FOSTERING INNOVATION

In Urban Programmes and Projects

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UN-Habitat Innovation Unit
External Relations, Strategy, Knowledge and Innovation Branch

UN@HABITAT
FOR A BETTER URBAN FUTURE

Contents

The objective of this Guidance Note is to:

1 Define innovation from UN-Habitat's perspective

2 Outline why it matters for sustainable urbanization

Innovation Unit

3 Explain the role of UN-Habitat's Innovation Unit

4 Suggest how innovation can be incorporated into projects and programmes

5 Suggest how the Principles of Digital Development can be used in technology focussed projects

6 Present useful practical tools and resource

Why innovation matters

Innovation has become an increasingly important issue as UN-Habitat continues to provide leadership on sustainable urbanization. It is critical as an internal process to adopt an innovation mindset to deliver the most creative, context sensitive and dynamic solutions to our partners and beneficiaries. It is also important as a tool to deliver more progressive, inclusive and sustainable impacts with a strong potential for upscaling within our projects and programmes.

The United Nations Secretary General has called for innovative ideas and solutions as the United Nations strives to deliver the 2030 Agenda in this final decade of action. He gives his vision of innovation as a key tool to overcome the challenges of our time. He stressed that innovative solutions must work for all, not only a few. He has developed a Strategy for New Technologies and more recently, a Roadmap for Digital Cooperation. Both documents emphasize the importance of a United Nations' wide approach and engagement with digital technology.

The Executive Director of UN-Habitat also embraces innovation and regards it as necessary to improve quality of life in urban areas. She states that UN-Habitat has repositioned itself through the new Strategic Plan to make more room for innovative and evidence-based urban solutions for all.

The Strategic Plan 2020-2023 calls for innovative funding opportunities, partnerships and methodologies, such as open and challenge-driven innovation, to be explored and the capacity of local government to effectively procure, test and implement frontier technologies to be significantly strengthened. For innovation to flourish, UN-Habitat needs adequate institutional, managerial and financial conditions. It is only when innovation is part of every project across the organization, and when innovative solutions are used by everyone, that innovation becomes a key enabler for development. It recognizes innovation as both an organizational performance enabler and a key outcome of the Plan.

The United Nations has its own Innovation Network and many UN organizations and entities have active and dynamic innovation programmes. According to the UN Innovations approach, there are three ways that innovation can be fostered:

❶ **Build or strengthen architecture to promote innovation** (collaborative spaces, systems, labs, processes to incubate new ideas and accelerate development and impact)

❷ **Activate partnerships and build an innovation ecosystem** (relevant partners, new partners that might not normally be considered, processes to engage such as incubators and labs)

❸ **Leverage / reinforce a culture of innovation** (embrace innovation and that it is not business as usual, strengthen capacity and permission to ask questions, pose a range of options and solutions, be encouraged by managers to be creative).

This Guidance Note provides colleagues partners and stakeholders with practical information and key entry points to strengthen innovation within their programme and project processes and outcomes to accelerate sustainable urbanization. **The Guidance Note** also provides a checklist to engage on the recommended Principles for Digital Development as they develop their projects and programmes[1] .

1.   The United Nations Innovation Network has requested its UN members to endorse the Principles for Digital Development as a way to foster shared values on approaching and engaging with digital technology.

UN-Habitat's definition of innovation

In the context of sustainable urban development, innovation can be considered as the process, actions and outcomes that create and deliver new knowledge, tools and sustainable solutions to improve the living conditions for all in cities.

For UN-Habitat, innovation means embracing new ideas, up-to-date means and fresh approaches to our work. It is based on horizontal and collaborative working practices that consider diverse contexts and perspectives. Innovation can be digital or non-digital, and take shape as a

process, a practical tool or application or as a culture. Approached from a collaborative perspective, it can help to efficiently deliver impacts at scale, put people at the centre of the development process and ensure that no one and no place is left behind.

Innovation can be:

1 New ways of thinking, approaching a problem or a process from a new angle or perspective.
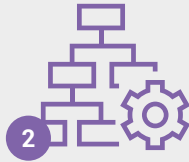
2 Incremental and a process evolving over time to deliver new and improved processes and outcomes.

3 Disruptive and quite a radical change from what has been done before.

4 Technology driven, tapping into frontier or cutting-edge technological solutions.

5 Related to non-technological approaches such as a new way of engaging people or integrating sectors in a planning process which have not been used in that context before.

Innovation works best when:

1 It is not left to chance but given mindful application and considered in daily activities and processes.

2 It is generated from proactive discussions that promote fresh ideas and approaches to challenges.

3 There's active collaboration by diverse teams working together across all stages of the project or programme cycle.

4 There's an overall commitment to building an open, collaborative and non-hierarchical culture supporting the free flow of ideas and interactive spaces for different people to come together.

