***How does International Rescue Committee (IRC) come up with its innovative services through organizational leadership while trying to cover the needs in specific country and region and to overcome the differences based on different cultures and mentalities?***

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**Introduction**

The aim of this paper is to explain innovation process and creativity management in International Rescue Committee (international non-governmental organization), also focusing on specifics of the process in general which is related to dealing in crisis in specific country and region. Literally speaking, we are all informed of what happens when humanitarian and war crises arise somewhere, but are not aware of the processes undertaken within organizations offering their assistance in such situations.   
The IRC responds to some of the world's worst crises, delivering aid that saves lives while paving the way for long-term recovery. (International Rescue Committee)

Since I come from the country affected by the war and post-conflict crisis I personally can consider myself as beneficiary of their services, but was never aware of all the effort that is put in research and development of their services and innovation process behind.

I order to get clear picture of its work and get answers to specific questions regarding IRC’s work, I have been in contact with its Regional director who has been engaged in its different project and activities for more than twenty years and has worked in different countries in Europe and Africa. Furthermore, I personally am very familiar with IRC’s work in my country through contacts with its former employees and seeing evidences of their work almost on daily basis like rebuilt facilities, infrastructure and homes. IRC has played important role during war crises in my country as well as in its post war development, and was of the first agencies that offered its assistance in those critical times. Those two contacts will enable us to see two different points of view, one from international and one from local team member. Furthermore, one has past and current experience related to the work in much undeveloped countries in Africa, while other has long experience as former employee only in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where completely new ideas and approaches had to be developed unlike in Africa. Diversity of opinions and ideas is very important for any process, including this paper.

**General overview of IRC’s work**

International Rescue Committee is a global humanitarian aid, relief, and development nongovernmental organization. It was funded at the suggestion of Albert Einstein in 1933 with primarily goal to assist Germans suffering under Hitler. More than 80 years after Albert Einstein helped create the IRC, the number and intensity of humanitarian crises across the globe warrant a dose of Einstein-inspired innovation. The IRC offers emergency aid and long-term assistance to refugees and those displaced by war, persecution or natural disaster. The IRC is currently working in over 40 countries and 28 U.S. cities where it resettles refugees and helps them become self-sufficient. Consisting of first responders, humanitarian relief workers, international development experts, healthcare providers, and educators, the IRC has assisted millions of people around the world since its founding in 1933. In 2016, more than 26 million people benefited from IRC programs and those of its partner organizations. The IRC delivers a number of services, including emergency response, health care, programs fighting gender-based violence, post-conflict development projects, children and youth protection and education programs, water and sanitation systems, strengthening the capacity of local organizations, and supporting civil society and good-governance initiatives. (International Rescue Committee)

The IRC has grown because its teams have gone to the toughest places, done cutting-edge research, developed in-depth knowledge, and forged vital relationships with local governments. In 2010 International Rescue Committee had 8000 employees. (International Rescue Committee)

In its three-year strategic plan till 2020 IRC emphasizes that the beneficiaries of their programs deserve evidence-based interventions that bring real change to their lives. That is what they are determined to deliver. (International Rescue Committee)

To meet the needs and aspirations of those they serve, IRC’s aim is to lead the reform of the humanitarian aid sector by:

* reaching more people more quickly to match the scale and urgency of today’s crises;
* setting new standards for quality and effectiveness through evidence and innovation;
* building tools and systems that enable our staff to focus on high-impact programs.

The impact of the programs depends on speed as well as quality of delivery. Within 72 hours of a disaster, IRC is pledged to organize health care, distribute cash, and deliver clean water. That means new ways of working, new preparations in advance of disaster striking, and new partnerships with the private sector. (International Rescue Committee)

**Innovation process**

The scope and complexity of problems facing the billion poorest people on the planet can seem overwhelming. While progress has been made, incremental efforts may never reach a solution. Because the issues are so intractable, Neal Keny-Guyer argues that the true job of international NGOs is to innovate. While there will likely never be a silver bullet to end poverty, scalable solutions that draw on the power of markets can have significant impact. Keny-Guyer describes building those solutions through an iterative process that brings out the insights and creativity of locals through the tools of design thinking. (Neal Keny-Guyer, 2013)

Innovation has always been the spirit of the International Rescue Committee. The early IRC — founded in 1933 at the call of Albert Einstein — invented new ways to help people escape the horrors of World War II. Today, organization shows commitment to research and development which is pioneering changes in products and processes that, in turn, are changing lives.

