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Innovative Space: In Theory and Practice

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Innovation is a concept in humanitarianism that is often misunderstood in the context of international development. It is a favorite term of many development organizations for the stories and ideas evoked, but its sources and impact are not often realized. Louise Bloom and Alexander Betts, researchers from the Refugee Studies Centre at the University of Oxford, describe this problem, writing, "Although the term 'innovation' has been used to describe new products, project approaches and systems in international aid, the innovation concepts themselves have not been widely unpacked, adapted or standardised in practice or thinking for humanitarianism."[1] Improper engagement with innovation can be a devastating inhibitor to sustainable implementation of humanitarian aid, causing humanitarians to blindly accept approaches to development maladapted to specific contexts. Proper engagement within global humanitarianism is enabled by an understanding of innovative space, a concept intended to prompt thought and reflection on development initiatives within communities.

Two Worlds of Innovation

In *The Two Worlds of Humanitarian Innovation*, authors Bloom and Betts define worlds based on notions of top-down and bottom-up innovation. They are distinguished, respectively, as:

> one which falls solely into the institutionalised practice of a small number of humanitarian actors, and which focuses on upwards accountability to donors and traditionally takes a more 'top-down' approach in implementing solutions for affected populations; and another which fosters and builds on the existing innovative capabilities and systems of local communities.[2]

The former, top-down approach is more visible and prominent in the work of humanitarianism. Development organizations are legitimized by their key actors and their transparency and accountability to donors. This formation tends to approach innovation as approved products that can be implemented and adjusted to work in specific contexts, and then evaluated based on indicators to determine their success. While necessary to the professionalization of the humanitarian sector, research suggests that "too often, evaluation is undertaken simply to satisfy agencies and donors, rather than to improve outcomes for the targeted population."[3] An understanding of innovation, separate from the process of institutionalizing and professionalizing humanitarian work, is necessary to improve ongoing development efforts.

The second approach, that of bottom-up innovation, is less represented and less understood and includes partnerships with local NGOs and in-country interaction with beneficiaries. Inseparable from this approach are social and cultural considerations that supply an understanding of the contextual factors often overlooked by the top-down approach. The nature of this interaction, as it is able to "draw upon and foster existing innovation that is

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[1] Bloom, Louise, and Alexander Betts. "The Two Worlds of Humanitarian Innovation." Refugee Studies Centre. August 1, 2013. 7
[2] Ibid. 3
[3] Ibid. 11

thriving within affected communities"[4] is a cause for reflection and concern. Through a discourse on the concept of participation, this reflection may occur.

As a bottom-up innovation strategy, participation has been institutionalized as a core concept for many current organizations, including the International Committee of the Red Cross and Sphere Project. Defined by Robert Chambers, "participation methodologies '[a]ll frame and facilitate sequences of activities which empower participants to undertake their own appraisal or research and analysis, come to their own conclusions and take action.'"[5] Participation's manifestation in practice has taken many forms, but appropriate employment of participation is yet to be clearly defined. Some methodologies have been very effective at facilitating communal change, yet were criticized for use of strategies like public shaming and negative reinforcement. One such example of a criticized methodology is the one employed by Community Led Total Sanitation (CLTS), which uses a participatory strategy that seeks to end communal practices of open defecation. Developed in Bangladesh in 2000, it utilizes a facilitator who publically shames people through demonstrations in order to trigger collective action against the practice. Though CLTS encourages the use of endemic facilitators and consistently achieves the so-called open defecation free (ODF) status in communities that participate, it is criticized for using public shaming as an entry point. CLTS fulfils Chamber's general definition of participation yet overlooks the implications of public shaming and other negative reinforcement measures on a community. A more focused understanding of participation would enable more appropriate use of it in practice. I offer the notion that participation in international development is, at its best, a facilitation of knowledge within an open space that leads to the innovation of an appropriate solution.