Innovation at UN-Habitat

UN-Habitat has a long history of innovation. To consolidate on its work and strengthen its innovation agenda, an Innovation Unit was created as part of the 2019-2020 restructuring to strengthen innovative thinking, practice and solutions both within the organization and externally for the benefit of our partners and the beneficiaries we serve. The Unit will:
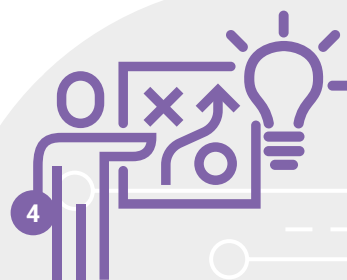
1 Promote an innovation culture for improved sustainable urbanization outcomes.
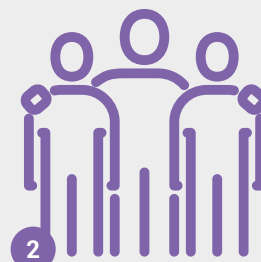
2 Act as an enabler and broker for new ideas and partnerships for inclusive and at scale impacts.
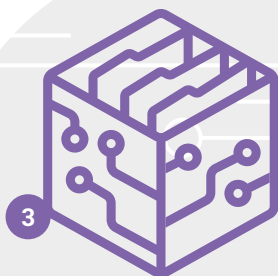
3 Develop relevant knowledge and tools to strengthen innovation.

4 Promote innovation in project and programme design and implementation by providing advice on tools, methodologies, technologies and partnerships.

What are ingredients to promote innovation?

There are specific ingredients which promote innovation. We believe that the following ingredients are important starting points to consider how we can be more innovative in our work, as well as what partners can do to engage with innovation in projects and programmes:

INGREDIENTS	EXPLANATION
Leadership	Those in positions of influence and decision-making roles must demonstrate the value of innovation for achieving sustainable development, and initiate processes to make people, organizations, programmes and projects more innovative. This includes dedicating resources for capacity development, investing in research and development, as well as in innovative tools, for example.
A culture of innovation and creativity	Innovation is heightened when there is a culture of risk taking, creativity and an expectation for partnerships to generate new ideas. An innovation culture must be fostered both within an organization, as well as encouraged in the broader society and amongst partners. Cities and organizational leaders need to create physical and other signals that show how innovation is valued, and resources are invested.
Capacity and knowledge	Related to a culture of innovation is providing resources and opportunities for capacity building and making knowledge on innovation freely available. Building capacity and knowledge includes training of governments and relevant organizational staff, promotion of innovation in education systems and opportunities for training and exchange for development professionals, entrepreneurs and citizens.
Innovative frameworks	Innovation is elevated in an environment with clear policies, strategies and approaches to promote it. Integrating innovation in design, implementation and evaluation processes significantly improves benefits to target groups. Innovation should feature in national urban policy, city level strategies or urban plans. At an organizational level, innovation should be captured in strategic plans, as well as individual performance review cycles.
Flexible infrastructure	Infrastructure to support innovative thinking – public spaces for people to meet, exchange ideas, showcase artwork and ideas, innovation labs and hubs – is fundamental. In an organizational setting, this includes physical spaces and time for interaction and ideas exchange and the access to digital tools. In addition, with the leveraging power of digital technologies, infrastructure to connect people to the internet is essential.
Diverse partnerships	Cross-sectoral and multi-stakeholder collaborations are vital for innovation. Providing platforms for different perspectives will generate new ideas and approaches. Bringing together organizations, leaders (including traditional leaders), communities and the private sector creates a dynamic mechanism for fostering innovative solutions.
Dedicated funds	All the ingredients above - innovative processes, projects, fostering a culture as well as spaces for innovation - require financial support and resources . Seed funding for ideas, labs or spaces are critical and can often be generated from the collaboration with diverse partners. At the same time, in-kind support and dedicated spaces for innovation are required to facilitate innovation.

Incorporating innovation into projects

Innovation can feature in programmes and projects in a number of ways, including:

① **Building the capacity of teams and key stakeholders** so that everyone can more readily consider and engage with innovation and start to think outside the box, reflect on what's new and different that can be brought into the project across all or particular phases. Make innovation part of your team discussions more systematically.

② **Considering what new approaches and methodologies** are being used to approach the challenge and impact on proposed beneficiaries. The Innovation Unit can help you explore what's new or state of the art in your area of work.

③ **Designing and testing new tools** that can support an innovative approach including a project innovation lab that matches the challenges and aspirations of the project with the appropriate tools.

④ **Understanding how the innovation could trigger a more dynamic impact.** Innovations can often accelerate the speed at which your project can reach beneficiaries or provide a more dynamic engagement process. Additionally, thinking through the innovative aspects can be a point of leverage with donors. Consider what your project reports on in terms of innovation e.g. delivering a more inclusive outcome or one that increases the capacity for scalability. Think how this can add value in terms of scaling up or presenting a viable phase 2 option to your partners and donors.

