



## How the Needs of the World's Children are Driving Innovation Success Stories at UNICEF

### *What Business Can Learn From the Globe's Most Crucial Ideation Campaign*

In Africa, hundreds of thousands of previously “voiceless” children are using a new platform to tell the world what they need for their health, development and survival.

In Mongolia, rural children are avoiding winter diarrheal deaths thanks to an idea for using insulated shipping containers as safe toilets and hand-washing venues. In the wake of disasters and conflicts in places like South Sudan and Haiti, children are being protected from human trafficking by a mobile phone app that quickly reunites them with their caretakers. And in Nepal, new open source technologies are empowering young people to be responders, reporters and resources to their communities in the wake of an earthquake which has left thousands dead and more than 1.7 million children in need of humanitarian assistance.

Despite its location within one of the world’s largest bureaucracies, UNICEF has emerged not only as an award-winning center of innovation, but one that can also rapidly implement new ideas on a scale that dwarfs the largest private sector initiatives. And despite greater-than-ever inequities and challenges facing the world’s children, UNICEF believes that, thanks to the tool of collaborative innovation, new technologies and “an infrastructure of openness” present a realistic hope that, for the first time, the tide can turn for many of these challenges. Suddenly, development “of the people; by the people; for the people” has become an achievable mantra, with young people acting as both first responders to crises affecting them, and collaborative change agents who are revolutionizing efficiencies for development resources.

The mandate for the interdisciplinary team comprising UNICEF Innovation is simple: to improve the lives of children around the world through ideation and connectivity. And its approach is based on nine innovation principles, including openness (open innovation; open source; open data); the innovative use of existing



resources; collaboration across industries and sectors; data-driven project management; and design for scale and modular replication.

Many traditional solutions still work well, but its no longer business as usual at UNICEF. The launch of its Global Innovation Center in May was heralded to “provide leadership and technical support to the roll-out and scale-up of a select portfolio of proven innovative solutions by expanding their application from one to several countries and regions, supporting South-South collaboration.”

And the mindset change behind this mandate is the idea that access to information is as fundamental to development as education and nutrition. In an interview with one of UNICEF’s collaborative partners – the CMO Council – the Director of UNICEF’s Global Innovation Centre, Dr Sharad Sapra, said: “Through collaboration, we can actually turn whole world around. The changes that were thought only possible 50 years down the road we can now make happen in 5 years. A new set of strategies need to be designed for a new set of assumptions, and that is where innovation comes to the forefront: a new way of thinking on how to address the needs of people facing these inequities.”

UNICEF now co-ordinates 14 “Innovation labs,” which are local collaborations between government, academia, business and civil society, and which serve as incubation accelerators for new solutions.

At the heart of UNICEF’s innovation technologies is RapidPro: an open source platform that the agency co-developed and acquired to build and scale mobile phone applications anywhere in the world. RapidPro’s simple interface allows ordinary development practitioners to create new interactive applications without having to hire programmers or software engineers.

Now known as “the app store for international development,” RapidPro has spawned a remarkably diverse suite of country-specific programs that are changing and saving lives. These include: U-Report, which has already given a real-time voice to over 700 000 young people; EduTrac, which reconnects teachers to the needs of learners; mTrac, which provides real-time data on health services



and medical supplies; Project Mwana, which ensures quick HIV testing for infants; and mHero, which is offering numerous real-time health communication applications, having revolutionized connectivity during the Ebola crisis.

If there was any remaining doubt for company CEOs about the need for new innovation tools to drive revenue, the commitment at UNICEF to innovate across all areas of work for the highest stakes of all – the lives of countless children – should draw a final line through the corporate business-as-usual culture. There is now the best argument possible that businesses should not only learn from UNICEF’s example, but should actively collaborate – at the very least, for the revenue potential from millions of future customers, and the market security of a more stable world.

A prime example of both this collaboration and the mindset shift at the UN children’s agency is CauseTech – a network of the world’s leading innovators and entrepreneurs who are working together to leverage and scale their social impact technologies to fit UNICEF needs. Launched as a joint initiative between the CMO Council, the Business Performance Innovation (BPI) Network, and UNICEF Innovation, CauseTech’s “Succeed where There’s a Need” campaign invites innovators to vie for winning roles within curated challenges. This community also underscores the bottom-up mindset change at UNICEF – in which the agency is embracing a major initiative that it does not control.

UNICEF Innovation has enabled the Government of Uganda to improve the number of births registered by a staggering 24% in a single year, through turning solutions designed for banking security to ensuring secure, confidential and on-the-spot issuance of abridged birth certificates for 1.4 million children under five years old. Birth registration innovation is critical in Uganda because – having previously been “invisible” to service delivery through their lack of documentation – millions of children are now able to access education, vaccination and health services.

