Innovation in the UN

A session of the Joint Meeting of the Executive Boards of
UNDP/UNFPA/UNOPS, UNICEF, UN-Women and WFP

February 2, 2015

Why Innovate?

In adapting to the growing complexity of the 21st century, the United Nations system needs dynamic solutions to ensure it remains relevant and responsive. As governments are elaborating on the Sustainable Development Goals and targets for the new development agenda, innovation and the role of partnerships across sectors are increasingly important to accelerate progress on the most pressing issues.

On February 2, 2015 The executive boards of the United Nations' six agencies, funds and programmes leading humanitarian and development initiatives globally joined forces to discuss the challenges faced in developing and scaling up innovative ideas, processes and products.

"UNDP, UNFPA, UNICEF, UNOPS, UN-Women and WFP deliver approximately $15 billion a year in humanitarian assistance and development initiatives, making a real difference around the world. It is a very timely discussion as the UN system has started a process of transformative change to increase its relevance and effectiveness through the post-2015 development agenda."

– United Nations
Secretary-General,
Ban Ki-Moon

Innovation Principles

The event kicked off with "Fail Fair: Learning from Risk-taking," where funds and programmes shared their experiences of innovations that did not work as intended, and the invaluable insights gained through failure. These lessons and the openness to share both failures and successes are critical for the United Nations system as it seeks to scale-up innovative approaches and partnerships in response to myriad global challenges.

Following the Fail Fair, agencies shared a set of principles of innovation which guide the work, funders and assessment of innovation.

These principles of innovation have been endorsed by:

- Global Pulse
- SIDA
- The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation
- UNDP
- UNHCR
- UNICEF
- USAID
- WFP

"We must not forget that the people we serve must always remain at the center of everything we do. Innovation is one of the means through which we can achieve a greater impact in that mission."
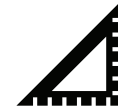
- United Nations
  Secretary-General,
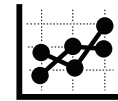 **Ban Ki-Moon**
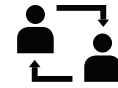
1. Design with the User

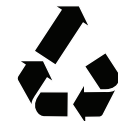*2. Understand the Existing Ecosystem*

3. Design for Scale

4. Build for Sustainability

5. Be Data Driven

6. Use Open Standards, Open Data, Open Source, and Open Innovation

7. Reuse and Improve

8. Do no Harm

9. Be Collaborative

Things that need to change

The United Nations faces a number of challenges in developing and scaling-up innovative ideas, processes and products.

The Executive Boards of the United Nations funds and programmes can play a significant role in enabling innovation, particularly by encouraging the notion that innovation needs a new mind set and an expanded 'space'. Four possible areas for further action were identified as:
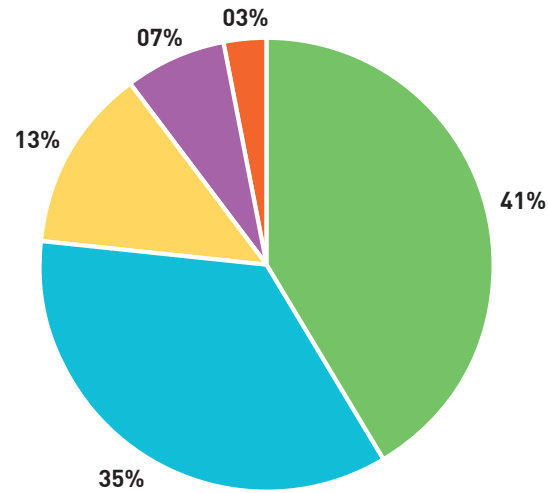
- *Partnerships*
- *Risk-Taking*
- *Financing*
- *Measuring Impact*

To assess widespread sentiment around these four areas, during the meeting the audience -- Board members, national governments and other stakeholders -- was polled using real-time engagement technology to answer a series of questions. The results follow.

