Innovation projects can reinvent the UN

June 9 2021

Credit: University of Geneva

Researchers at the University of Geneva (UNIGE) demonstrate that innovative projects spearheaded by United Nations (UN) country offices are remodeling the institution and expanding its role. Digital initiatives, particularly those scaled through headquarters, were shown to have the strongest impact, changing ways of working, embedding new skills, and restructuring teams across the UN. These findings, published in the *Journal of Management Studies*, highlight that fostering even single innovative projects could lead to fundamental transformations in the UN.

How do International Organizations build innovation capabilities through intrapreneurship and entrepreneurial behavior? To answer this question, researchers Tina Ambos and Katherine Tatarinov of the Geneva School of Economics and Management (GSEM) at the UNIGE looked at how innovative projects, particularly those born in country offices, are changing the institutional system in a sustainable way.

The role of digital technology

In one of the case studies conducted for this research, a refugee cash transfer initiative using blockchain widened the responsible UN body's role from 'ending poverty and hunger' to that more closely resembling a fintech company or development bank. By providing a platform for aid delivery, the organization is now helping its partners bypass unstable third-parties and save on transaction costs. "Such new activities often stretch the original mission of the organization," explains Ambos, professor of international management at GSEM and director of the i2i Hub for Innovation and Cross-Sector Partnerships. "The use of blockchain could spread across the entire UN system, changing the ways of working and increasing transparency."

Sensitive data on vulnerable groups held by the UN often means that digital innovation cannot be outsourced. This results in the organization upgrading its institutional knowledge and creating new teams to manage digital projects, which were found to have the biggest impact on how the UN operates overall. "Other skills have also been internalized, such as technical skills and human-centered design approaches," says co-author and Ph.D. student Tatarinov. "After learning in one context, the UN was able to test different technologies in its sites of operation according to local needs without depending on external experts."

Innovation units were found to be key in helping the UN scale initiatives by driving forward dynamic solutions. Such units nurture initiatives

through boot camps, cross-sectoral connections, helping teams overcome internal barriers, and broadcasting new learnings to the entire organization. The UN also involves local people to ensure sustainability and maximize social impact. End-users, such as refugees, are often active members of development teams, helping ensure that projects 'do no harm."

The power of bottom-up innovation

Innovations often start life in UN country offices, where staff need to respond quickly to unfolding crises. To circumvent slow central procedures, in-country innovators may decide not to involve the headquarters. Good ideas then spread from country to country, such as an anonymous SMS polling tool designed to gauge opinions on taboo topics in remote communities. "The idea grew organically, as other country offices could see the value of access to data on taboo topics," says Ambos. Such country-level innovations can achieve scale and have been shown to change the organization's culture when digital technology is involved.

Innovation champions at the country level are willing to employ workarounds to avoid head office bureaucracy, because they are motivated to solve an urgent problem—rather than by internal rewards or recognition. They are therefore able to access funds and forge partnerships which may have been disregarded by the large, centralized machinery of the UN, but which nevertheless align with broader organizational values.

"Strict hierarchies, risk-averse donors, and lengthy sign-off processes can stifle ideas, yet international organizations need to innovate to stay relevant," says co-author Tatarinov. "Greater public scrutiny, funding challenges, and the push towards digital means that bodies like the UN need to reinvent themselves—their culture, identity, and management

styles. By becoming more responsive and fostering innovative ideas, they can better achieve their missions and our shared global goals." The study findings show that the seed from one good idea can grow throughout a complex organization like the UN, changing it from the inside, and creating new space for enterprising ideas to flourish.

More information: Tina C. Ambos et al, Building Responsible Innovation in International Organizations through Intrapreneurship, *Journal of Management Studies* (2021). [DOI: 10.1111/joms.12738](https://doi.org/10.1111/joms.12738)

Provided by University of Geneva