

WHITE PAPER

Towards a National Humanitarian Innovation Framework for Kenya

*Advancing Anticipatory Action, Resilience,
and Locally-Led Humanitarian Action*

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Executive Summary

Kenya is increasingly confronted by complex and recurrent humanitarian crises driven by climate change, droughts, floods, disease outbreaks, displacement, and socioeconomic vulnerabilities. The growing frequency and severity of these shocks have exposed the limitations of traditional reactive humanitarian systems and highlighted the urgent need for more anticipatory, coordinated, adaptive, and locally anchored approaches.¹

Over the past decade, Kenya has made significant progress in strengthening disaster risk management and anticipatory action systems through investments in early warning systems, forecast-based financing, digital innovations, and multi-stakeholder coordination mechanisms. The development of the Kenya Anticipatory Action Roadmap (2024-2029) represents a major milestone in institutionalizing proactive disaster preparedness and response.¹

Kenya has emerged as a leading hub for humanitarian innovation in the region, driven by a dynamic ecosystem of government institutions, humanitarian actors, private sector partners, and local communities. Over the years, innovation has contributed significantly to improving the effectiveness, efficiency, and reach of humanitarian action. Notable advancements include the expansion of mobile money-enabled cash transfer systems, the adoption of forecast-based financing mechanisms, the strengthening of early warning and anticipatory action systems, and the growth of community-based resilience initiatives. These efforts have not only enhanced response capacities but have also positioned Kenya as a global reference point for innovation in humanitarian and climate resilience programming.

Building on these achievements, there is a strong foundation upon which more coordinated and scalable innovation systems can be developed.

However, despite these advances, humanitarian innovation efforts remain fragmented across institutions, sectors, and programs. Innovation initiatives are often implemented in silos, insufficiently coordinated, weakly institutionalized, and inadequately integrated into national systems and policy frameworks.² While significant progress has been made, the absence of a unified national framework limits the ability to align efforts, scale successful innovations, and sustain impact across the humanitarian ecosystem in Kenya.

This White Paper proposes the development of a National Humanitarian Innovation Framework for Kenya to provide a strategic and coordinated architecture for fostering innovation across humanitarian preparedness, anticipatory action, response, recovery, and resilience-building systems.

¹Intergovernmental Authority on Development Climate Prediction and Applications Centre (ICPAC). (2023). Kenya anticipatory action roadmap (2024–2029). <https://www.icpac.net>

²Obrecht, A., & Warner, A. (2016). More than just luck: Innovation in humanitarian action. Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action (ALNAP). <https://www.alnap.org/help-library/more-than-just-luck-innovation-in-humanitarian-action>

The proposed framework seeks to:

- Strengthen coordination and governance of humanitarian innovation
- Promote locally-led and community-centered innovation ecosystems
- Enhance anticipatory action and early warning-to-early action systems
- Facilitate responsible and ethical use of technology and data
- Improve financing mechanisms for innovation and resilience
- Strengthen research, learning, and evidence generation
- Align humanitarian innovation with national and global development priorities and frameworks

The paper proposes six strategic pillars:

- Governance and Coordination
- Data and Digital Innovation
- Financing and Investment Mechanisms
- Localization and Community-Centered Innovation
- Research, Learning, and Knowledge Systems
- Policy, Ethics, and Regulatory Frameworks

The White Paper further recommends the establishment of a multi-stakeholder technical working group to guide the co-development and operationalization of the framework.

Ultimately, the proposed framework aims to reposition humanitarian innovation in Kenya from fragmented experimentation toward coordinated, scalable, sustainable, and nationally owned systems capable of protecting lives, livelihoods, and development gains.

Introduction

Humanitarian systems globally are under increasing strain due to the escalating frequency, scale, and complexity of crises. Climate-induced disasters, protracted displacement, food insecurity, health emergencies and prolonged conflicts continue to place immense pressure on governments, humanitarian agencies, and affected communities.³

Kenya remains particularly vulnerable to recurrent climate-related hazards, especially droughts and floods. These shocks have significant implications for food security, livelihoods, health systems, infrastructure, and national economic stability.⁴

At the same time, rapid technological advancements, expanding digital infrastructure, mobile connectivity, artificial intelligence, predictive analytics, and innovative financing models are creating unprecedented opportunities to transform humanitarian action.

The concept of humanitarian innovation has emerged as a response to these changing realities. According to humanitarian policy literature, humanitarian innovation involves adaptation and improvement through identifying, testing, and scaling solutions to humanitarian challenges through products, processes, systems, partnerships, and new operational models (Obrecht & Warner, 2016).²

Kenya has already demonstrated strong potential in this space through:

- Mobile money and digital cash transfer systems
- Forecast-based financing mechanisms
- Early warning and anticipatory action systems
- Community-based resilience initiatives
- Climate and weather information systems
- Innovation hubs and technology ecosystems

However, these initiatives often operate independently with limited coordination, standardization, policy integration, or scalability.

This White Paper therefore seeks to provide a strategic basis for developing a coherent and nationally aligned Humanitarian Innovation Framework for Kenya.

³Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). (2022). Climate change 2022: Impacts, adaptation and vulnerability (Contribution of Working Group II to the Sixth Assessment Report). Cambridge University Press. <https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg2/>

⁴Government of Kenya. (2012). National drought management policy. Government Printer.

