



EVALUATION OF INNOVATION AT THE ICRC 2018-2023

KEY FINDINGS REPORT

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Lydia Tanner, Fiona Mwenda, Sali Hafez, Liddy Greenaway



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OVERVIEW

1. The ICRC's Innovation Facilitation Team (IFT) commissioned this evaluation of its activities between 2018 and 2023. It aimed to gauge the organizational changes brought about by the IFT's approach and to understand opportunities and requirements for innovation within the ICRC, in order to shape the future innovation strategy. Through 62 interviews, a survey, four team discussions, and nine in-depth case studies, we gathered perspectives from people across the ICRC. The evaluation delves into the team's accomplishments, examining how the innovation approach aligned with innovators' needs, addressed uptake barriers and fostered transversal teamwork. It summarizes the IFT's impact on the ICRC, highlighting new collaborations, staff training in strategic foresight, and the development of over 100 proofs of concept for innovations.
2. This document provides a summary of key findings and conclusions, please refer to the full evaluation report for further explanation.

ROLE OF INNOVATION AT THE ICRC

3. The ICRC has a long history of innovating in response to challenges and constraints. **A rich array of innovations has been implemented across the organization.** While it was far beyond the scope of this evaluation to enumerate all the innovative projects within the ICRC, the interviews unearthed examples from robotic process automation (RPA) for expense processing, to platforms for south-south knowledge exchange on de-mining, to makeshift approaches to building bricks or harvesting rainwater in very remote settings.
4. Innovation happened across multiple directorates, delegations, and metiers, however, these were **largely isolated islands of innovation** with few structures to link, organize, and upscale the solutions.
5. Within this context, the IFT was set up as a result of a donor's interest in supporting innovation led and managed from the ICRC Headquarters. This led to **multi-year funding for a team** located within the Executive Office of the Director General. The IFT received funding from the same single donor allowing it to provide flexible support for innovation outside of the ICRC's annual Planning for Results (PFR) cycle. The flexibility of funding was a notable strength of the IFT, and sets it apart from many other humanitarian innovation initiatives.
6. Almost unanimously, evaluation participants described innovation as an important capability for the ICRC. **The IFT boasted a strong internal reputation** and fostered a wide network of relationships throughout the organization. Their approach was led by the priorities and interests of innovators, looking for opportunities to add value. This included convening people across the ICRC around relevant topics of interest, such as Intellectual Property.

7. The initial 2017 Strategic Resolution came from the Director General and described an ambition to foster a culture of innovation and to support bottom-up and top-down initiatives. The IFT maintained this tripartite focus throughout, including:

The **Strategic Foresight Initiative**, which aimed to build foresight capabilities and foster future thinking. A growing body of literature demonstrates that foresight can contribute to organizational flexibility and learning in the face of uncertainty¹. Evaluation participants emphasized that strategic foresight could help address the need for better mid-term planning, for improved decision-making, and for strategic thinking within the organization. The Strategic Foresight Forum has trained participants from across the Directorates and from 76 different locations. Participants from delegations in particular emphasized the training as a unique learning opportunity. However, they also expressed frustration that there was no clear pathway linking the outcomes of foresight exercises to formal strategy development processes, something the IFT did not see as part of their original intent.

Supporting **incremental innovations**, from a diverse array of teams across the organization. These included both technical innovations such as AI-enabled approaches to identifying mine fields and non-technical innovations such as building community resilience to conflict and climate change in Niger. The recent Regional Climate and Conflict Challenges encouraged transversal approaches that brought together people from delegations and metiers.

Investing in **'building blocks' for larger transformations** including in Energy, Digital Health, Virtual Reality, and Generative AI. These were sometimes very territorial spaces and the team emphasized an intention to provide staff time and support, fund proofs of concept, and champion progress but not to "own" areas of work. These initiatives were all grounded in research to establish an understanding of the potential solutions and how they would be relevant to the ICRC. Respondents described how the IFT encouraged partnerships with the academic world.

