FIVE REASONS
TO FEAR INNOVATION

Lucia Nader & José Guilherme F. de Campos

• *...and many other reasons to dare* •
to innovate so as to adapt to today's world

ABSTRACT

In recent years, innovation has become a buzz word in the human rights sector. The concept is increasingly emphasised by funders and, consequently, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are beginning to pay attention to it, but usually with reluctance and cynicism.

Wanting to better understand the origins of innovation and why rights based NGOs tend to instinctively resist it, Lucia Nader and José Guilherme F. de Campos interviewed over one hundred activists and human rights defenders.

Here they distil the results of their research and offer the five main concerns with innovation that were articulated during the interviews, specifically that (1) it is simply a fashionable word from the private sector in the Global North; (2) there is no real need for innovation when fighting for human rights since the underlying principles of the movement do not change; (3) it is unfair to test innovative concepts on those that the human rights movement seeks to protect; (4) innovation only results in creating more rights violations; (5) innovation brings uncertainties, which funders tend not to like.

Analysing each of these concerns in turn and presenting counter arguments, the authors conclude by suggesting five questions that organisations must ask themselves before embarking on a process of innovation.

"The Stone Age did not end for the lack of stones", but because humanity decided to take a different direction and adopt new habits. This is the maxim accepted by many of those who believe in innovation: a controversial and recurrent concept in our research project on "Solid Organizations in a Liquid World" (SOLW).[1] SOLW aims to explore how civil society organisations (CSOs) and funders are reacting and adapting to the trends of contemporary society, including the empowerment of individuals as political actors, the multiplicity of information and agendas and the state in crisis, all of which are hallmarks of "liquid modernity".[2]

In order to do this we interviewed 102 activists and human rights defenders from Europe, the United States of America (U.S.) and Latin America between 2015 and 2016. A considerable number showed some resistance either to the concept of innovation in general or to the need for rights-based non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and donors to constantly innovate. Many of them shunned the idea of innovation, raising a series of concerns, which we have grouped here as "5 reasons to fear innovation".

As Emily Martinez from the Open Society Foundations (U.S.) pointed out recently during a conference, "who knows, might this resistance result from the fact [that] it seems contradictory to speak of innovation in a field where persistence and resilience are deemed key features and take so much of our energy? How is it possible to innovate in weekly visits to prisons to document abuses and torture, for example? Or, why do we immediately associate innovation with technology, whereas there is an increasing mistrust of and awareness about the limits of turning everything technological and modern?"

Nevertheless, it is undeniable that we are living through profound transformations in our societies. Some of these changes are visible in the recent waves of protests and in the emergence of "new movements" around the world. Among these changes, one could cite the speed of information and new forms of mobilisation, the multiplicity of agendas, the exacerbation of individual activism as opposed to channeling demands through existing organisations, the efforts to making state institutions truly representative and, in extreme cases, challenging the value of democracy and rights themselves.

During the course of our research, Alexandre Ciconello from Amnesty International (Brazil) warned that "we are witnessing a new cycle of renewed discussion on the identity and work methods of NGOs...We cannot isolate ourselves from the changes that are happening in our societies - we must give space and conditions to innovate if doing so is necessary."Akwasi Aidoo from Trust Africa (Ghana) added to this, stating that "there is an increasing alienation of human rights groups. In some contexts, the trust of ordinary people in human rights NGOs is decreasing and those organisations depend on donors to sustain their structure and operations." Pablo Collada from Ciudadano Inteligente (Chile) went even further, saying that "often we are concerned more with our survival than our relevance and fail to notice the changes in the world surrounding us." Several respondents highlighted that there is a sense of "exhaustion"

within their organisations, with challenges and historical violations persisting while new rights violations arise at every moment.

It is not just internal (organisational) factors that influence the ability and success of an innovation. External factors also play a key role – such as the dynamics of the different actors of the society related to a particular problem and the political, economic and cultural context.[3] In addition, it is key to recall that we will never fully control all those factors, especially in a world of ongoing and rapid changes.