Things that need to change:
Partnerships

The 'private sector' and 'governments' were identified as the two important partners in supporting innovations for development in the future. The results highlight the urgency for the United Nations system to position itself as a leader in this area.

"Only 3% consider international organizations leaders in innovation – it means that we have work to do, and it means there is an opportunity for all of us."

‒ **Anthony Lake**, Executive Director, UNICEF

"A culture of innovation brings the right people together in the right space to work on the right issues, without micromanaging the process or imposing any particular outcome. The key is to create physical, organizational and cultural structures that promote innovation, while ensuring that such structures do not suffocate innovation in its infant stages."

‒ **Dr. Babatunde Osotimehin,** Executive Director, UNFPA

Which partners will be the most important to support innovations for development in the future?

(Participants = 97)

- Governments
- International Organizations
- Civil Society
- Private Sector
- Academia

03%
07%
13%
41%
35%

Things that need to change:
Risk-Taking

Short-term risk aversion reinforces a culture of 'business as usual' rather than promoting new ways of working through risk-taking. Inflexible organizations result in low appetite for risk and inaction.

The audience encouraged agencies to take modest or significant risks to try out new projects which could potentially greatly benefit target populations. To allow for risk-taking, safe spaces for experimentation and learning must be created. This would allow for the scaling-up of what works, while being aware of and mitigating potential risks.

"It would be fair to say that we should all take a 'reasonable amount' of risk– which implies prudence while being prepared to dare."

‐ Helen Clark, Administrator, UNDP

"While promoting innovation, UN-Women is always guided by the principles of 'doing no harm and taking all measures to prevent harm to occur'. Ill-conceived innovative projects and policies could produce inadvertently counter-productive outcomes. This would present a considerable danger and reputational risk particularly for new institutions such as UN-Women. This is why UN-Women promotes innovation in a systematic manner and does not allow ad hoc experiments. Innovative approaches implies risk-taking and the possibility of lack of immediate impact, which is part of the gamble."

‐ Ms. Lakshmi Puri,
Deputy Executive Director, UN-Women
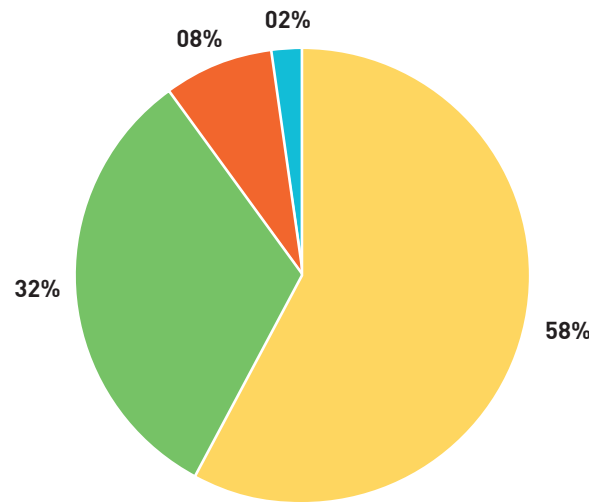
How much risk would you like agencies to take in order to try out a new project which, if successful, can potentially greatly benefit your target population?

(Participants = 95)