8. From 2018 to 2023, the **IFT trialed, adapted and clarified an approach to supporting innovation and garnering support within the institution**. Their support became increasingly organized (while remaining bespoke), through the development of structures (Innovation 2.0), the addition of a portfolio approach (Innovation 3.0), and the further addition of regional Climate and Conflict challenges (from 2020). These proved useful structures that enabled the team to support a more diverse range of innovations from a wider range of delegations and metiers.
9. The autonomy of the IFT enabled an approach that was **remarkably organic in comparison to other humanitarian innovation initiatives**. While most other initiatives have a formal call for proposals, with detailed applications, external reviewers, and funding panels, the IFT instead held discussions on priorities with potential partners and then collaboratively developed their proposals. This made the team remarkably responsive and meant that little time was wasted in developing proposals for initiatives that would never receive funding. However, it also came with a risk: it was not systematized and was vulnerable to staff turnover and loss of institutional knowledge and strategy.

1. Haarhaus & Liening, *Building dynamic capabilities to cope with environmental uncertainty: The role of strategic foresight*. 2019.

INNOVATION OBJECTIVES AND BARRIERS

10. In the absence of an official mandate, the **IFT articulated six overarching goals that guided its work** (see Table 1). The goals were informed by the 2017 Directorate Resolution² and the Summary Note 'Towards Innovation 3.0 in the ICRC'. Analysis of the IFT's approach and activities indicated that they made some progress towards achieving three of their goals and were on track to achieve the other three, as summarized in Table 1. A red rating indicates that no progress was made toward the goal, an amber rating indicates that some progress was made but it was limited, and a green rating indicates that progress was on track toward achieving the goal.

Table 1. Summary of achievements against IFT's six objectives

OBJECTIVES	RATING	SUMMARY OF ACHIEVEMENTS
Promote a culture of collective innovation³	Some progress	The IFT made some progress towards promoting a culture of collective innovation in the ICRC. They adopted a relational approach and focused on connecting with innovators, which was a major strength but was less effective outside of Headquarters. Efforts to raise awareness of innovation were limited by communication channels and the capacity of the team.
Build connections between innovators	On track	The IFT created links across the organization, developed multi-disciplinary teams and brought colleagues together to develop and implement solutions.
Support innovation	On track	The team funded 128 innovation initiatives, four institutional challenges, and provided a range of other support to innovators including moral support, political support, introduction to the IFT's networks and increased visibility.
Provide a 'safe space' for testing	On track	The IFT identified the need for and provided supportive 'space' for staff to brainstorm, design and test new and creative ideas.
Invest intentionally	Some progress	The investment approach was broad and responded to where the team identified potential for innovation across the organization. This was intentional but without specific investment criteria, the majority of funding decisions relied on the experience and judgment of individuals within the team.
Support the ICRC to prepare for the future	Some progress	The team was effective in developing foresight capabilities across the organization to support the ICRC to prepare for the future, but made limited progress in embedding foresight within organizational practices.

2. DIR 2417 rev, Annex 1

3. This is a phrase coined by IFT members. For the purpose of the evaluation, it was defined as an organizational culture that supports and values innovation and collaboration around innovation.

11. The majority of investments were made as a result of informal relationship building rather than through formal calls for proposals. **Investments were biased towards initiatives in Headquarters (45% of funded initiatives were based at HQ), digital technology initiatives (54% of IFT spend went to digital innovations), and male innovators (70% of initiatives were led by men).** The IFT also intentionally concentrated its efforts within certain metiers (for example WatHab and EcoSec) that were more open to innovation than others. Without agreed objectives, targets or quotas it is unclear if some of these were intended funding splits, or whether they occurred unintentionally. However, they clearly highlight tendencies in the team's approach which have implications for the rest of the organization and the way innovation is perceived.
12. **Despite the diversity of staff represented across the ICRC, the IFT suffered from a lack of diversity.** It had limited representation from the Global South and other diversity markers, for example disability. Research shows that a lack of diversity leads to decision-making bias⁴. As the areas of focus to date reflected areas of interest of the team this had a significant impact on what was funded. As the team evolves there is a strong potential for increased diversity through new hires to ensure they enable and do not stifle innovation.
13. There were multiple barriers to implementing the funded initiatives, including both innovation-specific barriers and those that affected the entire organization. The team made efforts to navigate most of these, although some were beyond their scope. They demonstrated creativity in addressing human resource and information management barriers. However, they made little progress in overcoming the lack of a coherent structure for the integration and replication of both technological and non-technological initiatives.
14. **The IFT coordinated with ICRC functions and metiers to adapt and improve operational and management processes.** The extent and ease of coordination partly depended on the types of challenges that were being addressed. This in turn affected the willingness of functions and metiers to engage with the IFT. For example, Finance engaged willingly with the IFT, partly due to the IFT's single donor and flexible funding requirements, but also due to an obligation to facilitate financing models. However, engagement with IT and on data protection issues involved more intractable challenges that made it harder to coordinate effectively.