2. Context and Rationale

2.1 The Changing Humanitarian Landscape

Humanitarian crises are becoming more interconnected, prolonged, and multidimensional. Climate change is increasingly recognized as a major threat of multiplier exacerbating existing vulnerabilities.³

Evidence indicates that anticipatory action and early intervention significantly reduce humanitarian impacts, preserve dignity, protect development gains, and improve cost-effectiveness.

Kenya has made substantial progress in advancing anticipatory action through:

- Early warning systems
- Forecast-based financing
- Early Action Protocols (EAPs)
- Multi-agency coordination mechanisms
- Community-based resilience programming

The Kenya Anticipatory Action Roadmap (2024-2029) outlines pillars including early warning, early action, coordination, research, policy, and financing.¹ However, innovation itself remains weakly institutionalized.

2.2 Existing Gaps

2.2.1 Fragmentation of Innovation Efforts

Humanitarian innovation initiatives are dispersed across institutions, projects, and sectors with limited interoperability and coordination.²

2.2.2 Limited Institutionalization

Most innovation efforts remain project-based and donor-driven rather than embedded within national systems and policy frameworks.⁵

2.2.3 Weak Financing Mechanisms

Innovation financing remains inconsistent, short-term, and insufficiently linked to national priorities.⁶

³United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). (2020). Anticipatory action: A critical tool for humanitarian response. <https://www.unocha.org>

⁶World Bank. (2021). Shock-responsive social protection and disaster risk financing in Africa. World Bank. <https://www.worldbank.org>

2.2.4 Limited Localization

Community-led innovation and indigenous knowledge systems are inadequately integrated into formal humanitarian systems.⁷

2.2.5 Data and Governance Challenges

Concerns remain regarding data governance, digital inclusion, ethical use of AI, and interoperability of systems.⁸

2.2.6 Research and Learning Gaps

There is insufficient investment in evidence generation, innovation learning, and knowledge-sharing mechanisms.²

3. Why Kenya Needs a National Humanitarian Innovation Framework

A National Humanitarian Innovation Framework would provide:

- Strategic Coordination
- National Ownership
- Scalability
- Policy Coherence
- Enhanced Resilience
- Localization

Such frameworks are increasingly recognized as essential for transitioning from fragmented innovation pilots to systemic transformation.⁶

4. Overarching Goal and Strategic Objectives

Overarching Goal

A resilient Kenya with coordinated, inclusive, ethical, and scalable humanitarian innovation systems that enable anticipatory action and strengthen community resilience.

⁷Barbelet, V. (2018). As local as possible, as international as necessary: Understanding capacity and complementarity in humanitarian action. Overseas Development Institute. <https://odi.org/en/publications/as-local-as-possible-as-international-as-necessary-understanding-capacity-and-complementarity-in-humanitarian-action/>

⁸Taylor, L., & Broeders, D. (2015). In the name of development: Power, profit and the datafication of the global South. *Geoforum*, 64, 229–237. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2015.07.002>

Strategic Objectives

The proposed framework seeks to:

- Institutionalize humanitarian innovation within national systems
- Strengthen anticipatory action and early warning-to-early action capacities
- Promote locally-led innovation ecosystems
- Enhance coordination among humanitarian, development, academic, private sector, and government actors
- Strengthen innovation financing and investment mechanisms
- Promote ethical, inclusive, and responsible innovation governance
- Improve evidence generation, learning, and adaptive management

5. Proposed Pillars of the Humanitarian Innovation Framework



Pillar 1: Governance and Coordination

This pillar seeks to establish effective coordination and oversight mechanisms for humanitarian innovation.



Pillar 2: Data and Digital Innovation

This pillar focuses on strengthening data-driven and technology-enabled humanitarian systems, including early warning and predictive analytics.⁵



Pillar 3: Financing and Investment Mechanisms

Sustainable financing is essential for scaling humanitarian innovation, including anticipatory financing and blended finance approaches.⁶



Pillar 4: Localisation and Community-Centered Innovation

Communities are not merely beneficiaries of innovation, but critical innovators and knowledge holders (Barbelet, 2018).⁷



Pillar 5: Research, Learning, and Knowledge Systems

This pillar seeks to strengthen evidence generation and adaptive learning.²



Pillar 6: Policy, Ethics, and Regulatory Systems

Humanitarian innovation must be guided by ethical principles, accountability, and inclusive governance.⁸

6. Cross-Cutting Principles

The framework should be guided by the following principles:

- i. Core Humanitarian Standard
- ii. Localisation and participation
- iii. Gender equality and inclusion
- iv. Accountability to affected populations
- v. Sustainability
- vi. Ethical and responsible innovation
- vii. Collaboration and interoperability
- viii. Evidence-informed decision-making

7. Institutional Arrangements

The White Paper proposes the establishment of a National Humanitarian Innovation Technical Working Group comprising government, humanitarian actors, research institutions, private sector actors, and community representatives.

8. Conclusion

Kenya stands at a critical moment in the evolution of humanitarian action. The convergence of climate risks, digital transformation, and anticipatory systems presents an opportunity to reimagine humanitarian systems that are proactive, coordinated, and resilient.³

This White Paper calls upon all stakeholders to collectively support the co-development of a National Humanitarian Innovation Framework for Kenya.

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