IRC staff work every day to build better programs. It is also well known that some of the major changes in the lives of those in need will come from big leaps, not just small steps, forward. That means creating the capacity for systematic research.

Evidence suggests that current humanitarian practices are not reaching enough people, nor making a big enough difference in their lives. Therefore, IRC recognized the need to develop solutions that reach more people, deliver more value for money and make a bigger impact on the lives of the people they serve.

In September 2016 the IRC’s center for innovation in humanitarian sector officially started to work. It is named Airbel for Varian Fry, who arrived in Marseilles in 1940 with $3,000 and a mission: to help people escape the horrors of Nazi-occupied France. There he established the Air-Bel Villa, a secret safe house that helped thousands of people escape to freedom.

Airbel is the innovation center at the International Rescue Committee with the aim to design, test, and drive large-scale adoption of innovations for people affected by crisis, focusing on projects that have the potential for reaching the most people with the most effective breakthrough products, services, and systems. The goal is to jumpstart innovative thinking not only within the IRC, but also the humanitarian sector by demonstrating a successful application of design-thinking tools, behavioral-science techniques, technology, and evidence-based research.

Airbel is a team of design-thinkers and strategists. Together with IRC technical experts and field staff, they design and scale new solutions that will reach more people and have a bigger impact in some of the most challenging places around the world. It brings together multidisciplinary teams of experts drawn from inside and outside the IRC to develop solutions that draw on a deep understanding of context, a user's needs and values, outside sciences and disciplines and build prototypes and responsibly pilot them in fragile contexts.

Focus on design of innovative solutions enabled IRC to develop a unique emergency classification system. The system helps them to quickly determine how severe an emergency is and how the organization should respond. The unit’s resources and experienced staff, including specialized in-country teams, are on standby around the world allowing the IRC to respond within 72 hours.

By borrowing from other sectors, and developing its own innovative approaches to crisis situations, IRC aims to address the questions that stifled the humanitarian response for many decades: how to deliver vaccinations in war zones;  how to tackle the upsurge in domestic and sexual violence that accompanies war; how to deliver cash into emergency settings quickly and cheaply. (International Rescue Committee)

The best example of new service is the one provided by IRC to refugees from Africa now living in Greece. This contently represents completely new approach and service provided to beneficiaries. Traditionally, for decades, aid is provided by governments or relief agencies in the form of in-kind donations such as blankets, heaters and bags of rice. While this is helpful in an immediate emergency, it does little to empower people or rebuild lives.

In Greece, the IRC distributes pre-paid debit cards that enable families to buy items that are culturally appropriate. After receiving their cards, families can purchase groceries and household items of their choice at shops that accept Visa. Each month, the cards are credited an amount between $100 and $350, depending on the family’s size.

Numerous studies have shown that a high percentage of in-kind aid is thrown away or resold at a loss. Cash in the hands of refugees also stimulates the local economy and helps to forge economic and social ties between refugees and local shopkeepers. (International Rescue Committee Annual Report, 2016)

While the work of Airbel is important in design of innovative solutions and services on global level, the fact remains that more attention should be given to the specifics of certain country and/or region.

**Leadership within organizations in general**

Leadership and innovation management within organization have its specifics.