Thus, it is crucial to move forward in a frank and constructive discussion about what innovation means for NGOs and human rights funders and what the challenges and opportunities are that lie ahead. In the following pages, we will do just that, knowing it is only the first step.

1 • Fearing Innovation

We have summarised and grouped what we heard from more than 100 human rights activists and donors when we discussed the issue of innovation into five overarching concerns that permeated the responses. After identifying the five recurring concerns, we then offer our analysis of why these concerns are valid but why innovation can still take place. All of them are relevant and bring important elements to qualify the debate.

1 – Isn't innovation just a fashionable Global North term used in the private sector and by funders now being forced on the social sector?

Indeed. It is undeniable that innovation has become fashionable and there is external pressure, including from donors, to seek "the new". It is also undeniable that much of what is written about innovation comes from the Global North and the private sector. Innovation is the first word in the Silicon Valley lexicon, accompanied by others such as "disruption", "human centered approach" and many other English terms that are hard to translate in a meaningful way to other contexts and languages.

According to the Oslo Manual on Guidelines for Collecting and Interpreting Innovation Data, one of the main theoretical references on the subject, "innovation is the implementation of a new or significantly improved product (good or service), or process, a new marketing method, or a new organisational method in business practices, workplace organisation or external relations."[4] This definition by itself could raise concerns from those who work for social change as it is primarily focused on the private sector.

The chart below shows the evolution of the use of the term "innovation" between 1948 and 2008 in books available on the Internet (an innovative tool in itself, powered by Google and available for free).

Evolution of the use of the term "innovation" in the books published digitally
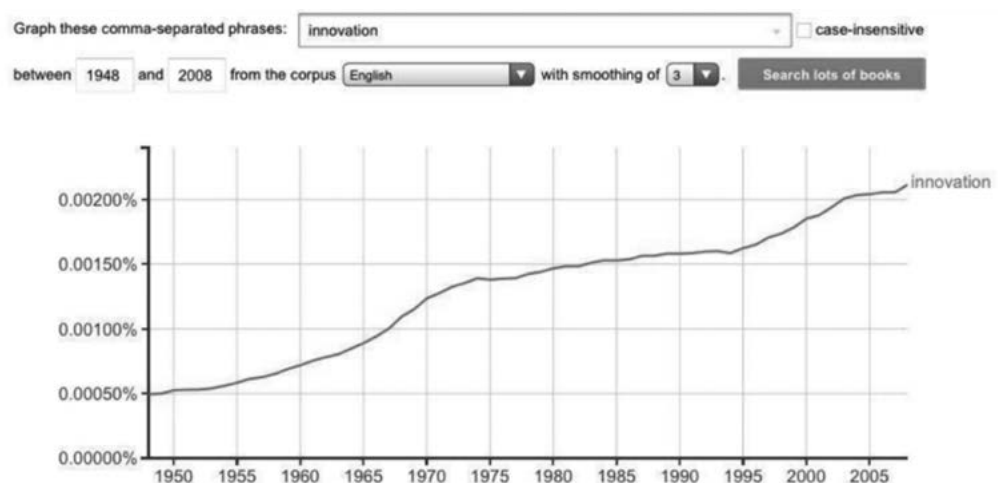
Source: Google Ngram Viewer

Warning that there are few studies on innovation in the world of NGOs, Johanna Mair and Christian Seelos, both researchers at Stanford University, define innovation in NGOs as "the process by which an idea that is new to an organisation fosters a new set of activities, such as new technologies, new management processes, new products or new services."[5] They highlight three dimensions that affect innovation: (i) individual factors - such as personality, motivation, cognitive ability, (ii) group factors - structure of the staff, organisational environment, internal processes and leadership style; and (iii) organisational factors - such as size, available resources and the culture of an organisation. They conclude by saying that innovation is complex and also depends on factors external to the organisation and can cause greater or lesser break or discontinuity with the previous *status quo* depending on this whole range of factors.