- None at all
- Very little - must be almost certain of success
- Modest amount
- Significant amount
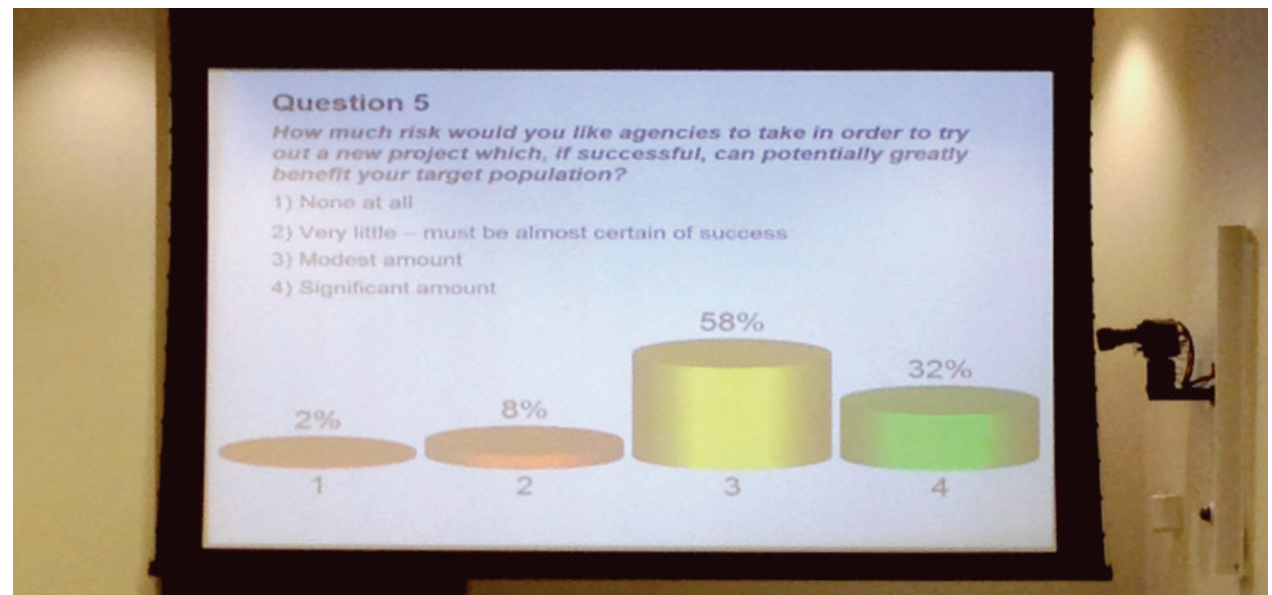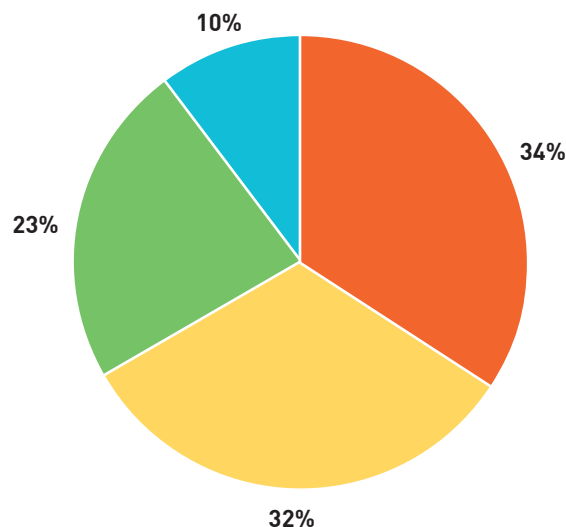
Things that need to change: *Financing*

Innovation often receives sporadic financing, limiting the ability of United Nations' organizations to develop optimal approaches or to test the scalability of projects through piloting. Financial regulations may present a barrier to investing resources for initiation, piloting and scaling up of innovative approaches. Detailed reporting requirements with pre-defined outcomes can also discourage innovation from developing.

Financial risk is a primary area of concern among participants. Financial risk needs to be considered from an 'innovation lens'. Innovations and the results they bring are cost-effective. Investments in piloting are usually small, while the cost of not innovating and using outdated approaches presents a significant drain on resources.

United Nations agencies, funds and programmes highlighted the need for greater flexibility of funding to allow for the United Nations system to lead and facilitate innovation for development.