Leadership is the action of leading people in an organization towards achieving goals. Leaders do this by influencing employee behaviors in several ways. A leader sets a clear vision for the organization, motivates employees, guides employees through the work process and builds morale

Setting a clear vision means influencing employees to understand and accept the future state of the organization. A good leader will influence other actors to perform their duties by explaining the vision and the importance of their role in the outcome. (Lois B. Chingandu, Rouzeh Eghtessadi, Katrina Wallace-Karenga, Percy Tawanda Ngwerume, 2015)

Motivating employees means to find out enough about the needs and wants of employees, giving them what they need and providing praise for a job well done. A good leader knows this and will communicate with his unit to learn more about their needs and wants. It may be as simple as giving a sweet treat for the efforts. (Lois B. Chingandu, Rouzeh Eghtessadi, Katrina Wallace-Karenga, Percy Tawanda Ngwerume, 2015)

When guiding employees, it is important to define their role in the work process and provide them with tools needed to perform and participate in their efforts along the way. A good leader will explain the tasks, provide the digging tools, direct the work and be available to assist if they run into a problem. (Lois B. Chingandu, Rouzeh Eghtessadi, Katrina Wallace-Karenga, Percy Tawanda Ngwerume, 2015)

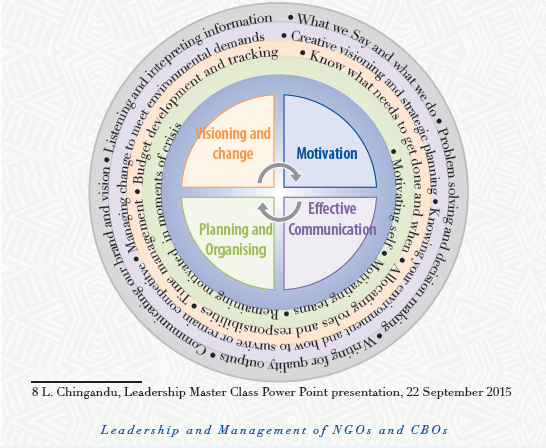
Building moral involves pulling everyone together to work towards a common goal. A good leader will let the actors know how much their work is appreciated. A simple gesture like throwing a party for the staff can help building moral. (study.com: “Leadership: Leaders & Their Role in Organizations”)

Transformational leadership is a style of leadership where a leader works with subordinates to identify needed change, creating a vision to guide the change through inspiration, and executing the change in tandem with committed members of a group. Transformational leadership serves to enhance the motivation, morale, and job performance of the followers through a variety of mechanisms; these include connecting the follower's sense of identity and self to a project and to the collective identity of the organization; being a role model for followers in order to inspire them and to raise their interest in the project; challenging followers to take greater ownership for their work, and understanding the strengths and weaknesses of followers, allowing the leader to align followers with tasks that enhance their performance. (Wikipedia: Transformational leadership, 2017)

Nowadays leadership can be seen as a complex dynamic process that emerges in the interactive “spaces between” people and ideas. It is not limited to a formal managerial role but rather emerges in the systemic interactions between heterogeneous agents. Leaders must transition a new perspectives that account for the complex adaptive needs of organizations. In my opinion leaders should be primarily effective supervisors of innovation process and relay on combination of three modern leadership theories. In this process, I think that the relationships should not be defined hierarchically, but rather by interaction between heterogeneous agents.

In my opinion three main aspects of leadership that are important to focus on when leading transformation are to influence the process, give focus to followers and interact. Leaders should primarily lead the process by giving guidelines, monitor the activities and results compared to desired goal and be integral part of the process mainly through interaction with other actors. Furthermore, I think that a transformation of organization is a process that cannot be managed by any single leader. It is generated by the insights of many people and should mainly be based on job-relevant diversity and participate safety.

When viewing leadership, there are particular skills that you require to enhance your style. This can be compared to an onion where around the basic core of leadership there are outer layers of skills that need to be acquired. The diagram below presents an outline of the core leadership skills that are required. (Lois B. Chingandu, Rouzeh Eghtessadi, Katrina Wallace-Karenga, Percy Tawanda Ngwerume, 2015)



*The leadership skills onion*

**Leadership and innovation management in IRC**

**Strategic planning and communication**

The organization is governed by an unpaid board of directors, having its headquarters in New York. Furthermore, it has its main office with its administration and director overseeing the work of its field offices in each country they work in, as well as regional director in charged for overseeing activities in several countries in specific region. Staff Leadership Board is also based in its headquarters in New York. (Taylor, 2017)

Although the structure looks too complex and widely spread, the flow of information is on very high level and every important information is available to each employee through reports and regular meetings of members of specific cells within organization.