Measuring innovation remains a challenge for the agency. However, to a degree greater even than the metrics challenge faced by businesses, in some areas



UNICEF finds it difficult to quantify the impact of its traditional efforts and its innovations, along with the efforts of many others. For example, 600,000 fewer children under five years old die annually now from preventable causes such as diarrhea, malaria and respiratory illnesses than in 2000 – but it is impossible to distinguish between the impact of government health department interventions, economic changes and UNICEF innovations.

And 17,000 children under five still die each day – a figure which reflects both the ultimate innovation target, and the source of the urgency and motivation behind the effort to implement effective ideas. So UNICEF prioritized outcomes over output, and uses a team of experienced professionals to evaluate effectiveness where there are gaps in the data. But the trends and the field office reports from around the globe show an unmistakable pattern: collaborative innovation is improving millions of young lives.

Beyond the problem of measurement, UNICEF Innovation offers numerous lessons for business. It is no coincidence that UNICEF is the most innovative of the UN agencies. While the WHO deals with largely health authorities and the High Commissioner for Refugees deals with home affairs and refugee organizations, UNICEF – operating in 190 countries - deals with every department, organization and NGO affecting the lives of young people. Collaboration and new partnerships is part of its DNA, and its staff is now leveraging these contacts in an innovation model that the world’s leading CEOs strongly advocate.

Reflecting the customer-driven innovation model at leading Silicon Valley companies, the agency is finding greater viability and community acceptance in its initiatives through bottom-up ideation, in which communities and children themselves are the authors. The By Youth For Youth (BYFY) program in Kosovo prepares young people from vulnerable communities to identify, analyze, and take entrepreneurial action against community challenges they care about— helping participants realize their role as agents of social change, and building their professional readiness and resilience along the way.



UNICEF works through a set of innovation principles that emphasize openness, collaboration, and the central importance of stakeholders, rather than shareholders. Its global family of game changers has the benefit of a crystal clear set of guidelines for solutions. Its principles include guidelines to “use, modify and extend existing tools, platforms and frameworks where possible;” “plan for sustainability from the start;” “include all user groups in planning;” and “ensure solutions are sensitive to, and useful for, the most marginalized populations.”

Crucially, the vast invitational net cast by UNICEF is identifying good ideas gathering dust in developing countries due to a lack of commercial funding or scale-up capacity. For instance, payment systems using mobile phones – a source of technology excitement today – was a technology developed in Africa in the late 1990s. A cellphone dongle that enables quick HIV results, which has been the subject of research headlines in the US, actually follows – and dovetails with – biotechnology synthesis work developed at Rhodes University in South Africa.

Low-tech – or at least offline second-generation technologies – have emerged as an area with massive and under-emphasized potential for disruptive innovation. Most of UNICEF’s open source innovation focuses on “dumb” mobile phone technology; a non-broadband focus, which some experts believe could yield major breakthroughs for western consumers in the future. In conversation with Donovan Neale-May – CEO of the CMO Council – Sapra posed this fascinating challenge to the world’s innovators: “No one has yet worked out the link between the radio and a cell phone as an interactive device. Why not? Anyone brilliant enough to develop this technology between 2 and 3-G will be the next Mark Zuckerberg.” Sapra added: “We work with (hardware) that people already have. The growth of cell phones has been phenomenal, and research shows us that 85% of people use it for talking and texting. In looking for potential technology solutions, we must keep in mind how people are actually using or going to use that technology.”

No one at UNICEF is offered cash or salary incentives for good ideas. Instead, officials there report that the sheer pride of improving the health and prospects of vulnerable young people – as well as the joy of cross-functional collaboration –



provides ample motivation to conceive new approaches. And despite the strong focus on innovation, UNICEF has avoided the common corporate model of making “innovation” a formal job description element for field office staff, except for a small enabling team. In this respect, its approach mirrors the model adopted by content giant News Corp, in which a small innovation team – comprising engineers and other “doers” – inspires innovation through the global network in a “show, don’t tell” model. And so, when UNICEF Innovation officials found exciting individual ideas at its Nepal office, their input was simply to suggest how nodes in the local innovation ecosystem could combine those ideas into a single powerful initiative. In Cambodia, a locally devised costing model – overlooked as paper-intensive – was revived when viewed through the innovation lens, due to its multiple applications and update mechanism.

The majority of the global population, especially those living in under-served and resource-constrained areas, does not have access to the three pillars of global citizenship: information, opportunity and choice. Innovations that improve access to information, facilitate youth activism and citizenship, and provide real-time information, contribute to establishing these three pillars. Implementing new ideas in these areas allow UNICEF programs to overcome barriers posed by distance and time that contribute to marginalizing and excluding children.

When you’re innovating for Good, and when children’s lives are the headline item on the balance sheet, it seems there is very little that innovation cannot achieve.