Mair, who is also the editor of the *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, believes that NGOs have exaggerated the idea of innovation as "a panacea for all ills". This may be due to: (i) a perception that we are undergoing a crisis in the social sector, having conducted decades of hard work without being sure of the results achieved; (ii) a general sense of "urgency" - maximised by the speed of information - which reinforces the need to "do something different" and (iii) financial resources available for innovation, linked to the private sector, which has led us to adopt a logic of innovation derived from the market, such as social ventures, hybrid models and impact investing.[6] However, Mair does not believe that we should refrain from innovating. According to her, considering the way we consume and process information today, our attention span has changed dramatically. Hence, organisations run the risk of having their credibility and visibility weakened if they do not innovate in the way they communicate, as just one example.

Beyond passing trends, we must define better what innovation means for the social sector. This article seeks to comprehend the specifics of innovation in this context. Moreover, it is necessary that each organisation adjusts the definition in order to make it useful to its mission. Innovation should serve the purpose and be in tune with the *modus operandi*, values, structure and history of each organisation.

So, it is up to each organisation to adapt the definition of innovation to their specific structure and institutional moment. What for some organisations is an innovation, for others may be considered as boldness, risk-taking or adjustment to the modern world. Where and how to innovate should also be a choice and adjusted according to the context of each institution. For instance, some innovate in processes, others in strategies or activities, others in their structure, in their "final product" or in relation to their beneficiaries. "NGOs and donors need to be more flexible and innovative, but within a strategic framework of what the organisation wants, what it is and what it seeks to achieve," said Hal Harvey, one of the creators of the idea of Strategic Philanthropy,[7] who is now reviewing some of the underlying assumptions of this concept.

2 – The core, values and principles of human rights have not changed (and will never change) - so why do we need to innovate?

The emergence of the contemporary legal framework of human rights dates from the mid-twentieth century, with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 and the various treaties and conventions that followed (and which continue to be created). The values and principles that are contained in these documents are non-negotiable. The fight for human rights depends on this to guarantee the effectiveness and strength of these rights.

Therefore, the idea of innovation can be uncomfortable, especially if we are talking about values and rights so rooted and historically constructed. Standing firm to principles and being persistent is no doubt commendable. However, innovation does not necessarily mean throwing out everything that has come before, ignoring its record, diminishing the importance of values, principles, persistence and expertise. These are qualities on which many organisations pride themselves, and with good reason.

Unfortunately, however, there are numerous problems that we fight against that continue to persist. To be bold and venture into new strategies, processes or activities may be well suited to address a particular challenge or seek a result desired by the organisation. This does not make the intrinsic tension disappear between, on the one hand, depth, which involves time necessary for knowledge and learning, and on the other, innovation. The tension exists and it was not born today.[8]

Finally, it is worth mentioning that one of our respondents told us that "an organisation needs to be strong enough to be able to be fluid, to reinvent itself," stressing the importance of seeking a balance between the two aspects.

3 – Don't you think that NGOs deal with real people who are victims of human rights violations and who should not be treated as guinea pigs or products to test new strategies?

Yes, people are not products and victims of human rights violations should never serve as guinea pigs. They are already too vulnerable to be the target of experiments, and of trial and error. But innovation can rightly arise from the need or demand of the victims or beneficiaries, and should always be developed in a way that positively impacts them. This is possible and healthy if we are appropriately cautious.

The interview with Susi Bascon from the Peace Brigades International (UK), illustrates this concern: "For me, the need (or not) to innovate and how we will do it derives from listening in-depth to human rights defenders and the victims - and not through other indicators. Otherwise, how will we know?…If we lose contact with people outside the organisation, how will we know when and where to innovate?"