"Innovation can result in delivering better quality, reaching more people and result in cost savings. The paybacks are positive over time"
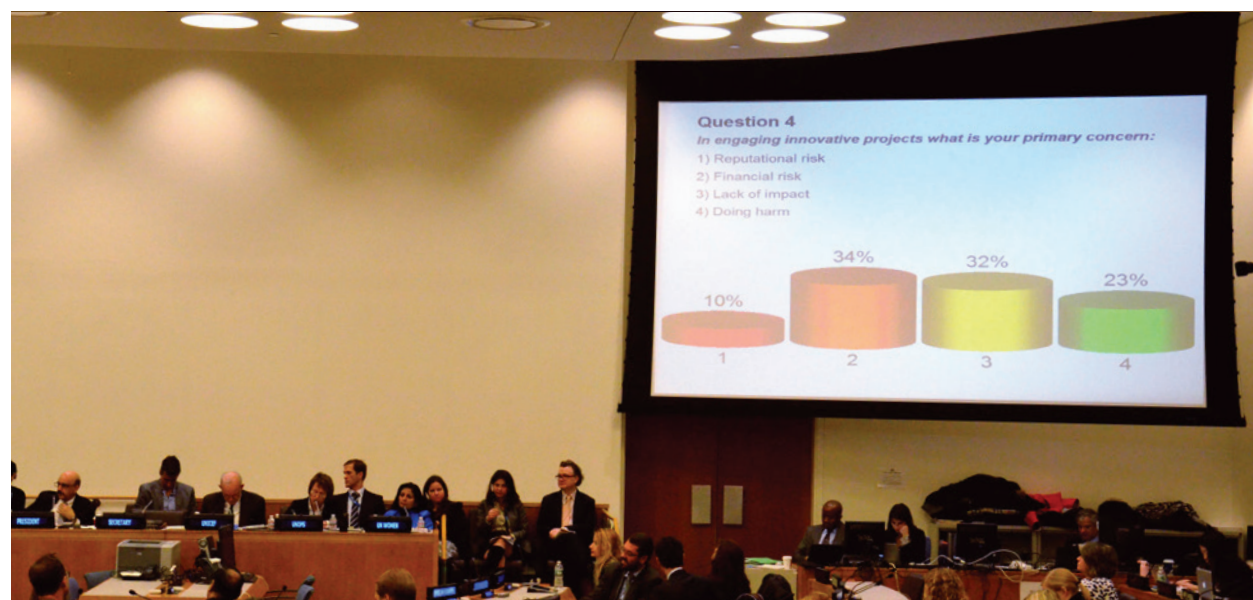
– **Ms. Grete Faremo,** Executive Director, UNOPS

In engaging innovative projects what is your primary concern?

(Participants = 96)

- Reputational Risk
- Financial Risk
- Lack of Impact
- Doing Harm

10%
34%
23%
32%

Things that need to change:
## *Measuring Results*

Initial ideas should be tested, prototyped, and rigorously monitored and measured. This type of iterative process, often used by the technology sector, is more likely to translate into successful outputs and results. Current systems that determine success based on pre-defined results and outcomes do not encourage innovation. Organisations require systems that allow for risk-taking and that support the management of failures. Failure should not be seen as a broader sign of managerial or organizational weakness, but as part of an essential learning and innovative process.

"Reputational and financial risks are operational realities for all of us, but we need to look at them from an innovation lens, rather than an operational lens only. But we need for focus on impact — once we have gone through a process, have identified something we consider a success and scale it up, we need to ensure impact. If there is lack of impact at this final stage, then that is true failure"

- **Mr. Amir Mahmoud Abdulla**, Deputy Executive Director and Chief Operating Officer of WFP

"As leaders, our role is to inspire innovation at every layer of our organisations. We need to be supportive, but not prescribe what that form of the innovation will be."

- **Helen Clark,** Administrator, UNDP
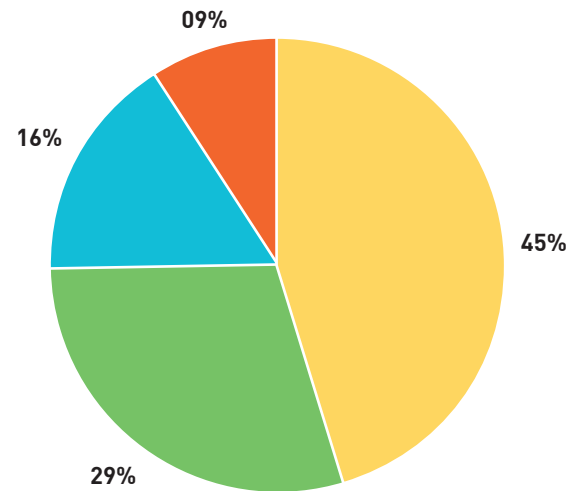
What do you consider the best marker for success around innovations that have achieved their intended results in reaching the targeted beneficiaries?

