
Humanitarian Innovation Fund After Action Review (AAR) Guidelines



Introduction

The Humanitarian Innovation Fund (HIF) has produced this short guide to help those working with innovations to structure their learning and reflection. AARs are a tool to structure some straightforward questions that help individuals and groups reflect and learn after undertaking an activity. Originating in the 1970s, AARs have been adapted for use in a number of fields due to their simplicity and flexibility. Structured and systematic learning are essential for successful innovation, and AARs can form an important part of this.

The AAR methodology aims to capture and document experiences in order to improve future practice.

Typically, an AAR focuses on a core set of questions:

What was supposed to happen?

What actually happened?

What was successful and why?

What didn't work and why?

What did we learn?

These questions help separate out what happened during the project or activity from what was planned, and identify what worked and what didn't. Although relevant in a variety of settings, questions like these are especially important when attempting to innovate, where new ideas are being tried and results and outcomes are unknown.

By its nature, innovation means trying new things, and this will necessarily entail learning and adaptation.

Conducting an AAR should help identify what elements of the innovation have been successful and should be taken forward, as well as what hasn't worked. Even where an innovation is unsuccessful, there will be valuable knowledge and learning that should be captured.

The HIF funds a wide variety of ideas that aim to improve international humanitarian action. Because of this diversity, we recognise that different projects and teams will need to adapt these guidelines for their own use.



Preparation

AARs are structured discussions with the aim of enabling learning. They are not a critique or an evaluation of a project or team. Everyone who participated in the project should be given equal opportunity to share, regardless of their expertise or position, and all views should be respected and recorded (this may include partners and users when relevant).

To achieve the environment needed for this, preparation is important.

The People You Need

Making sure the relevant people are involved in an AAR is perhaps the most important element to its success, whether the AAR is to take place over 20 minutes at the end of a day's activity or two days at the end of the project. In particular, it is useful to think about conducting a final AAR while the project team is still in place.

Given timing and resources, it may be a good idea to identify an external facilitator to oversee the AAR. Even if the AAR is conducted internally, someone should be identified who can facilitate the session, keeping time and giving everyone equal chance to contribute.

Whoever facilitates, it is important to make sure they are familiar with the purpose of the exercise and the questions it addresses. Crucially, they should be able to create and maintain the open, honest environment needed

and encourage conversation and participation by all team members.

It is also important that someone is identified to capture and record the discussion, in order to produce a clear output from the activity.

The Information You Need

It is important that before the AAR starts, all the members of the project team are aware of the purpose of the exercise and how the information generated will be used. Remember that in the case of the HIF, it is the innovation that is the focus of the exercise.

Before the AAR gets started, everyone should have a shared understanding of the fundamentals of the project, such as the idea behind the innovation, the timeframe of the project, and who was involved. The questions that the AAR is going to cover should be agreed, and it may make sense to write them up on flipchart paper, which can then be tagged with answers on Post-its.

Where there is likely to be disagreement, it may make sense to ask participants to write down answers in advance.

The core group of questions that form the AAR are presented overleaf with an expanded range of examples that may offer more detailed question to choose from or adapt.

Questions for Innovation AARs

1 What was supposed to happen?

This question is about what was planned at the beginning of the project:

- What were you hoping the innovation would achieve?
- What were the planned project activities and timeline?
- Who did you expect would play a key role in the process?
- What did you hope to know about the innovation or area of practice by the end of the project and how would you measure this?
- What effect did you expect external factors to have on the innovation?

2 What actually happened?

This question aims to compare reality with what was envisaged at the start.

- How has the innovation – and your understanding of it – progressed?
- Were the key planned activities or tasks carried out? Can you establish a timeline?
- What do the differences between plans and reality tell us about the innovation?
- How did the role played by different actors affect the process?
- How did external factors affect the innovation, positively or negatively?

3 What was successful and why?

This question should be used to identify the most successful elements of the innovation and the conditions that made success possible.

What was the most successful element of the innovation, expected or unexpected?

- Was the project successful in taking forward the innovation through the relevant stage of the innovation process? If so, what contributed to this?
- What obstacles had to be overcome, and were these foreseen?

This is about more than whether the planned activities were a success. It should be used to

discuss the most promising elements of the innovation.

4 What didn't work, and why?

Most innovations don't change the world, and learning from failure is essential to successful innovation in the long-run.

- What elements of the innovation were unsuccessful?
- What didn't go to plan, and why?
- Where things didn't work, was this due to the project design and delivery, or a failure of the innovation itself?
- Did you identify any unintended consequences of the innovation, and what impact did they have?

5 What did we learn?

Lessons can be divided along these lines:

What has been learnt about the innovation?

- What was learnt about the innovative idea during the project?
- What was learnt about the given area of practice?

What was learnt from the process?

- What did you learn about developing innovations in humanitarian practice?
- What would you do differently next time?

What Next?

The final question (and what might seem like the most pressing) is 'What next?' The process of innovation is dynamic, and the end of a HIF grant may be just the beginning of a longer innovation process.

Capturing and documenting the learning generated through the project is an important part of identifying the most appropriate next steps. How this information will then be presented and shared should be agreed – for instance, will the outcomes of the AAR be

shared as a separate document or included in a final project report? Outputs should include actionable recommendations and next steps.

Most innovations don't achieve the success envisaged for them, but this is a natural part of the process of innovation. Innovators should be prepared to discard what hasn't worked and identify and take forward those aspects which show promise. The AAR should provide a useful stepping stone in this process.

Good Luck!

Background and further reading on AARs

Leader's Guide to After-Action Reviews (AAR) 2011 US Army Combined Arms Center. Training Circular. Washington, D.C.

Luna E., Rodriguez L., Salazar L (2009) Guidelines for Conducting After Action Reviews IDB Vice Presidency for Sectors and Knowledge

Parry C.S., Darling M. J. (2001) Emergent Learning in Action: The After Action Review. The Systems Thinker 12(8)1-6

Ramalingam, B. 2006. Tools for knowledge and learning: A guide for development and humanitarian organizations. ODI, London, UK.

Salem-Schatz S., Ordin D., Mittman B. (2010) Guide to the After Action Review Version 1.1; Using Evaluation to Improve Our Work: A Resource Guide

U.S. Agency for International Development (2006) After-Action Review Technical Guidance. (PN-ADF-360) Washington D.C.

The HIF

The Humanitarian Innovation Fund (HIF) provides a unique cross-sector funding mechanism to facilitate and promote innovations and innovation processes within the sector.

It is the product of a partnership between ELRHA (Enhancing Learning and Research for Humanitarian Assistance) and ALNAP (The Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action) and is hosted by Save the Children UK.

For more information about the Humanitarian Innovation Fund please visit our website: www.humanitarianinnovationfund.org

The HIF innovation process:

