focus coaching and strategies on cross-cutting challenges with many parts, rather than simply applying conventional Silicon Valley inspired product innovation tools.

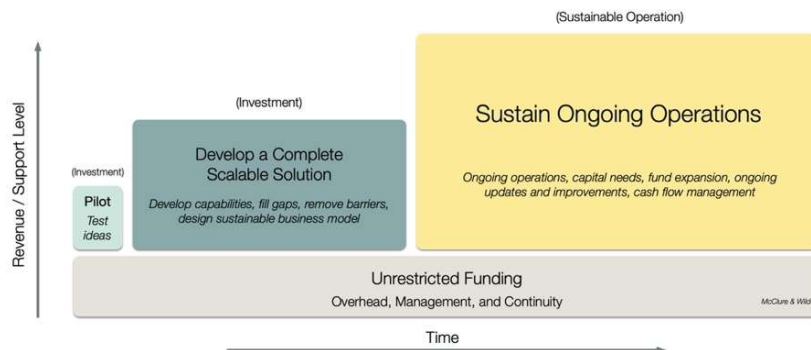
Supporting Complex Innovations – Combining Funding with Coaching

Innovators designing narrowly defined products tend to focus much of their attention on early stage pilots. This lightweight testing of ideas with a small project budget has been the focus of many labs. This work often has an implicit assumption that once a pilot proves itself, the next challenge is simply finding funding to ‘scale up’ production and adoption. This model may make sense if you are developing a new water filter, or deploying a mobile app, but it doesn’t reflect the journey of an innovator who is working on a more sophisticated and messier challenge.

Complex innovations, which involve many different actors, complex tradeoffs, and tricky integration of technologies and practices face different developmental challenges. There is a long evolutionary journey between initial pilot testing and the eventual wide scale adoption, a journey that requires diverse skills, difficult strategic thinking, and longer-term development.

For these innovators there is a clear need for financial support, but it isn’t on the same easy terms as funding a pilot or investing in replicating a solution for scale. Pilots are attractive to funders because they can be funded as short, small budget projects that have limited expectation for immediate impact (light green box). Making the case for scaling up a proven solution (yellow box) is also an easy, since there’s a direct connection between funding and impact.

Funding / Support Needs on the Journey to Scalable Sustainable Solutions



In contrast, complex innovations have a long evolutionary journey between initial exploration and broad impact (the dark green area in the diagram). This journey requires significant patient funding while teams address a wide range of difficult challenges, many of which will likely be outside their areas of expertise. To make this work even more challenging, results are often deferred until much later, or are ambiguous and hard to measure.

Increasingly, there is a recognition that this evolving journey needs both more funding and a loosening of restrictions on specific activities and results. Further, because of the complexity and variety of skills required, innovators benefit from coaching support aimed at navigating the unique challenges of creating complex solutions.

The H2H accelerator recognized this two-part challenge and provided a combination of appropriate financial support and innovation coaching for the program's evolution.

Coaching – Building a Complete Compelling Narrative

High profile challenges, like climate adaptation, localized purchasing, and data technology adoption, are spaces where new thinking can be difficult to grasp. Complex innovations address wholistic problems with many interconnected parts. Solutions break with conventional thinking and require funders and collaborators to think about opportunities in new ways. As a result, there is a need for innovators to work hard to deliver a compelling explanation of the problem, their strategy, and why their approach is both better and credible.

Innovators working in these hard spaces typically have parts of this narrative in place, but also wrestle with key gaps in their thinking. Their strategy and action plans are not fully developed and they find it difficult to clearly lay out to others what's been in their mind. As a result, their effort to scale promising early work hits a wall. They find themselves unable to bring others along on the journey.

In varied ways, this was the situation facing all three of the innovators in the H2H accelerator. Each program had parts of its strategic narrative fleshed out, while other key pieces were either missing or poorly integrated into the overall approach.

To build out each team's complete vision and its supporting end to end narrative, a series of remote coaching sessions were held. The coaches were Dan McClure and Hannah Reichardt from Innovation Ecosystem, who had support from the H2H team. With the coaches help, each innovation team explored their end to end strategic narrative, framed their concepts, and addressed gaps in their approach.

The original H2H accelerator plan anticipated that much of this work would be done through two in person workshops, where all three teams working together over a few days. However, because each team's challenges required in-depth exploration, it was decided to replace the first workshop with a series of one-on-one remote coaching sessions.

This team by team approach allowed the coaches to deeply explore each group's strategies, and then provided an opportunity to synthesize information after each session. This integrated thinking was captured in a shared working deck that included visual models and text narratives. This pattern of exploration meeting – offline synthesis – exploration meeting – offline synthesis, provided an opportunity to develop and refine complex thinking over time.

Live Testing of the Innovator's Complete and Compelling Narratives

Innovators who have immersed themselves in a challenge often overestimate the power of their story. Because they have the ideas in their head, and naturally bring passion to the subject, they are frequently unaware of how well they actually convey their thinking. As a result, it is incredibly useful to stand in front of a group and make a compelling case for a complex idea that breaks with the status quo's way of doing things.

To provide this real world experience, all the innovators met together in Geneva for three days. During the first day each team was given 90 minutes to present their end to end narrative to the rest of the group. Typically, each presentation took 20 minutes and an hour plus was used to get feedback and suggestions from their peers and the H2H team.

Teams reported that this live face to face engagement was probably the most valuable part of the H2H Accelerator program. A wide range of issues were raised and there was an opportunity for back and forth dialog with other innovators who were facing similar challenges.

The second day of the workshop provided an opportunity for each team to work amongst themselves (many team members were from different locations, so face to face time was uncommon). It also provided a chance to take advantage of additional team by team coaching. The coaches observed that all three teams made significant steps forward during this time.

The third day allowed individual teams to continue working together or to engage with external parties in Geneva. These meetings provided an opportunity to quickly test their thinking and narrative with external audiences, taking their compelling narrative out into the world.

Timeline

Once the winning project teams were identified, the program moved directly into coaching support on a team by team basis. The program culminated in a face to face cross team meeting four months later.

- | | |
|--------------------------------------|----------------------------|
| • H2H Accelerator Kickoff with Teams | December 2022 |
| • Coaching Sessions | December 2023 – March 2023 |
| • Face to Face Workshop (Geneva) | March 2023 |

Summary

The H2H Accelerator developed and tested an innovation support approach that was able to leverage a limited funding budget to support innovators working on complex challenges. This is a critical need, since many innovation support programs still focus on early stage innovations, piloting smaller product or service inventions. Support tailored to complex innovations, programs that are on an evolving journey to scaled impact, is much harder to find.

The H2H Accelerator's combination of relatively flexible funding and significant coaching support allowed each team to address the unique multi-part challenges they faced. Because each team was a complex innovation initiative at roughly at the same stage of development, it was possible to provide teams with similar forms of coaching support, while still tailoring the sessions to individual team needs. This shared engagement with complex challenges also meant that innovators had a valuable opportunity to learn from each other during the face to face workshop.

ⁱ <https://startnetwork.org/learn-change/resources/library/labs-and-beyond-opportunities-transform-innovation-support-0>