

GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS ABOUT PARTNERSHIP BUILDING.

The **6** top recommendations below are for start-ups seeking to explore partnerships with international institutional actors in the humanitarian and international development ecosystem

1. Research, know the ecosystem.

Here are two angles of research:

First, you may want to explore the countries where your solution might be more relevant for pilots today, and where adoption and dissemination can be most effective. To choose countries, you may want to look at the following criteria:

1. **Needs in the country:** to understand the scope of the problem, impact, etc. using online resources such as [Reliefweb](#), [Devex](#), etc.
2. **Partnership opportunities and existing innovation ecosystem:** To analyze partnerships potential and to understand where your solution positions itself in the ecosystem. You want enough relevant actors to partner with at local, regional, and international levels, but not too many competitors. For example, a country where there is a strong innovation ecosystem in place like Uganda or Nigeria, this can open you many doors, but it also means that there are many other actors around. Here you can use [3Ws/5Ws documents](#) available on websites such as Relief Web ('Who does What, Where, When and Why'),
3. **Funding opportunities:** To understand where the money is, analyze funding trends in geographical areas, sectoral priorities. You can find information on donors trends on [Devex](#), [Donor Tracker](#), [Development Initiatives Fact Sheets](#), etc. (see more information in annex).
4. **Logistical, administration, security, and easy to do business factors:** You can use [the World Bank' easy-to-do-business index](#) as a good starting point.

It is a matter of finding the right equilibrium between all these factors to see where you fit. For example, if you are a start-up with a WASH solution that can be relevant for displaced and host communities - Uganda can appear as a great country because it fills up all the above criteria. The limitation however would be that there are already a lot of actors piloting so many solutions.

Second, you can conduct an ecosystem mapping to understand who does what, how and where and then decide on which regions to focus on:

- **UN agencies - programs** (e.g. UNICEF GBV department)
- **UN innovation actors:** UNCDF, UNDP accelerator labs, WFP, UNFPA, UNICEF innovation fund, UNHCR innovation service, in-country labs (Response Innovation Labs, AfriLabs etc.)
- **In-house NGO innovation departments:** Oxfam, IRC, DRC, Save the Children, World Vision, MSF.
- **Research and best practices networks:** UN Connecting business initiative, UN Global Compact, DEVEX, ALNAP (for humanitarian innovation).
- **Funding & partnerships networks:** ELRHA and Humanitarian Grand Challenge (for humanitarian innovation), Global Innovation Exchange, Gates Foundation, Global Innovation Found, MIT Solve, DEVEX, START Network, TRANSFORM, WellCome Trust.

Finally, after you have done your research and have understood global trends as well as actors 'politics', you can plug the pieces together and identify your value proposition and your specific 'angle' accordingly.

2. Make sure your solution is relevant, ethical and sustainable.

First, institutional partners will want to make sure that your solution (and the way it is delivered) is relevant to the specific context. And, unfortunately there is a plethora of examples in humanitarian and development settings in which technologies were brought in without full consideration of the contexts, or in which too many assumptions were not tested, and resulted in waste of resources and no impact.

Second, the institutional partners will want to see that the technologies are not harmful to individuals, but also not harmful to the social and economic relationships in place, or to the environment. It is important to ensure that technologies do not create new divisions or exacerbate existing ones (for example, digital technologies that require basic tech literacy skills that not everyone has, or that does not take into account power dynamics around gender, thus leaving women behind).

Third, innovation and technologies can sometimes create further distance with communities and reduce accountability towards the communities we work with. Institutional partners will want to see how start-ups incorporate accountability mechanisms in their innovation journeys. It is vital for the start-up to show how they more genuinely and meaningfully local innovation ecosystems and Community-Based Organizations from relevant contexts to move away from vertical approaches to innovation. Many tools have been developed – borrowing from UX design approaches – to better understand and engage the communities and users in humanitarian/ID settings, including, IDEO toolkit, DIY toolkit, ELRHA humanitarian innovation guide, MIT D-lab, Stanford D-School design bootleg etc.¹

Fourth, it is important to move beyond the linearity of innovation. Too often, innovation processes focus on solutions (are solutions obsessed) rather than the actual needs and opportunities in specific contexts. Isolated interventions/products are not sufficient to address root causes and complex problems that require longer-term transformational changes. Institutional partners will prioritize start-ups that use a systemic approach in which targeted problems are analyzed in their whole complexity.