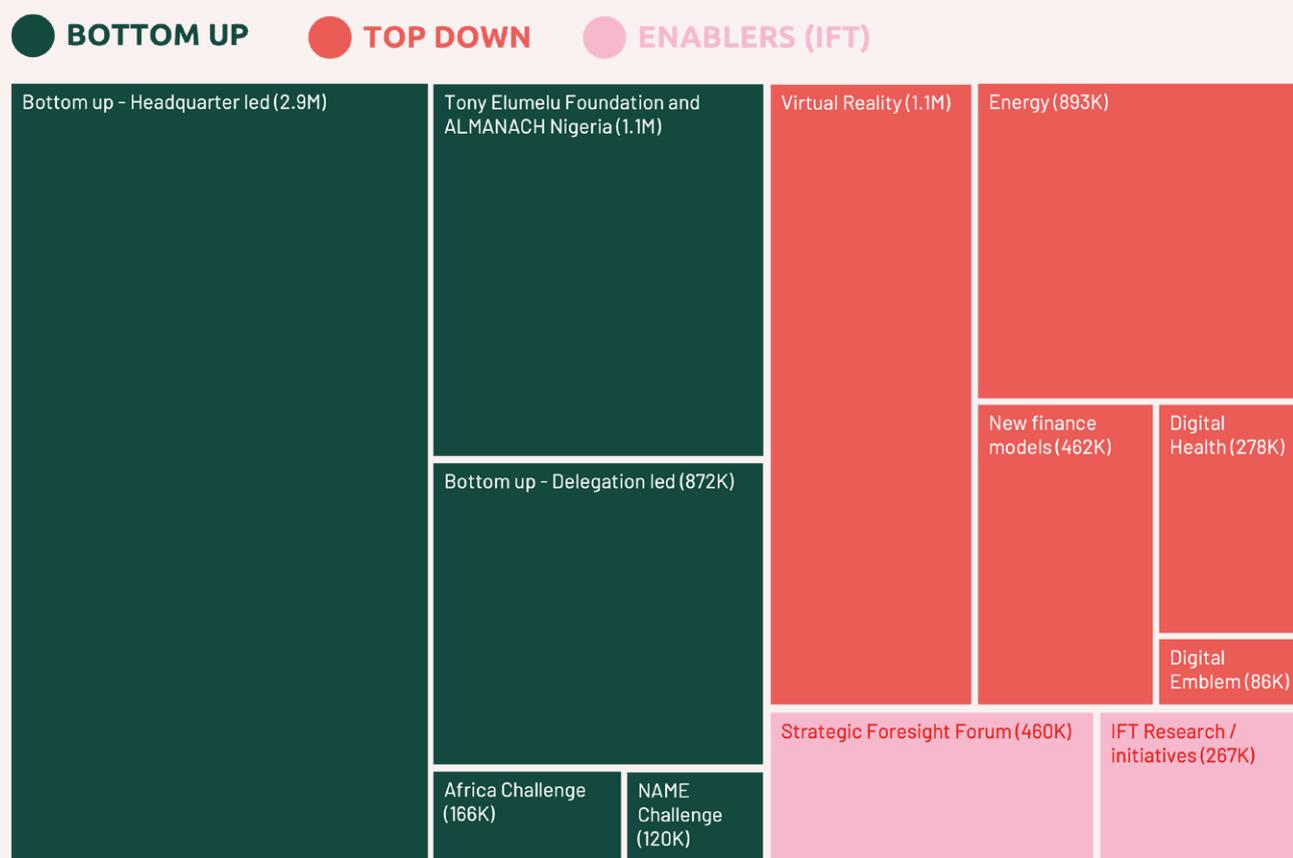


Figure 1. Total IFT investments (8.7M CHF) from 2018 to June 2023. Investments include 86 closed and 7 ongoing initiatives with available data. Excludes other IFT activities such as communications, InspiRED days, and other training and facilitation.