The focus on impact, on theories of change, and on more efficient processes should always trigger the question: where are the people, the beneficiaries of the organisation? Without this, the very *raison d'être* of the human rights movement and its values - such as empowerment, participation, transparency and humanism - are put at risk. This phenomenon is called "dehumanising", a ghost that can come to haunt us as a result of the professionalisation of NGOs. It can also affect the relationships and capacity of people to communicate and share ideas, create and access external concepts and even lose motivation and commitment to the organisation's mission. Altogether, this might affect the capacity of organisation to continuously innovate.[9]

Some new trends in planning, such as "Design Thinking", "Agile", or "Lean Thinking" - again the terms are all in English and are difficult to translate meaningfully into other languages - indicate various ways to shift attention from organisational structure, tools or processes towards people. These are methodologies based on the concept of "human-centered approach" (or "human-centered design" or HCD)[10] - i.e. to (re)place the individual at the centre. As far as the social sector is concerned, those individuals are the various people involved in a particular action of an organisation as well as its main beneficiaries. Those methodologies are pragmatic in essence, and encourage innovation by the culture of continuous improvement and flexibility. Importantly, the common feature of all these methods is the necessity to stay in close and continuous contact with the beneficiaries, so the organisation can go on adapting itself in accordance with the results achieved and the feedback received. Again, having a clear vision and mission remain fundamental elements, which guide the organisation, and any methodology requires adaptation to the specific circumstances of each organisation.

4 – Are we talking about new forms of technology as innovation? How do we prevent them from creating new violations instead of resolving existing issues?

Another common argument is one that defines innovation as adaptation to new technologies. Innovation would then "only" be to adapt to new technologies and forms of communication, to make use of online tools and integrate "tech culture" to the day-to-day running of the organisation.

Yet, as we all know, technology is not a solution for everything and may even have undesirable effects. For instance, technological advancement can cause new rights violations. Darius Cuplinskas from the Open Society Foundations (UK) recalls that "the expansion of the current state surveillance is unprecedented and, unlike physical violence, it tends to be highly invisible." We also know that the same new media, which facilitates mobilisation can also create new barriers for political organisation. Miguel Lago, from NossasCidades (Brazil), stressed the ambiguities of the apparent dichotomy between online and offline. "The first tends to create superficial involvement and relational ties. However, it often broadens the spectrum of participation, while the second tends to nurture deeper relational ties without, however, the same power of mobilisation." Additionally, it is often argued that we must resist technological innovation because it can deepen inequality.[11]

Even with so many caveats, technology and connectivity are a fact and they can bring many benefits, when used against old rights violations, and to combat the new rights violations, which technology brings.

Today, several organisations are exploring new ways of collecting evidence of violations and processing information through, for example, mobile applications, videos and other tools. "Technology can help speed up the process of checking evidence and improving the quality and time spent in drafting reports on violations. In addition, with technology you can expand and diversify the voices of people who report abuses" said a representative of The Whistle[12] during the RightsCon 2016[13] – an annual conference on rights and technology which brought together 800 people in San Francisco. The Whistle is an app designed to address exactly this challenge. In the same panel, the representative of Physicians for Human Rights[14] (U.S.) warned that organisations resist adapting themselves to the virtual world, adding that "many believe that using technology is to transfer what we have on paper to an online format. It is not. It is a whole new language. But then will we replace human rights lawyers for young people who know how to use technology to document violations? Not necessarily - I think of doctors who use our applications to document violations, who at the same time must continue knowing how to examine their patients, keeping themselves up to date on their medical knowledge in addition to knowing how to use technology. It all depends on what kind of organisation and what technology we are talking about."