⑤ **Considering how the monitoring and evaluation framework** can measure the innovation aspects of your project which strengthens the information and learning from the project, provides an important addition for partners and donors as well as provides rich and interesting communications pieces throughout the life of the project.

Make innovation part of your team more systematically.
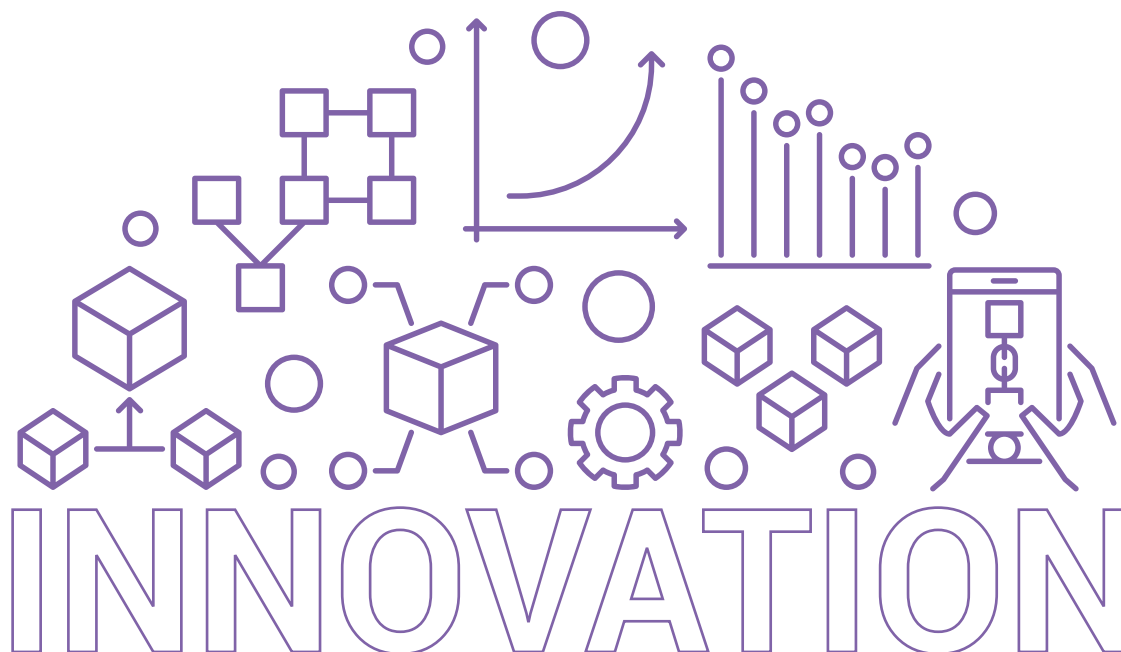
INNOVATION

Checklist to promote innovation across the programme and project cycle

The following checklist provides practical entry points on how innovation can be incorporated into project and programme development, implementation and monitoring phases.

INNOVATION IN YOUR TEAM	CHECK
Has your team undertaken any capacity development activities on innovation?	☐
Has your team engaged with available tools and resources on innovation to see what might be useful?	☐
Have you dedicated any time towards exploring how innovation could be strengthened in project and programme design, implementation and monitoring?	☐
Have you approached the Innovation Unit for ideas on building your team's innovation capacity?	☐

INNOVATION IN PROJECT DESIGN	CHECK
Have you reviewed the project pathways (from design to beneficiary impacts) and identified where innovations can make a difference?	☐
Have you considered how new tools, approaches or technologies can improve impact or efficiency in your project?	☐
Are you collaborating with others, including stakeholders you might not normally consider, to develop creative and ultimately more integrated solutions?	☐
Have you checked whether any proposed innovation initiatives are unique or might already exist2 and can therefore be adapted to your project?	☐
Have you considered any risks or challenges that the innovation initiative might engender and for whom?	☐
Have you dedicated any budget to innovation activities such as towards capacity development initiatives or a partner roundtable on innovation?	☐

INNOVATION IN YOUR PROJECT AND PROGRAMME DEVELOPMENT PROCESS	CHECK
Does your project document identify innovations that can be adopted across the project or programme lifecycle?[3]	☐
Does the project document demonstrate how innovation can be used to strengthen cross-cutting and social inclusion issues?[4]	☐
Does the project document show how innovation might be measured in the log frame and expected outcomes?	☐
Have you consulted UN-Habitat's Innovation Unit on your project document to get new ideas on an approach, process or tools which could enhance innovation in the project?	☐

INNOVATION IN PARTNER ENGAGEMENT (INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL)	CHECK
Have you considered engaging new partners or internal colleagues who might add an interesting and different perspective to your project team(s)?	☐
Have you proactively discussed innovation in meetings with key partners, stakeholders and donors?	☐
Have you explored what innovation networks and capacities exist amongst the project/programme partners or that might be available locally (a local innovation hub or a start-up)?	☐