4. Jantuah, Moench & Bond. 'Using Diversity and Inclusion as a Source for Humanitarian Innovation'. 2019.

IMPACT

15. Between 2018 and June 2023, the IFT invested 8.2M CHF into 128 top-down and bottom-up initiatives and 0.5M into Strategic Foresight (see Figure 1). The evaluation examined these investments against three outcome areas:

Consolidated learning: There was evidence of learning outcomes across the portfolio. Interviews with initiative leads indicated that most learning was used by the innovation teams to develop their solutions and/or to inform other work. For example, although the Better Body Bags initiative concluded that the new solution was not an improvement on current practice, it generated academic evidence that will inform future work on body bags. Five of the nine case study initiatives had published research or for wider use and all had shared learning via blogs. There was no documentation of how these learning outputs had been used by the ICRC more broadly (a normal challenge for research and learning initiatives) although several respondents noted awareness of research from other innovators.

Improved solutions: Participants described how the IFT helped innovators articulate a hypothesis that they could test through innovation funding. All seven of the case studies into innovation initiatives led to improved efficiencies (eg the Autonomous Restoring Family Links (RFL) service and the Electronic Red Cross Messaging service), new technical solutions (eg the Digital emblem), or novel approaches (eg to community-based conflict and climate resilience in Niger). Of 99 closed initiatives, 42% were integrated into the PfR and 10% received alternative funding (see Figure 2), indicating buy-in for the solution.

Wide adoption of new solutions: It can take years to decades for innovations to be developed, tested, and adopted at scale. Many of the solutions that were funded by the IFT are still at a fairly early stage and will need more funding, time, and support to reach their potential. Two of the projects that achieved the greatest uptake were recipients of significant funding: the ALMANACH (short for the Algorithm for the Management of Childhood Illness) digital health tool in Nigeria and the Virtual Reality Unit, which now has at least 20 different training scenarios for staff from different metiers. The IFT helped teams think about 'next step pathways' after testing, but this was not a primary objective.

16. **A constellation of factors proved important to the success of those innovations that were adopted** into metiers or delegations. Participants explained the need for senior management support, expert agreement, clear responsibility for replication efforts, data protection protocols, alignment with other efforts, and funding availability for the next phase. Innovators needed to engage systematically with the right people from the outset. Even when they did this, territorialism and mistrust could pose significant hurdles. Multiple initiatives explained how the IFT contributed to overcoming these factors (and therefore to adoption), especially by facilitating linkages and through championing.
17. Beyond these initiatives, participants argued that **access to innovation support catalyzed new ideas**. For example, Regional Challenge participants felt the challenges had allowed teams to learn how to articulate a hypothesis for testing, and to get feedback on the design and implementation of a new idea. Innovators across the ICRC spoke of how access to flexible funding and the ability to implement activities outside the PfR and without managerial approval processes had instilled a sense of autonomy and safety to test and fail.