(Participants = 95)

- ▉ The innovation can be scaled up within the country.

- ▉ The innovation can be transferred to other programmes or programme areas within the United Nations' organizations.

- ▉ The innovation can be shared globally as knowledge with other organizations or governments around the world.

- ▉ The innovation leads to new unexpected results or insights that encourage further innovation.
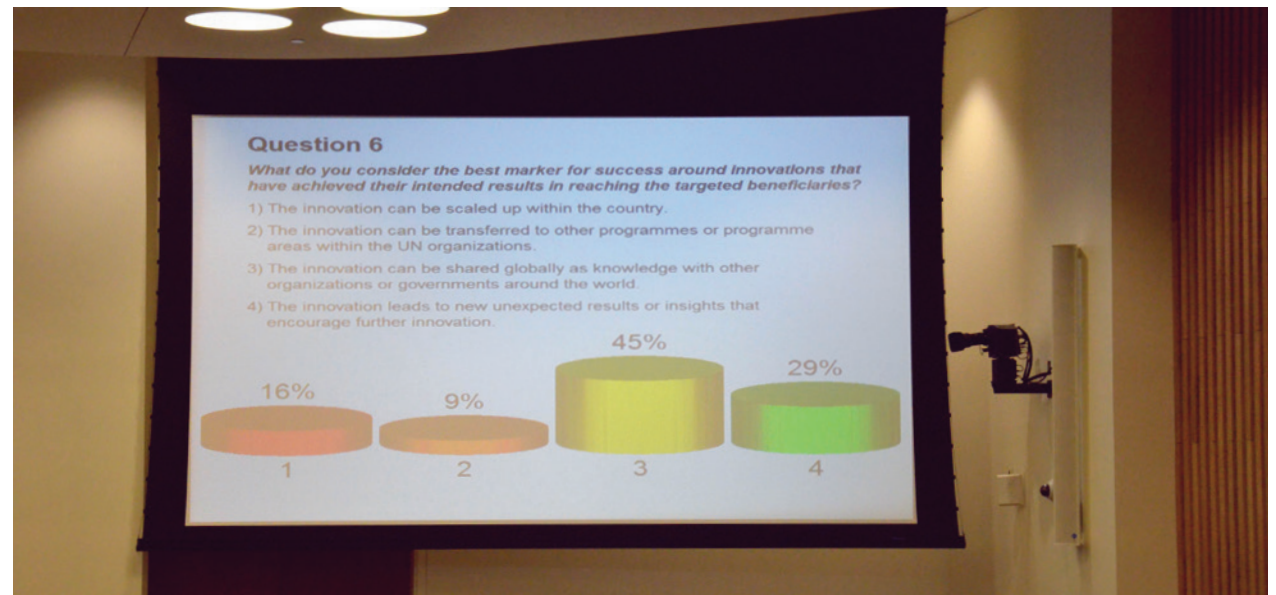
Portfolios

Real-time data, **engagement modalities** and **infrastructure solutions** present three common approaches that have the potential to significantly increase the effectiveness, efficiency and speed of interventions across sectors, leading to greater impact on development outcomes at programme and policy levels:

- **Portfolio 1: Real-Time Data** - allows governments and UN funds and programmes to connect with communities and address needs more quickly.

- **Portfolio 2: Engagement Modalities** - creates mechanisms for feedback and co-creation between governments and citizens.

- **Portfolio 3: Infrastructure Solutions** - provides reliable access to electricity and power necessary for poverty reduction.