Finally, institutional partners will want to make sure that technologies are sustainable, i.e. not perpetuating that dependency on external aid/interventions – for instance, depending on parts that cannot be manufactured or found locally and therefore depending on external interventions to make the system work etc.

3. Know the 'language' and apply it.

Institutional partners want to see that start-ups speak their languages, and beyond the rhetoric, they want to see that this language actually reflects your approach and work.

For instance, for start-ups working at the individual/community level:

- They would want to see how your solution reduces risks and vulnerabilities, and promote individual or community resilience
- They will want to see how your solution addresses the needs of the most marginalized groups, more at-risk groups, and leave no one behind.
- They will want to see how you meaningfully and genuinely engage communities in the innovation journey.

¹ See list of tools selected by Mindset-PCS: <http://www.mindset-pcs.com/blog-mind-the-gap/methods-tools-for-meaningful-community-engagement/>.

For solutions addressing agencies' needs:

- They will want to see that you understand current global trends, priorities and gaps in practice to see how your solution can help them respond to global gaps. For instance, how your technology can help navigate COVID19 challenges and new realities; how solutions can help make communities more resilient; how your solution can help better prepare to climate-related shocks etc.
- UNHCR recommends that start-ups explore possibilities of integrating the 'innovation' into existing structures or organizational architecture to improve rates of adoption/uptake whilst minimizing resistance to changes.

For solutions looking at broader systemic changes / decision-making levels (for instance start-ups looking at decreasing the emission of GHG in companies or cities):

- They will want to see how your solution is enshrined into existing policy frameworks. E.g. for solutions on pollination, they would want to see how your solution contribute to the latest EU directive on biodiversity etc.

4. Create visibility.

You need to share content about your work, provided that this content is professional and backed by robust research- and practice-based evidence. You can do so by using the following channels:

- Social media, monthly/quarterly newsletters, blog posts on your website or on partners' blogs (e.g. UNDP blog), joint publications (blog or articles) with key experts, online series ('discussions with...' format), events for ['international days of..'](#)
- Conference², webinars, expositions as a speaker; you may want to subscribe to [Conference Alert](#) to build a 'conference strategy' and attend/contribute to major innovation or international development conferences e.g. [AidEx](#).
- Awards for entrepreneurs ([see Mindset-PCS website](#)).
- Academic publications through partnerships with 'evidence partners', i.e. academic institutions or research centers.

5. Engage, build rapport and trust.

This sector, contrary to the myth, is not an 'impenetrable fortress'. You should maximize the networks provided by accelerators, advisors, mentors etc. to get e-introductions. LinkedIn also works well in this ecosystem.

² Conference alert: <https://conferencealert.com/sustainable-development.php>; or <https://waset.org/development-conferences>;

Core tips for emails in this sector:

- Do not sell; you want to **“share best practices and explore synergies.”**
- Personalize the email; **adapt your angle**; choose a key sentence that will catch attention depending on the sector’s trends, and organization’s mandate and priorities.
- Highlight a **logical continuum** between a specific problem or opportunity, existing responses, remaining gaps, your solution and value proposition, and impact.
- Show you have local partnerships, connections.
- DO NOT embrace a top-down approach to innovation; show horizontal processes (Do not write ‘my solution’ but ‘a solution that was designed in collaboration with communities, partners ABC etc.’). Don’t be judgmental (e.g. “UN agencies have a problem with XYZ, and my solution will solve this). Do not act as if you are saving the world (e.g. ‘my solution will save hunger problem in Africa’).
- When meeting adjust your pitch (get specific pitch deck for these actors).

6. Prepare your compliance requirements as early as possible.

If institutional actors are considering partnering with you, they will ask you to undergo a thorough compliance process. Be ready ahead of time, and start working on it right now, as it is in any case a good practice. Make sure you have the following procedures in place:

- Zero tolerance policy against corruption, fraud, and bribery
- Zero tolerance policy against child labor and modern slavery
- Zero tolerance policy against sexual exploitation and abuse
- Sound financial & procurement policies
- Social and environmental impact policy
- Gender equality, gender mainstreaming policy
- Human resources policies highlighting gender, inclusion and diversity as well as including whistleblowing procedures etc.

[The United Nations Global Compact](#) offers great resources in that respect. It encourage businesses worldwide to adopt sustainable and socially responsible policies, and to report on their implementation.

For more information, contact us at info@mindset-pcs.com.