



# Starting the ethical journey

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**REFLECTIONS ON ETHICAL  
ISSUES EXPERIENCED BY  
DEPP LABS: PART 1**



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# INTRODUCTION

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## DEPP INNOVATION LABS

DEPP Innovation Labs is a [two-year programme](#) that manages several labs in four disaster-prone countries (Bangladesh, Jordan, Kenya and Philippines). Kristin Bergtora Sandvik was invited to participate as an ethics advisor to this project in January 2018. This reflection piece is the first in a three-part series that explore ethics questions faced by community-centred innovation labs.

## STARTING THE ETHICAL JOURNEY

The objective of our academic-practitioner collaboration was to facilitate a process of joint learning and reflection. First, we wanted to make the labs more aware of ethics issues in relation to their everyday activities and help them to think through these issues. Secondly, we wanted to document and analyse this process, with the aim of building knowledge in the sector and furthering academic engagement with this field.

The following reflections are based on my initial activities undertaken with the labs: an online discussion at the website, a webinar where I gave an introduction in February 2018, and subsequent self-reporting by the labs in spring 2018. Views expressed are my own.

## INNOVATION AND LOCALISATION

In the context of DEPP, community-centred refers to the process of involving people and organisations affected by disasters in the design, development and implementation of solutions (innovations) to their problems.

Over the last decade, innovation has emerged as a central vehicle for change in the humanitarian sector. I have explored this in research articles, including [Humanitarian innovation, humanitarian renewal?](#) and [Now is the time to deliver: looking for humanitarian innovation's theory of change.](#)

While there has been a proliferation of 'labs' in the humanitarian space, and while 'localisation' has emerged as a buzzword since the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016, these labs are generally not made up by members of communities in crisis or host communities. In fact, I have not been able to identify any community-based innovation labs in the humanitarian space outside this project. This means that the DEPP Labs programme, and the type of system innovation it represents, provides a unique opportunity to think through the triangular relationships between labs, innovation teams and the community.

Although humanitarian innovation community labs look like regular aid projects in many respects, there are several important differences: the structuring of innovation processes, the compressed timeframe, the toolbox and the objective of humanitarian innovation. This means that we are speaking of a very different type of activity, which comes with its own set of specific ethical dilemmas.

# DEFINING HUMANITARIAN ETHICS

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For community-based labs, questions such as how you balance humanitarian ‘do no harm’ principles with innovation success are deeply practical, and need to be framed in the context of the labs’ everyday work. For the initial phase of the DEPP programme cycle, this meant grappling with continuous sorting exercises: What is the actual innovation problem? What is the ethics problem in that problem? How should this cluster of problems be distinguished from ‘regular’ organisational or operational problems arising from operating in resource constrained/insecure or emergency contexts?

## WHAT IS HUMANITARIAN ETHICS

‘Ethics’ is here construed as a very simple idea: standards of rights and wrongs governing personal behaviour or the way we conduct an activity. See, for example, Hugo Slim’s book [Humanitarian Ethics](#).

In practice, humanitarian ethics is a process of carefully and systematically thinking through the moral underpinnings of a humanitarian enterprise. However, ethical questions change over time, and issues arise that were not envisaged at the outset.

It is not helpful to recite humanitarian principles as a mantra and treat them as moral absolutes: humanitarians need to think about ethics with respect to both what they are doing and how they are doing it. They also need to consider the direct and indirect consequences for the populations they profess to assist, as well as for donors and for others who share the ‘humanitarian’ label. For the DEPP Labs, this entails thinking about the ethics of ‘humanitarian’ + ‘innovation’ + ‘community’.

## THE PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE

From the outset, we have to acknowledge the presence of multiple and parallel ethical perspectives in the humanitarian innovation ecosystem. It is important to emphasise that the process of reflecting on humanitarian ethics looks different for someone who is trying to be a responsible donor or grant maker, someone who is trying to co-ordinate an international code of conduct exercise and someone who is working on the local level with communities in crisis.

However, for all groups, the challenge is about personal ethics and what it means to be an ethical decision-maker on an individual level in a context of moral stress, feelings of inadequacy, and personal sympathies and antipathies, coupled with a strong desire to take action.

## WHAT IS SPECIFICALLY HUMANITARIAN ABOUT HUMANITARIAN ETHICS?

The operational environments for the DEPP Labs are slow onset drought, preparedness for disaster/natural disaster and urban refugee communities. Humanitarian responders will often describe this kind of context as one of vulnerability, of chaotic and difficult logistics (for example lack of connectivity), of weak or unwilling government, and of security issues for aid workers.

Academic commentators, on the other hand, have noted that the idea of 'crisis' is premised upon specific ideas about emergency and urgency that make certain responses appear appropriate and that foreground the imperative to 'do something'. An ethics reflection should try to grapple with both levels: how context is experienced, and the fact that any interpretation is, to a certain extent, socially constructed. Other ways of understanding a situation, a problem or a solution might be possible.

## **ALL PROBLEMS ARE NOT ETHICAL PROBLEMS**

It is also important to note that all problems are not ethical problems or the result of bad humanitarianism or bad decisions. Humanitarians must see the limits of their own power: they are not responsible for suffering, or for climate change, armed conflict or government failure. [Criminal behaviour](#) by humanitarian workers (such as harassment, extortion, taking and embezzlement) is not an ethical issue: this behaviour is unethical but, more importantly, illegal – and need to be dealt with as such.

Underfunding – and the attendant notion of the '[protection gap](#)' that humanitarians are not able to attend for lack of resources or capacity – is a huge issue, and one that forces specific trade-offs at field level. But having to contend with unpleasant trade-offs is not unethical. Often, there are no ideal solutions: effectiveness and timeliness must be balanced against accountability and participation.