Furthermore, every country program is supposed to make its own strategic plan, specifying its goals, planning and creating services to be provided to its beneficiaries. What is important to mention here is that almost every employee is involved in this process through brainstorming sessions and SWOT (strength, weakness, opportunities and threats) analysis held in field offices or within project team members. The results of those analysis are channeled to the higher lever and are the basis for creating strategic plan. (Taylor, 2017)

The reason why this method is very important in this type of organization is because *- A necessity before using creativity is understanding.* Understanding in this particular case is knowledge of the specific situation in the field including specific needs in area thus creating tools and services that will best satisfy them.

**Gaps in IRC’s innovation process**

What IRC as well as other organizations often fails to do is to base its existing and new services more on PESTL analysis.

**PESTLE** is a mnemonic which in its expanded form denotes P for Political, E for Economic, S for Social, T for Technological, L for Legal and E for Environmental. It gives a bird’s eye view of the whole environment from many different angles that one wants to check and keep a track of while contemplating on a certain idea/plan.

There are certain questions that one needs to ask while conducting this **analysis**, which give them an idea of what things to keep in mind. They are:

* What is the political situation of the country and how can it affect and influence their work?
* What are the prevalent economic factors?
* How much importance does culture have in the market and what are its determinants?
* What technological innovations are likely to pop up and affect the market structure?
* Are there any current legislations that regulate the industry or can there be any change in the legislations for the industry?
* What are the environmental concerns?

All the aspects of this technique are crucial for any industry a business might be in. More than just understanding the market, this framework represents one of the vertebras of the backbone of strategic management that not only defines what a company should do, but also accounts for an organization’s goals and the strategies stringed to them

It may be so, that the importance of each of the factors may be different to different kinds of industries, but it is imperative to any strategy a company wants to develop that they conduct the **PESTLE analysis** as it forms a much more comprehensive version of the SWOT analysis. (PESTLE Analysis: “What is PESTLE Analysis”, 2018)

Even though it may not look appropriate for the work of any aid organization, this analysis is crucial if organizations aims to have positive impact of its services in certain country and region. IRC has a lot of development projects whose aim is to support sustainability, livelihood incomes etc. For that matter it is very important to understand and know the area and design ideas accordingly. There is no guarantee that people will adopt new product or service in certain country or region, despite the fact that it was very successful somewhere else. (Taylor, 2017)

Former IRC’s employee from Bosnia and Herzegovina gave one example of the service provided to beneficiaries in this country which was not successful at all. In order to enable beneficiaries to increase their income and provide enough food for their families, IRC provided all the necessities for establishing rabbit farms. This product was verified by the cost effectiveness of this type of animal production since it is not expensive production, the nutrition value of the rabbit meat is good and fertility of animals is high, which enables families to enlarge its flock quickly and gain income. Main reason for failure of this innovation is the fact that this type of production never existed in Bosnia and Herzegovina, it is not in its culture to eat this meat and the market did not demand it. (Sefo, 2017)

**Leadership problems within IRC**

One of the main problems in team work within international organizations including IRC is the fact that teams include international and local staff, where they have different opinions and ideas for the most of the time. The problems are mostly arising when tailor-made solutions and best practice scenarios from other countries in the world are to be implemented in specific country. This is mostly not possible to do due to different cultures, different development state, economy and education in general.

The sense is that leadership development is understood as enhancing the ability of individuals and organization to work together to envision and enact change – has a significant role to play in helping NGOs achieve their objectives.

