

[SE04-HUM]

Curveballs, Surprises and the Unexpected Solutions that Can Result

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Brief Bio
Session Leader(s)

Abi Weaver, a director within the international division of the American Red Cross, is currently researching and testing emerging technology solutions with the vision that they can help strengthen disaster resilience in urban communities. Abi comes from a family of early adopters. Her grandmother was the first among them to purchase a personal computer. Her father has been e-banking since the 80s. And while she was in primary school, her parents adopted a household robot. And with this background, it's no surprise that Abi's career eventually steered toward 3D printers, augmented reality and smart cars. But for Abi, the lure is not the technology. The draw is what these tools enable humans to accomplish. In addition to her 11-year career with the Red Cross, Abi has held strategic communications and government relations positions at PATH, an international nonprofit organization that accelerates global health technologies, as well as the National Parent Teacher Association, America's premiere child advocacy organization. She has earned degrees in journalism and public relations, and lives in the Washington, DC metro area.

Abstract
Short description, including alignment with conference themes and objectives

Traditional humanitarian action is built on restoring order. Under pressure to deliver support urgently, humanitarians often favor legacy interventions based on familiarity and past performance. When humanitarians make universal assumptions about problems and needs or act exclusively on their bias toward specific technology (or non-technology) solutions, they can experience rejection, delays and loss of trust; they can waste resources; they can deny access to desired alternatives and stymie development; and most dangerously, they can create additional vulnerability and risk. Then again, when humanitarians approach a problem with an open mind and when they look to the affected communities to inform and make critical decisions, they can avoid these types of mismatches, mitigate the related risks, find creative and locally relevant solutions, and expand their toolbox for future crises. Furthermore, humanitarians who leverage curiosity, empathy, humility and flexibility are even more likely to discover novel and breakthrough solutions that otherwise might never have surfaced. Panelists will share examples where expected or traditional solutions failed and how they discovered superior alternatives that defied conventional wisdom and practice, managed the resulting disruption, and transformed setbacks into successful ventures and social impact.

Description
Proposed discussion focus

1. Promotion of soft skills (like curiosity, empathy, humility, flexibility and resilience) and a growth mindset in humanitarian innovation.
2. Case studies of learning with people affected by humanitarian issues and overcoming failed hypotheses, under resourcing and political barriers.
3. Discussion on how humanitarian bias toward frugal innovation, assumptions about low/high/no technology solutions and the misidentification of problems affects social impact. Which risks offer potential for a solution driven by scientists?

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Objectives

Justification and expected impact during and after the conference

Unintentionally, humanitarians often approach problems with assumptions and bias which can result in additional challenges, costly mistakes and dangerous consequences. Learning how to identify those barriers, manage the uncertainty and ambiguity that come with more inclusive and experimental approaches, and see curveballs and surprises as acceptable solutions will result in wiser investments, more appropriate applications and more sustainable impact.

Target Audience

Program designers, directors, managers; officers; funders; response/recovery assessment teams; monitoring and evaluation advisors; technologists; innovation leaders; and other decision makers/strategists.