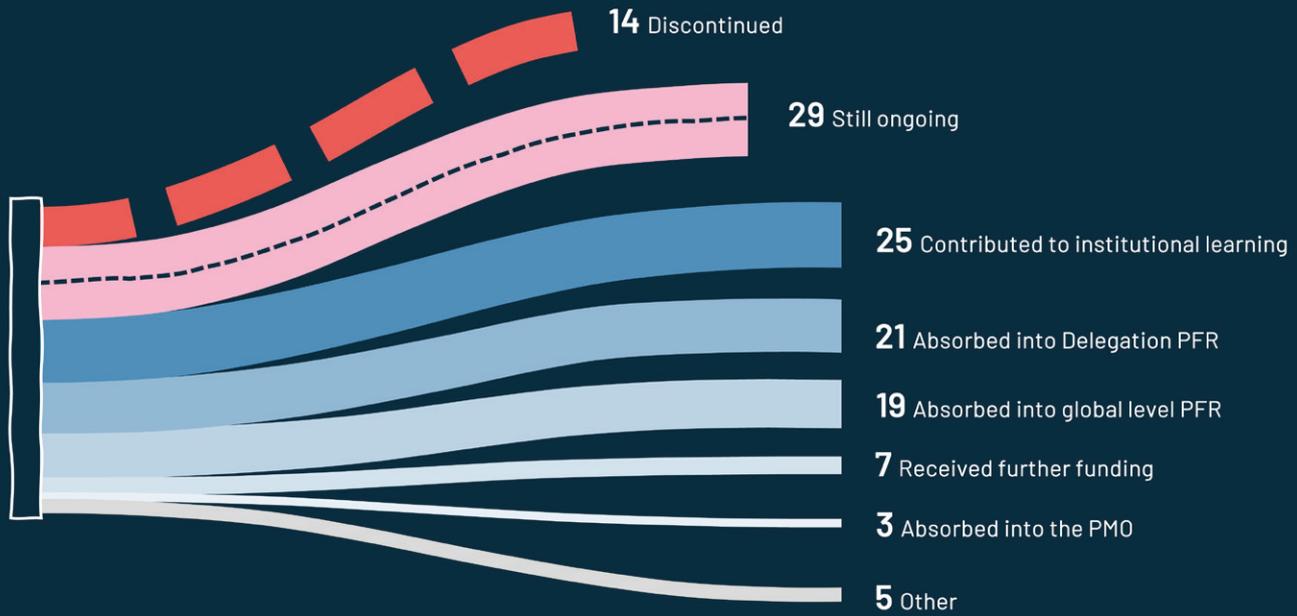


Figure 2. Documented pathway at close of initiative, with one primary pathway per initiative. Number represents number of initiatives in each pathway - 128 initiatives in total (pathway data was unavailable for 5 initiatives).

18. **There was a surge of interest in the Strategic Foresight Forum, with over 1,100 applicants for the Forum's two cohorts** (2022 and 2023). Impressively, all 50 of the first cohort of Strategic Foresight Forum participants successfully completed it, and 85% found the tools to be 'highly effective'⁵. The Forum promoted diverse participation⁶ based on geographic location, professional background, areas of specialization, departmental affiliation, and level of seniority. Participants noted the quality and depth of discussion and the equitable balancing of headquarters and field voices. They saw the Forum as a novel opportunity, particularly for residential staff within delegations with little exposure to such initiatives. Strategic Foresight participants repeatedly said they were using foresight to improve their planning and generate ideas about the future.
19. **Another significant impact of the IFT's work was its role as a connector.** The team cultivated productive relationships and facilitated cross-departmental collaborations. This led to the exchange of information and experiences, with participants noting the scarcity of such spaces within the ICRC. The InspiRED days and the Strategic Foresight Forum, in particular, were described by participants as unique in forming linkages across diverse organizational levels and units. Research partnerships were also fostered with prestigious entities like the University of Geneva, École Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne (EPFL), Swiss Federal Institute of Technology Zurich (ETH Zurich), although less so with academic institutions in other countries. Although there were normal challenges in tracking research and influencing impact, several initiatives, such as the Digital Dilemmas immersive experience, showcased potential influences beyond the ICRC.

5. ICRC, *Strategic Foresight initiative. 2021-2023. 2023* (Internal document).

6. Weiner, M, *Cultural prerequisites for participating in open foresight. R&D Management Volume 49, Issue 5 p. 703-715. 2019.*



FUTURE MODEL FOR INNOVATION

Strategic objectives

20. The **IFT lacked strategic objectives against which it could assess success**. Strategic direction was set in 2017 through a Resolution that defined a broad remit for innovation but did little to define its scope or provide metrics for success. The Board did not assume responsibility for setting strategic direction, which would have provided guidance, leverage, and accountability. In some ways, the team benefited from a lack of predefined objectives, which allowed them a great deal of flexibility to identify new opportunities. However, now that the IFT is established, its sustained success requires more than unbridled flexibility.
21. The lack of objectives has resulted in **a broad set of intentions and initiatives**. The team set out their intent in their annual report to the funder, and retrofitted their objectives for this evaluation. The objectives they articulated were ambitious and wide-reaching from creating a culture of innovation to supporting innovators. Evaluation participants similarly described different purposes of innovation funding and support including to modernize the ICRC, identify new solutions that would reduce costs, improve the quality of core services (to be 'faster, stronger, better'), address the implications of current technologies with regard to IHL, and facilitate digitalization.
22. **Greater clarity is now required**. A Board-led strategy process should build on the IFT's own work on strategic foresight and set out what the IFT is trying to achieve, covering the following questions:
 - What are the purpose and objectives of innovation at the ICRC?
 - What areas of innovation should be prioritized?
 - What is the IFT's role in facilitating scaling?