The use of videos by organisations is also growing. "In 2015, for the first time, the number of videos we made reporting violations exceeded the number of printed reports. Today a researcher goes to a country visit taking along a camera, he or she tweets during the investigation, etc. A few years ago, this did not happened. We have to adapt", said Carroll Bogert, from Human Rights Watch (U.S.). Finally, one should remember that for organisations which have

technology in their DNA, the need for innovation is a constant concern: "As we work with technology and video, we have to be constantly watching changes and adapting some of our strategies, innovating," recalled Tanya Karanasios, from Witness (U.S.).

5 – And who can guarantee that we will have more impact if we innovate - and which funders will accept more flexibility, audacity and risk-taking?

There is just no way to guarantee it. Taking risks and learning from mistakes is a fundamental condition of those who are willing to innovate. Also, we have as the initial challenge the difficulty of measuring impact, whether the action is innovative or not. This challenge is not new - and we continue to act regardless, every day, more or less successfully.

Still, according to Johanna Mair, "the vital mistake we often make is to measure the success of an innovation only by its impact. Innovating, if done well, also leads to improvements in internal processes, organisational environment, motivation and cognitive improvements."

The funding model of an organisation influences - greatly - its ability and willingness to innovate. "We cannot afford to make mistakes. The current model of financing of most organisations does not allow us to innovate, to dare," noted Ana Valeria Araujo from the Fundo Brasil de Direitos Humanos (Brazil).

Based on the interviews, there is no doubt that predictable funding and long-term and institutional support - rather than project-specific support - is more likely to foster audacity and risk-taking. This type of financing also enables a more fluid and honest dialogue between the funder and the funded, where both sides win.

"We received enough general operating support and because of that we could, for instance, be innovative, and adapt to the unexpected protests in Brazil when they happened in June 2013", said Tanya Karanasios from Witness (U.S.). Mauricio Albarracín, from Colombia Diversa (Colombia), added that "NGOs seek the cooperation of international agencies, seduce them, but it should be the other way around. Those agencies should go after them, because NGOs are the ones that have new ideas, and do the actual work as 'ideas hunters'."

2 • Thus, *habemus* innovation?

There are plenty of reasons for being cautious with regard to "innovation for innovation sake", as described above in each of the five reasons for "fearing innovation". Yet, there is also a broad spectrum of reasons to be explored before an organisation understands and decides to put a new idea into practice.

For this to happen, organisations and activists who are thinking about innovation need to ask the following questions:[15]

i – What is innovation for my organisation? Without discrediting the theoretical scholars in this field, no definition of innovation will be 100% suitable to any organisation. Within the areas in which we want to have an impact, it is our duty to think about what innovation means to the organisation's mission, to its staff and those for whom the organisation exists. Whatever the concept people have in mind, when the term innovation is used, they are often talking about adapting, making room for creativity, changing and risk-taking.

ii – For what, and why, do I want to innovate? The most obvious answer is that we want to innovate to pursue our main objective in a better way - the mission of the organisation. However, when you dwell on this question we can get more detailed answers - do we want to achieve better results; do we want to (re)position the human beings, our beneficiaries, at the centre of our action; do we want to motivate our staff; do we want to engage public opinion; and so on.

iii – Where do I want to innovate? Innovation can occur at the programmatic level of an organisation, regarding their strategies, activities, structure, internal flows and/or processes. Depending on its magnitude, it can be seen as a break with an old way of doing things, creating something entirely new or adapting to a new reality. Depending on how it is implemented and upheld, it can also be seen as experimentation: gradually figuring out whether there are better ways to execute activities, strategies, etc. In order to do that, organisations can gradually implement small changes and constantly make use of feedback and evaluations to ratify or not changes done without taking the inevitable risks of more radical transformations.

iv – How will I innovate and what do I need for it? This will depend on the answers to all the questions above. It will also depend on how we overcome funding challenges, including an analysis of external factors and the context in which the organisation operates at any given time, country, etc.

v – Who will innovate? It is important to remember that the leadership and management of people in an organisation is another key factor of innovation. "An organisation has greater capacity for innovation when it is composed of a multidisciplinary staff, and the roles are well defined between managers, experts and strategists. It is essential that the entire team is guided and inspired by the purpose of the organisation and the organisational culture is enhanced in a responsible way through creativity, cooperation and risk-taking," notes Lucas Malaspina, from Escola de Ativismo (Brazil).