IRC recognizes the need to do more to train staff to enhance skills and help them deal creatively with the immense challenge and opportunity that they must tackle. Furthermore this investment in individual employee development and growth will help enhance retention and reduce stagnation and frustration. The response by educational and training institutions to address this need is promising and must be further extended and supported by funders. At the same time, there is need to demonstrate the effectiveness and value of these investments in leadership development for funders, as they are the ones that are the most often make the decisions about which innovative idea will be implemented in certain area. (International Rescue Committee, 2018)

For an international organization, having a truly international workforce can be seen as a matter of fairness and equity. And those are important perceptions and commitments for agencies fighting poverty, disaster, disease, and injustice. But increasingly, hiring talent with deep knowledge of local problems and challenges is also seen as a way to build effectiveness, impact, and sustainability into the job of doing good. And that is crucial for organizations facing new and complex crises, often with shrinking budgets and questions about whether old aid and development methods have worked quickly enough, or at all. The fact is that in most cases the best ideas come from the people living day-to-day as close to the challenges as possible. (Donna Bryson, 2013)

Former employee of IRC in Bosnia and Herzegovina who worked there for eleven years says: “When I started to work for IRC every decision making position was filled by international staff. The role of local staff was purely administrational. At that time all activates were related to emergency aid assistance. Over the course of time, and thanks to IRC’s commitment to capacity building of its staff, this situation changed and local staff was more involved in process od decision making as well as innovation process in general. The main problem we faced is lack of knowledge from international staff which was related to the specifics of the situation in our country. As majority of international staff came with previous experience gained while working in Africa, it was very difficult for us to explain that Bosnia and Herzegovina as country in Europe, ever though war effected, has much higher development state and well educated inhabitants with much better living conditions prior to the war. Having all this in mind, it was hard to explain that the innovative ideas implemented in Africa are not applicable for our surrounding. It was very frustrating to explain over and over again that for 2 USD (what was the amount of investment necessary to establish barbershop in Africa) you cannot even buy scissors in Bosnia and Herzegovina and thus such idea cannot be implemented here, even though it was very successful in Africa.

Furthermore, one had to understand our socio political background as we were communist country before the war, and having communism in power prevented us from creative thinking and participating in such processes in general. Even though we were involved in team work with international staff coming from different countries and continents, were all felt reluctant to participate safety due to the fact that we all felt that we did not have adequate knowledge and were not in the same position as international staff.

Thanks to IRC leadership and determination to transfer of skill and know-how to local staff all this changed. This was also important as the type of services provided to beneficiaries by IRC had to changes since it had to shift from emergency aid assistance to post war development type of service. In innovation process local staff was integral part of creative group thinking and thus was participating safety and providing important data related to specifics of certain country. As time passed, and all thanks to good transformational leadership approach, the number of international staff on decision making positions decreased and number of locals being involved in innovation process increased, as it is recognized that local leaders can bring insights and depth to international organization.” (Sefo, 2017)

**Conclusion**

Even though it is obvious that IRC is putting much effort in innovations and is basing it ground work on triangle of analysis including proper data gathering, focusing on specifics and making adequate propositions and analytical tool in order to achieve desired results, it is obvious that it often fails to understand the needs in certain area and act accordingly. This may also be due to the fact that a lot of projects are donor driven, and that are supposed to follow the rules set by particular donor.

What is also important to mention is that through adequate transformation theory related to shift of power from international to local staff IRC tries to overcome the gap initiated by inability to implement all innovative ideas to all the countries they work in.

Another important novelty is IRC(‘s) sense for importance of innovation implemented through establishing of Airbel. This is important on the global level, but as described earlier most of innovative ideas are area specific and should be designed for and implemented in specific area.

Although IRC has complex leadership structure and is operating in extremely wide area and working with most vulnerable population in dangerous and difficult surrounding, it manages to pass all the information to its staff on time and equally. Also important is the fact that IRC through its leaders is try to foster a pleasant and harmonized work climate among its employees, being aware of the fact that they come from very different background and surrounding.

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