Areas of innovation

23. The IFT **connected with, funded, and supported more than one hundred innovation teams** across the ICRC as well as delivering training to more than 1,700 people. To guide investment choices, the IFT developed portfolios in 2018 based on topics of interest among their stakeholders that were also relevant to the ICRC's wide-reaching 2019-2024 strategy. The portfolios were fairly broad categories and the team included an X-file for anything not falling within the portfolio focus meaning that **almost anything could be funded**. The evaluation participants did not feel that the portfolio categories were narrow enough to drive innovation in specific areas, nor to reflect a systematic analysis of future priorities for the ICRC.
24. Given the limited resources and the breadth of the organization, the **investments were inevitably biased**. Activities were disproportionately implemented in HQ, in programmatic teams, and in a small number of metiers. Investments in a mixed portfolio were made but lacked a clear rationale for why they were selected over alternative strategies. Although the open call for ideas accepted innovations from across the organization's metiers and delegations, the majority of participants perceived innovation to be Headquarter-focused. It is important to ensure that innovation does not become its own silo, known to favour certain demographics, locations, departments, or types of innovation.
25. The evaluation articulates **three alternative routes forward** and we recommend that the Board decides on one of these options in Q1 2024. This would help guide investment decisions, and provide staff with a rationale for what gets supported and for the overall portfolio. Trade-offs between each option are outlined in Annex 2.
 - Option 1: Programmatic Innovations** Articulate a narrower scope for the IFT based on innovations within clearly defined portfolios that focus only on operational/programmatic areas

Option 2: Diversified Innovations Rebalance innovation for the whole organization, focusing on solutions for both programmes and institutional processes related to procurement, administration, finance etc.

Option 3: Digital and top-down Innovations Have a more exclusive focus on innovations in new technologies. This tighter focus appealed to a minority of stakeholders but risks less connection with the delegations.

26. Once this has been decided, the team should begin to monitor whether its resource distribution serves the **diversity of its intended users**. This is not to say that the team can facilitate innovation in every unit and delegation, but that its innovation initiatives should include examples that are relevant to and can inspire all of its potential innovators.

Capacities and tools

27. In its early days, the IFT experimented with a range of different training methodologies including for partnership brokering and in the innovation pipeline. Since then, it has primarily focused on supporting innovation teams in hypothesis testing through funding and in launching a significant strategic foresight initiative. IFT figures indicate that **approximately 8% of the organization engaged in strategic foresight activities**. These activities established frameworks for envisioning future needs and planning innovations.
28. The team should continue to **consolidate its training efforts in these areas**. Participants' desires to see foresight used at an institutional level are logical and positive but there are significant hurdles to integrating new organisational processes in the ICRC. In the immediate term, investing in the growing cohort of foresight participants represents a positive start for the initiative.

Impact and data

29. The IFT kept records on the investments made, how funding was used, and what happened to investments at the end of funding. However, without investment criteria, **they haven't had a way to assess this data against their original intentions**. The evaluation documented impacts across the portfolio, including different types of learning and improved solutions. However, the IFT found it challenging to measure the impact of an innovation portfolio that incorporated a wide array of initiatives operating in different sectors, at different scales, and with different types of social or institutional outcomes. Different team members, Board members, and observers viewed different types of impact more or less favourably. Without criteria to assess the quality of the initiatives, decision-making depended on personal experience, and the relative value of some investments was hotly contested.
30. The next step is to **develop a more rigorous approach to data**. Research on evaluating innovation highlights three types of impact that were used to assess impact in this evaluation (see Section 5 of the long report)⁷. These provide a good starting point to help guide investment decisions and analysis. The Board should build on these priorities to establish investment criteria for the IFT to ensure that the investments align with the team's goals and have a positive impact in the intended areas (see examples in Annex 3). Once decided, these investment criteria should be made available to all potential innovators and shared in the annual call for proposals. They could include:
- Consolidated learning in relation to particular problems, in relation to particular types of solutions, or in relation to pathways to adoption
 - An improved solution in terms of cost reduction or measurably improved services
 - Widespread adoption of an improved solution