# ‘COMMUNITY’: ETHICS AS EXPECTATION MANAGEMENT

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For all the DEPP Labs, their relationships with their innovators and with the community changed, fluctuated and evolved during the programme cycle. However, it is important to note that, at the start of the cycle, the labs gave careful thought to how they would like these relationships to play out. Here are some of the questions they asked themselves and each other.

## WHAT IS A COMMUNITY-CENTRED APPROACH?

Doing community-based innovation is to ask the community to go on a journey of uncertainty, which may carry significant opportunity costs. This makes expectation management crucial. Specifically, it requires careful thinking about community rights in terms of participation, access to the final product, access to intellectual property (IP) and protection against digital harms, such as [cyber-attacks](#), sloppy handling of [sensitive personal data](#) or [unethical experimental practices](#).

## HOW MUCH SHOULD BE INVESTED IN FACILITATING COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION?

Some communities may have very little knowledge, information or experience of even engaging with others for development projects. When we deal with a community that is new to innovation approaches and we have limited time to collect innovative ideas:

- How much we should focus on getting ideas from the community and how much from other organisations outside of the community?
- When we do involve community representatives in the process of selecting innovations, how much involvement is appropriate?
- Should we spend more time with the community at an early engagement period, building trust and acceptance, which in practice means extending the deadline to call for ideas?

## HOW DO WE MANAGE EXPECTATIONS?

There are specific ethical issues to consider when working with marginalised and vulnerable communities regarding the way we raise, and manage, expectations.

- Is it ethical for us to involve communities in crisis in implementing a project, when we do not know if it will succeed or not?
- What impact do we promise – and how do we assess long-term impact?
- Are communities adequately informed about their role, and what expectations are we creating?
- Are communities adequately compensated for their contributions – especially if a project goes on to commercialise the IP?

There is also a general problem of what is meant by community members ‘consent’ and how long this consent is valid for. Is it for example valid beyond the project period?

## WHAT ARE THE OPPORTUNITY COSTS?

Does the potential cost to the community of their participation, for example people’s time, outweigh the benefits? For the community, there is also the opportunity cost of participating in lab projects versus other preparedness activities they might do. For the lab projects, the outcomes are not certain, experiments may not work or may simply be discontinued.

When multiple engagements with the community build their hopes, how can we justify the harm of failed projects/innovations? This is especially important in communities that have experienced being used by multiple NGOs and government actors as experiment areas/test subjects in the past.

## WHAT ABOUT UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES?

- Are we exposing communities to any increased risk as a result of participating in lab work?
- Are we treating people’s data appropriately?
- Are there certain risks that can be taken in the start-up/innovation sector that shouldn't be taken in the development sector?
- How can we be innovative and open to risks but not put people in direct/indirect harm with experimental systems?
- How can labs capture and assess the negative impact on the community in terms of environment, culture, tradition or security?

## WHAT IS THE COLLECTIVE IMPACT?

Even at the start of the innovation cycle, it is necessary to think about collective impact: what is the impact on the community when the programme ends, or the innovation fails? But an equally hard question might be about ‘ownership’ of a successful innovation, especially if the innovation project is not really going to be a project which will be implemented by the partner/host community afterwards.

- What if the participating community members request that the innovation products they tested be given to them, but the innovation teams prefer not to do so?
- Is it ethical to develop an innovation project that is not going to be implemented by the partner/host community afterwards?
- Are we expecting the partner community to implement a product innovation even if the external ‘idea originator’ leaves after piloting? Will they be able to do so?

# THE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN LABS AND INNOVATORS

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## WHO IS GOING TO BE IN THE PROJECT?

The question ‘Who is going to be in the project?’ raises the issue of who a community member is –and who gets to define questions of membership and voice.

Labs expressed some anxiety about working with innovators not ‘from the community’. It was also a challenge to ensure that a representative sample of the community engaged with the lab. It was noted that many of the people who are better placed to be successful innovators may not necessarily be from the most marginalised groups (or the people who humanitarians generally work with). Furthermore, they may not always be truly representative of the community, as there are some groups who prefer to stay invisible. Moreover, how might cultural norms impact, for example, women’s participation—and how do humanitarians deal with this? Finally, saying no to community members has a cost too, and may affect the momentum of participation and acceptance.

## WORKING RELATIONSHIPS

Working relationships are increasingly viewed as a part of humanitarian ethics. In the case of the DEPP Labs, this includes the relationship between staff and innovators. DEPP Lab members wondered how they should assess or screen the ethics of the innovators they worked with, as well as those of others participating in the project. They also wondered about the impact on the innovator when the programme ends or the innovation fails. What are the team’s care and control responsibilities in relation to the innovators, and what are the responsibilities of the innovators themselves?

## SHORT TIMEFRAMES

How are we going to deal with innovations that need longer than the eight-month programme cycle to be implemented?

Will we be open for innovations that totally change during project implementation?



Funding for the DEPP Innovation Labs programme finishes in July 2019, and innovations may struggle to reach scale before this time. What happens to innovation in labs that cease to operate after this? By this point, innovators will have invested a lot of time into developing their innovation, but it might not be mature enough to go it alone or find sustainable future support. Are the innovations just dropped? What will the ethical impact of this be on the innovator?

# SOME FINAL THOUGHTS

The answers to these questions are far from easy and there is no ‘one size fits all’ solution to them. What is key in the DEPP Lab process is that these questions are continually asked and re-asked as the programme develops. Involving stakeholders at all levels of the programme is important to ensure that the best judgement is made on how to respond to these ethical dilemmas and that it is made in a transparent way.

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## RELATED ARTICLES

Innovation labs and ethical issues, part 2: Local culture and everyday practice

Innovation labs and ethical issues, part 3: professionalisation, participation and relationships