3 • Conclusion

Finally, the assumption that innovation is always good - or good in itself - is a mistake. But to resist innovation for fear of taking risks or for being overcautious

can be a mistake as well. The challenges are many. Innovation is a choice and can be a complex process that simultaneously requires humility and ambition. In order to foster reflection, sharing experiences among NGOs and among funders is not only essential to have new ideas, but it is also a good way to test them and share lessons learned. As some say, "borrowing is the new innovation."[16]

NOTES

1 • For more information on the research project, visit http://www.liquidworld.info.

2 • For a comprehensive explanation of the "liquid modernity", see Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012).

3 • The dynamics between internal and external factors, as well as the features that prevent or enable innovation are discussed in detail in the report prepared by the Rockefeller Foundation, What Determines the Capacity for Continuous Innovation in Social Sector Organizations? (Christian Seelos and Johanna Mair, "What determines the capacity for continuous innovation in social sector organizations," *Rockefeller Foundation Report*, January 31, 2012, accessed March 2016, http://www.christianseelos.com/capacity-for-continuous-innovation_PACS_31Jan2012_Final.pdf).

4 • Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), *Oslo Manual: Guidelines for collecting and interpreting innovation data* (Paris: OECD, 2005), 46.

5 • Seelos and Mair, "What determines," 7.

6 • Christian Seelos and Johanna Mair, "Innovation is not the Holy Grail," *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, 44-49, 2012, accessed March 2016, http://ssir.org/articles/entry/innovation_is_not_the_holy_grail.

7 • The concept of "Strategic Philanthropy" was coined by Hal Harvey and Paul Brest in their book Money Well Spent (Paul Brest and Hal Harvey, *Money Well Spent: A Strategic Plan for Smart Philanthropy*

(New York: Bloomberg Press, 2010)). Adopting a Strategic Philanthropy approach includes designing a realistic strategy based on a solid evidence-based understanding of the world, adopting clear goals and previously stated indicators of success in order to evaluate progress and measure it against the stated strategy and milestones.

8 • See James G. March, "Exploration and Exploitation in Organizational Learning," *Organization Science* 2, no. 1(1991): 71-87.

9 • Seelos and Mair, "What determines," 19.

10 • For more information, see the Manual published by IDEO - a U.S. consultancy firm known for being one of the pioneers and major contributors to the popularisation and development of the concept of Design Thinking and Human-Centered Approach (https://www.ideo.com/work/human-centered-design-toolkit).

11 • In an article published in January 2016, Ricardo Abramovay discusses the negative impacts caused by the technological innovation, such as rising unemployment and concentration of wealth and power. (Ricardo Abramovay, "Robôs, personagens do capítulo inicial de uma era de transformação," *Valor Econômico*, January 12, 2016, accessed March 2016, http://ricardoabramovay.com/robos-personagens-do-capitulo-inicial-de-uma-era-de-transformacao/).

12 • For more information, see http://www.thewhistle.org/.

13 • For more information, see https://www.

rightscon.org/.

14 · For more information, see http://physiciansforhumanrights.org/.

15 · See in Seelos and Mair, "What determines," 31-32, a list of features (called "pathologies") that can positively or negatively influence in an organisation's ability to innovate.

16 · In an article, Gahrmann points out that this idea of "borrowing, copying and stealing good ideas" was widely echoed at a conference hosted by the European Foundation Centre. (Christian Gahrmann, "Borrowing is the New Innovation," *Blog Grantcraft a Service of Foundation Center*, Milan, May 28, 2015, accessed March 2016, http://www.grantcraft.org/blog/borrowing-is-the-new-innovation).

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