Scaling

31. The IFT had a clear **emphasis on innovations for the ICRC and this was reflected in most discussions** with participants. One or two investments were made in innovations that scaled outside of the ICRC (most notably the ALMANACH project, an investment of over >1M that scaled a digital health tool within the Nigerian health system). However, most participants spoke of replication across different metiers and delegations as the primary scaling pathway. Although the IFT supported teams in thinking through their post-funding plans, neither innovation teams, nor the IFT, nor the metiers and delegations that the innovations were situated within thought replication was their responsibility.
32. The IFT should both **consider the potential for scale in its investment decisions and should clarify its position in supporting scale**, allocating human resources to support teams to replicate and consolidate learning across various initiatives. The structure for replication will look different for technological innovations, where the team must navigate the gap between technological innovations and ICT frameworks

and practices (including that at the time of the evaluation, only larger projects received funding from the Tech and Data Board). Successful scaling for innovations requires teams to be thinking about scaling from the first prototypes. It is not possible or desirable for the IFT to completely hand over responsibility for scaling to other elements of the ICRC. Clearly distinct roles for the IFT and the recently re-launched Foundation are needed to avoid confusion and duplication and are still being defined.

33. The evaluation found that **innovation was recognised by participants as an important capability for the ICRC**. The team effectively utilized its position within the Executive Office of the Director General to establish valuable relationships across siloed segments of the organization, beginning to address the challenge that innovation has traditionally existed in isolated islands through the ICRC. There is huge potential for engaging further across the ICRC, the movement, and the innovation sector more widely. However, the results so far illustrate the value of incrementally building on the team’s work, focussing on transversal relationships, stronger systems, and bespoke support. This should continue in the next iteration, especially given the anticipated staff turnover. The focus should include developing narrower investment criteria, clarifying and investing in pathways for innovation adoption, and strengthening communications with the delegations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Table 2. Recommendations to the Board, IFT and to the IFT/Innovation Initiative leads together. The objectives are ordered by priority within each grouping.

LEVEL	RECOMMENDATION
Inno Board	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Given the constraints of their roles, the Board should hold a yearly half-day workshop to set strategic direction for the IFT including defining a set of objectives and investment criteria. The first should take place as soon as possible, ideally early in 2024. The Board should draw upon the IFT’s own Strategic Foresight thinking to inform priorities. Clarify and resource a role within the IFT for supporting the uptake of innovations within (and possibly beyond) the ICRC. This may be divided between multiple team members and could build on the effective role provided to the Virtual Reality Unit. It should include working with innovators, the Foundation, the PMO, and the Board to plan for the transition from innovation funding to institutional handover from the outset. As part of this, the Board should clarify distinct roles for the IFT and the Foundation to reduce duplication and address confusion among innovators.
IFT	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Continue to invest in the strategic foresight initiative, focussing on skills-building for staff across the ICRC. In the immediate term, focus on individual learning outcomes. In the medium term, continue to look for ways to integrate foresight into organizational processes. Develop a systematic mechanism for approving which projects receive funding based on planned learning, scaling, and impacts. Introduce more structured and standardized reporting requirements that capture outcomes against the planned objectives, and that plan for the innovation’s next steps. Continue to explore structured approaches to engaging systematically with regions and delegations, for example, the regional challenges. Strengthen internal communications, including a stronger emphasis on the IFT’s impact in communications, including through a rebrand of the Inspired blog to modernize and hosting more events that showcase innovations and bring innovators together. Continue to use IFT funds to alleviate the pressure on people who are innovating on top of their regular roles. Consider how to provide this type of support outside of the top-down challenges and extend it as far as possible within the available budget.
IFT and Innovation initiatives	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Invest in processes to consolidate learning across the portfolio, including peer-to-peer exchange. Work with innovation teams to share research plans with the Research Ethics Board for advice, and methodological feedback and to mitigate ethical risks.

