

DEMOCRATISING TRANSFORMATION



SPURRING LEARNING AT PLANETARY SCALE – Hila Cohen / World Food Programme Innovation Accelerator

Hila Cohen is the Head of Business Development and Chief of Staff at the United Nations (UN) World Food Programme (WFP) Innovation Accelerator. While explaining the current situation of global hunger, she expressed that if we look at man-made conflict, if we look at climate shocks, if we look at the ripple effects of COVID-19 and what is happening in the Ukraine right now - these factors are all interlinked and are exacerbating global hunger.

WFP is one of the largest humanitarian actors worldwide, with aims of breaking the cycle of hunger and poverty, and addressing hunger globally. The organisation works with local governments to define strategies regarding what they think are most important in addressing hunger locally. As such, WFP delivers food assistance in emergencies and works with communities to improve nutrition and build resilience.

The WFP Innovation Accelerator works with start-ups, non-profit organisations and internal innovators that address the challenges that WFP experiences on the ground. The Innovation Accelerator's approach is mainly demand driven, meaning that there is an analysis of the local problems and subsequent 'matchmaking' between start-ups and the local WFP teams. In developing their solutions, start-ups are encouraged to apply human-centred design; encouraging them to understand the realities of their users.

Hila recommends that innovation-focused corporate venture structures, such as accelerators or incubators, clearly communicate to start-ups what their actual value-proposition to the

start-up and innovation teams is. In Hila's view, since start-ups are limited in resources, if they approach you and decide that you are one of the entities that they want to work with, you should be transparent regarding what you're offering and what you're not. In this way, the start-up can make the best decision for their development. Such open communication and transparent investment will lead to greater change in actually solving a real problem for someone in the end.

Overall, Hila believes there is an increasing trend towards delivering greater impact, as well as frameworks like ESG - Environmental, Social and (Corporate) Governance - gaining popularity. With the growing interest in 'impact innovation,' there will be corresponding interest in the results. Impact start-ups will need to show sustainable business models. Investors or accelerators, like the WFP Innovation Accelerator, must continue to think about how to support them to be sustainable, and therefore investable. The shift will happen when an impact innovation is able to navigate both worlds; the impact side, as well as being viable for different types of investment (including public and private sector investments).

In terms of navigating large organisations, Hila shared that influencing internal processes can take time. Her mindset is one of patient optimism, as innovation ecosystems and cultures are not built in a day. Hila also shared that driving innovation required her team to actively learn and navigate internal processes. All the achievements of the WFP Innovation Accelerator to date couldn't have been completed without conversations and alignment with WFP colleagues from the procurement, legal, partnerships and programmatic departments, as well as from WFP's country office teams. She shared that an innovation team cannot do it all on its own. You need to communicate internally what you're trying to do and share tangible results. That's what has built trust, in her experience. Many times when people speak about innovation, they actually underestimate the importance of all these backend elements to a certain extent, and how critical they will be as you develop your innovation accelerator, or scale-up design.

Hila concluded by sharing her belief in the importance of being a 'translator' within her role. That is, being in tune with the needs of all parties involved and aligning all elements of an innovation initiative, both internally and with external counterparts such as start-ups. As she emphasised, you have to know your organisation and the problem that you are trying to address with innovation very well. You need to be really understanding of the realities of the people whose problem you are solving and those of your colleagues on the ground.

Hila and the team at the WFP Innovation Accelerator continue to source, support, and scale high-impact innovations to achieve Zero Hunger from their base in Munich, Germany. Since 2015, over 100 projects have been supported, with 16 scaling-up globally to achieve significant impact. Supported innovations have raised more than US \$180 million in co-funding, and in 2021 alone, innovation projects positively impacted over 9 million people across 67 countries through WFP's humanitarian field operations.

Follow the WFP Innovation Accelerator and Hila to learn more:

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<https://innovation.wfp.org/year-in-review-2021/>

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