Portfolio 1: Real-Time Data

Thanks to recent advances in technology, particularly cellular telephony, governments and United Nations funds and programmes can use real-time data in new ways: utilizing text messaging to connect marginalized communities to crucial services, creating early-warning systems to address needs more quickly, and speeding up surveys to monitor implementation.

Example 1:
mTrac in Uganda

UNICEF's mTrac is an SMS- and web- based data collection and analysis platform available on RapidPro - a platform that allows the international development community to visually build nationally scalable programmes and applications. mTrac was developed to enable health facility workers and community health workers to submit routine reports covering weekly disease surveillance and drug stocks at zero cost via their personally owned basic mobile phones.

In Uganda, mTrac is used nationwide by over 16,000 health facility workers in 3,200 health facilities and has successfully been used to track the health facility stock of essential medicines. Real-time monitoring of vaccine supplies enabled stock-outs to be addressed, and led to an increase in immunization coverage of DPT1 from 52% to 98% within one year.

Example 2:
Automatic Disaster Analysis Mapping System (ADAM)

The Automatic Disaster Analysis and Mapping System (ADAM) produces a 'virtual dashboard' as soon as a disaster strikes, featuring details including the scale of the emergency, number of people affected, weather conditions, and the WFP resources available in the area. This data is then automatically issued to staff and people from other organizations, via a subscription email and through a Twitter feed.

ADAM has drastically reduced the amount of time it takes to gather information and issue details, and has dramatically improved WFP's response time in the aftermath of an emergency.

Example 3:
mVAM (Mobile Vulnerability Analysis and Mapping)

WFP's mVAM (Mobile Vulnerability Analysis and Mapping) project is piloting remote data collection from households through short mobile phone surveys, using live telephone interviews, text message (SMS), and Interactive Voice Response (IVR) systems.

mVAM monitors a panel of roughly 600 households in total across the Democratic Republic of Congo and Somalia for a period of 12 months. Since September 2014, WFP has also conducted remote food security surveys in the Ebola-affected countries of Sierra Leone, Guinea, and Liberia using mobile phones.

Portfolio 2: Community Engagement

Putting the people affected by development challenges -- the end-users -- at the heart of defining the specifics of the problem, co-designing solutions, and testing and iterating those solutions is central to identifying innovations that create tangible changes. Technology creates mechanisms for citizens to co-create solutions as well as for developing feedback loops between citizens and the government.

Example 1:
U-Report

U-Report is an SMS and Twitter based tool that allows young people to speak out on issues that matter to them and have the results mapped in real-time. Available on the new RapidPro software U-Report is now highly scalable which is exemplified by its presence in 12 countries, CAR the most recent to launch in March, and many more in the pipeline. Over 550,000 youth are interacting with UNICEF and our UN and NGO partners on a weekly basis in the largest youth engagement tool of its kind. Recently U-Report has been used to inform disaster preparedness in Uganda, counsel over 50,000 young people on HIV/AIDS in Zambia and fight Ebola in Liberia. In fact U-Report Liberia has grown by over 20,000 young people in the last week, demonstrating the demand for the opportunity to speak out by young people in the most marginalised places and how tools originally put in place for emergencies can become part of the fabric of ongoing youth engagement in a sustainable way.

Example 2:
Innovation Labs in Egypt

UNDP Egypt has held a series of innovative initiatives focused on engaging citizens and government in a variety of issues. A Social Justice Innovation Camp for Egypt's National Human Development Report gathered 45 Egyptian youth to share their experiences of social injustice and to voice their opinions, concerns and aspirations to decision-makers.

'Design for integrated living', brought together a wide range of participants to generate ideas and simple, cost-effective prototypes that would aid persons with disabilities in leading an easier, more inclusive and integrated life.

'hack4mobile' generated ideas for smart cities. The winning teams will have the opportunity to participate in the Mobile World Congress.