Innovative Space Theory

In testing this theoretical notion, we ought to consider critical and self-critical questions concerning what is understood about the capacity for innovation within beneficiary communities and how beliefs can impact the nature of participatory practice. These questions must be answered in any humanitarian work we witness or undertake. I propose some answers may be encountered in the nature of spaces. By this, I refer to the kinds of spaces which exist in any practice of participation, the spaces in which both humanitarians and beneficiaries influence the collective action and result. In her brilliant account titled *Making Spaces, Changing Places: Situating Participation in Development*, Andrea Cornwall addresses these ideas first by placing the concept of space in a political context:

> Political space' is not only something taken up, assumed or filled, but something that can be created, opened, reshaped. The notion of 'policy space' evokes sites shaped through the exercise of agency, in which different actors, knowledges, and interests interact and in which room can be made for alternatives, but from which some people and ideas remain excluded.[6]

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[4] Ibid. 10

[5] Ibid. 23

[6] Cornwall, Andrea. "Making Spaces, Changing Places: Situating Participation in Development." OpenDocs: Institute of Development Studies. 2002. 2

Spaces are not only operated in by participants, but are generated and maintained by them. This fluidity of spaces indicates that they can compromise the humanitarian ideal of impartiality by excluding ideas and potential participants. Humanitarians often first seek consensus within beneficiary communities, hoping to quickly identify beliefs and needs and how to appropriately address them. This consensus-seeking is prone to misrepresentation, however, and may tacitly ignore critical issues. Cornwall points out that "issues of power and difference may not only undermine the very possibility of equitable, consensual decision-making, they may also restrict the possibility of 'thinking outside the box.'"[7]

Cornwall offers a simplified question to counter this suppression of bottom-up humanitarian innovation and guide our thought about spaces. "Asking 'who speaks for and about whom' would entail looking more closely at issues of identity, difference and power, as well as broader issues of accountability and legitimacy."[8] Spaces may be created and maintained by powerful actors, including self-interested beneficiaries and unfair outsider humanitarians. A similar issue occurs when "spaces fostered as a way of amplifying marginalized voices may end up being filled by gatekeepers, who speak for but not with those they represent."[9] Participants and humanitarians alike may take the gatekeeper role on behalf of particular participants, yet not represent their true beliefs and needs. A critical awareness of influence within spaces in a specific community enables humanitarians to determine how they ought to facilitate participation.

A space in which both beneficiaries and humanitarians engage in the practice of participation helps foster sustainable innovation only insofar as it is created. Cornwall states that "particular spaces may be produced by the powerful, but filled with those whose alternative visions transform their possibilities."[10] Thus, if an innovative space is created impartially in the practice of participation, it is continually shaped by the beneficiary community. As Cornwall suggests, "Sharing the construction of alternative versions of the world can work to fashion networks of solidarity and build people's confidence in their own knowledge and capabilities, and with it a sense of entitlement shaped by recognition of one's agency."[11] Created appropriately and shaped continually, this type of space reconciles the two worlds of humanitarian innovation. Professional humanitarian institutions organize the means by which communities collectively improve the well-being of all members. Innovative space exists free from outside interference and open to all who would benefit from an initiative or project. People operating within innovative space do not ignore or reject the influence of the top-down humanitarian world. Rather, communities use its provided means to build collective capacity to realize the well-being of all, a chief aim of all humanitarian initiatives and projects.

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[7] Ibid. 5
[8] Ibid. 24
[9] Ibid
[10] Ibid. 9
[11] Ibid. 26

A Pragmatic Partnership

This theory may seem idealistic, but its pragmatic potential is displayed in a current humanitarian partnership between Water to Thrive, a U.S. faith-based nonprofit, "dedicated to spreading awareness of the global water crisis while raising the funds needed to construct water wells for those who desperately need them in rural Africa"[12] and the International Lifeline Fund, abbreviated as Lifeline, a relief and development organization. Water to Thrive functions as an intermediary between United States churches or individuals and beneficiary communities through full funding of water related projects. Implementation is then fully performed by trusted partner organizations like Lifeline. Through these organizations, "each village and well site elects a local water committee who decides on governance of the well" according to Susanne Wilson, executive director.[13] These partnerships enable Water to Thrive staff and donors to consistently visit project sites. Wilson sums up the extent of Water to Thrive's interaction with beneficiaries:

> Water to Thrive visits beneficiaries and interacts with them to determine the need and support prior to well construction. Water to Thrive visits the well sites both during construction and upon completion. Interviews are conducted to determine the impact of water on the beneficiaries. Additionally, wells are visited to determine the sustainability and longevity of the projects.[14]

Exemplary in the world of top-down innovation, Water to Thrive provides the advocacy, professionalization, and accountability valued in global humanitarianism which enables its partners to occupy and thrive in the world of bottom-up innovation.

Lifeline provides direct services to specific areas in East Africa and Haiti. Operating in development, it provides access to clean drinking water and efficient methods of cooking by specializing in "producing fresh water wells" and "implementing community led hygiene and sanitation initiatives."[15] In Uganda, Water to Thrive provides funding for wells in the Apac district. For each project, Lifeline employs participation practices surrounding the areas of water, sanitation, and hygiene, or WASH, within beneficiary communities. John Justin Otai, Lifeline's senior WASH program adviser in the Apac district, oversees the use of a participation method by which Community Health Clubs are established. These clubs organize members of a community to take initiative for the health of their household and the well-being of others. They supplement water committees and are uniquely composed of "at least 50, but sometimes as many as 150 members, men and women, young and old and [of] all levels of education."[16] Similarly, they are administered by an "annually elected Committee" including "chairwoman, vice, secretary, treasurer, etc. who keep all records of members and their household facilities" and "monitor monthly."[17]

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[12] Our Story. Water to Thrive. Accessed March 30, 2016. https://watertothrive.org/our-story
[13] Wilson, Susanne. Water to Thrive Q&A. E-mail interview by author. March 30, 2016
[14] Ibid.
[15] Our History. International Lifeline Fund. Accessed March 30, 2016. https://lifelinefund.org/about/history/
[16] Otai, John Justin. Using Health Promotion as an Entry Point Through Community Health Clubs
(CHCs)PowerPoint, March 31, 2016. 4
[17] Ibid. 12

John Justin Otai proposes the clubs move through four phases: knowledge, practical, economic, and social. In the first phase, members organize and begin to attend weekly trainings conducted by one of Lifeline's community based facilitators. These sessions catalyze movement into the second phase in which "members decide on practical ways to improve their homes, motivated by many problem solving activities."[18] Intended to last at least six months, the clubs often use song and drama as a way of promoting "learning through fun participatory activities [to] reinforce good practice."[19] Post training, the third and fourth phases reap economic and social improvement through initiatives like communal nutrition gardens and gained capability and "responsibility for the most vulnerable within their community."[20] As the concept of the Community Health Club has matured, Lifeline recognizes health as the entry point to emerging opportunities for further development through education, agriculture, and entrepreneurship. Thus, Lifeline and Otai have adopted the revised name of Community Development Clubs to better capture their potential.

Lifeline's use of Community Development Clubs in Uganda epitomizes the creation of innovative space. Open to all and free from interference, they enable a facilitation of knowledge that prompts innovation of contextually appropriate solutions at the household and the communal level. Strategic placement of the community-based facilitator "behind [but] not in charge of"[21] the club produces the spaces, but allows the alternative visions of members to build solidarity and promote confidence in the possibility of a healthy community.

Through this research, we explored innovative space as it is developed in theory and manifested in practice through a working partnership grounded in a model of participation. How can we continue to understand and identify this elsewhere in global humanitarian initiatives and partnerships? I propose we may do so through examination, realization, and discernment. First, by closely and critically examining existing familiar humanitarian efforts. Second, by seeking to realize the impact that beliefs and interactions have on the capability for bottom-up innovation in beneficiary communities. And finally, by discerning avenues by which to give or act in ways that enable the creation, but not command, of innovative spaces. Through this thoughtful process, we will become more attuned to identifying sustainable and respectful development initiatives in the areas of the world we experience and become connected to through our own participation in those communities.

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[18] Ibid. 6
[19] Ibid. 14
[20] Ibid. 8,10
[21] Ibid. 12

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