Example 3:
Make My Island Maldives

UNDP Maldives developed "MakeMyIsland!", which uses mobile crowd-sourcing for better delivery of public services by providing a platform where community members can report concerns through a mobile app, SMS or the website. A series of prototype tests are being conducted with the support of the local Island Council, community and local NGOs as well as the team's pro bono technical partner Fix my street UK, whose work provided the original inspiration for the initiative. Initial feedback indicates that the system has allowed for community concerns to be addressed.

Example 4:
Innovation Labs in Armenia

A joint initiative of UNDP and UNICEF, Kolba Labs is a social venture incubator for initiatives conceived, designed and led by young people in Armenia. The incubation programme includes training workshops to develop core competencies and access to a network of mentors and specialists to help transform the innovations into social enterprises. To date, Kolba Labs have generated interesting ideas such as a virtual blood bank registry.

Example 5:
UNFPA's Husbands' School (Ecole des Maris)

A 2007 survey conducted by UNFPA Niger identified men's power, attitudes and behaviour as a major barrier to women taking advantage of reproductive health care in Niger. Under the coordination of a local NGO, UNFPA Husbands' Schools actively involve men, including traditional leaders, in health promotion and behavior change at the community level.

The programme also works to reach 'future husbands' by engaging young men under 25 to foster intergenerational dialogue and change harmful gender norms. A recent evaluation revealed significant progress in the rates of skilled attendance at birth and contraceptive prevalence in participating communities. The strategy has been scaled up across Niger and more recently replicated in Burkina Faso, Cote d'Ivoire, Sierra Leone, Guinea and other countries in West and Central Africa.

Portfolio 3:
Infrastructure/
Access to Information

Providing reliable access to electricity and power is necessary for poverty reduction, and is especially important for reaching the most vulnerable populations. Whether in rural schools, local health centres or densely populated urban areas, most electronic devices and means of communication rely on electricity. Advances in solar-power technology, for instance, have led to an exponential decrease in costs and help support more sustainable ways of energy creation.

Example 1:
Project Lumiere in Burundi

Project Lumiere, led by UNICEF Burundi's Innovation Lab, has been designed with the community to help identify a scalable model for delivering household energy supply in isolated areas. Communities purchase a solar or kinetic generator and robust, fast-charging LED lights to sell within their communities – introducing a safe, affordable lighting source and creating a constant revenue stream from the ongoing recharging of the lamps. Based on the project's early successes, scale up to an additional 40 communities is planned. UNICEF is supporting the development of a social enterprise to oversee provision of additional rechargeable lights and, in the future, the introduction of other affordable, open micro-energy technologies.

Example 2:
Digital Drum

UNICEF's Digital Drum is designed to help rural communities that have difficulty getting information about health, education and other issues. These solar-powered computer kiosks, which come loaded with educational content, are made of locally available metal oil drums and built to be durable against the elements. The intellectual property has been made open source and the product can be manufactured by private sector companies.

Example 3:
Safety Scan Tools

UN-Women supported an innovative approach using technology to address gender based violence. "Safety Scan tools" were distributed to rural and marginalized women to "map" dangerous areas in real time. While this tool was expected to map unsafe spaces and encourage community leaders to take action accordingly, women's inputs were not taken seriously by community leaders. Community leaders had not been sensitized sufficiently and as a result, targeted spaces remained unsafe for women. The new project didn't benefit communities as much as expected, but generated important lessons. Training women in using technology in itself added value, providing an increased sense of empowerment and self-esteem amongst women.

"Innovation is not an end in itself. Innovative approaches should be integrated throughout our organizations and serve to improve our programmes, policies and technical capacities. Like inventors around the world, the UN needs to develop an enabling environment more conducive to innovative approaches, particularly in testing new ideas and taking successful solutions to scale. Innovation can serve to empower communities, improve response times and, ultimately, facilitate the realization of human rights. In this sense, innovation can be seen as reinforcing a human rights approach to development.

- United Nations
  Secretary-General,
  Ban Ki-Moon