



Digital Transformation



Strategic and Emergent Innovation



Results-based Management



Collaborative Culture

# Learning and Innovation at Helvetas, 2021-2024

April 2021



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**HELVETAS**

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## 1. Context and Lessons Learned

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### 1.1 The foundations of learning & innovation at Helvetas

Underlying Helvetas' vision of a just world is a set of core values aimed at inclusion, co-creation and shared ownership of solutions, all of which resonate strongly with knowledge sharing, learning and innovation. Helvetas' values are demonstrated by how we work, both internally and with partners.

Learning and innovation are best supported by bringing multiple perspectives together (from field experience, conceptual work, across disciplines), by articulating, discussing and confronting key challenges in collaborative ways, by facilitating and engaging in multi-stakeholder partnerships.

These ways of working contribute to mutual learning between Helvetas and its partners:

- With implementing partners, we exchange on local realities, we facilitate multistakeholder dialogues, and we bring thematic experience from other countries and regions
- Together with our donors, we reflect on what works and what does not, we advocate for inclusive and systemic approaches, we share our own and learn about other innovations we can bring into our programming
- We join with like-minded organizations to influence development policy and to exchange learning on major challenges such as climate change, shrinking space for civil society and economic exclusion

All of this serves to strengthen Helvetas and the organizations with which it works and to enable learning, innovation and improvement at multiple levels. In other words, Helvetas' efforts to achieve its learning and innovation goals simultaneously strengthen the impact of our work by creating space for dialogue and conditions for ongoing learning and innovation.

The Theory of Change in the Helvetas Program 2021-2024, outlines the three intervention mechanisms Helvetas uses to achieve its vision: development & humanitarian response projects, thematic advice and advocacy. These mechanisms work together to contribute to change in pursuit of poverty reduction and human rights. They are also complemented by the two Transversal Themes of Gender & Social Equity and Learning & Innovation and the Program's strategic focus topic, digitalization.

These intervention mechanisms become mutually reinforcing and realize their full potential only when there is consistent knowledge sharing and cross-fertilization of thinking, collaborative and agile ways of working and appropriate tools. A major enabler for achieving this is an environment where ideas, knowledge, learning and innovation thrive, where what is learned in one situation can be brought into another, and where the organization as a whole **and** its network of partners are improving their processes. Indeed, incorporating learning into future doing and quickly adapting to a changing world are essential to Helvetas' programming.

It is nothing new to say that the pace of technological change – particularly relating to digital technologies – is fast and is accelerating, but it remains a defining feature of the current century. One of the most important implications for the development community is that digitalization is exponentially increasing the connectedness of people and institutions. On the one hand such

Addressing the wide variety of challenges faced in a highly interconnected world – from community to global levels – can only be done through dialogue, exchange and collaboration. *Truly sustainable development is owned by those who are directly affected and must be driven by innovative and learning-oriented approaches.*  
– Helvetas Programme 2021-2024

connectedness offers the possibility to greatly streamline business processes, and digital technology can help facilitate inclusion and enable greater transparency and participation. On the other, digital technology can exacerbate inequalities of access, and be used for high levels of surveillance and spreading of misinformation, while it creates new challenges related to data protection, access to hardware and internet-based content.

More broadly, we understand most of our working contexts to be complex, with numerous stakeholders, institutions and systems (environment, economy, society) that interact in a wide variety of ways, and that can change rapidly. Working in this kind of environment requires taking an approach that:

- Is **anchored** in understanding the socio-economic, environmental and political systems in which we work (and applies an analytical lens that is rights-based and gender and inequality sensitive)
- Recognizes and enables the Helvetas' role as **facilitator**, working with different system partners, in the joint pursuit of change
- Emphasizes **learning and innovation** as crucial for effective adaptation and evolution, and to realize the potential of our interventions

## 1.2 Learning and Innovation and their relation to sustainability

Development organizations recognize the complexity of the environmental, economic and social contexts in which they work. In tandem with this, the global collaborative effort around Agenda 2030 and its associated Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is a manifestation of a sophisticated and holistic approach to understanding and contributing to sustainable development.

Sustainable solutions require engagement on the part of a wide variety of actors, and they require processes, tools and commitment to learning and to innovation. For this reason, innovation in particular is on the agenda of many development organizations.

Looking at some of Helvetas' key partners, for example:

- Helvetas is part of **Alliance 2015 (A2015)**, a partnership of European humanitarian and development NGOs dedicated to eradicating poverty, hunger, injustice and inequality. Welthungerhilfe has a strong focus on enabling scaling in its projects and programs, whilst taking into account that there is no 'one size fits all' approach. Concern Worldwide strives to foster a spirit of innovation throughout the organization, and to build on its long-standing presence and relationships in its country programs to innovate pragmatically. People in Need specializes in innovation in the area of communications, particularly through the use of drones. Helvetas participates in and benefits from regular exchanges within A2015 on innovation and on creating positive digital cultures
- Helvetas also works with the **Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC)** in a variety of contexts. For example, Helvetas has provided backstopping to a number of SDC thematic networks, which were created to better link staff with similar interests as well as partners. Aside from SDC's interest in innovation around these networks (first, using them as a KM vehicle, more recently to explore more cross-disciplinary collaboration through clustering), SDC has also recently launched several innovation-focused initiatives (e.g. TRANSFORM and Tech4Dev to support partnerships between academic, NGO and other institutions)
- On the academic side, Helvetas is a participating NGO in innovation-oriented initiatives of the two affiliated institutions, the **Swiss Federal Institute of Technology (ETH)** and the **École**

**Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne (EPFL).** In both cases, scale is a crucial element, as is technology focused innovation. Here Helvetas can contribute its extensive field experience and facilitation of learning and innovation-oriented collaborations whilst gaining access to the more cutting-edge technology advances.

### 1.3 Lessons Learned from the previous period

The Helvetas Knowledge and Learning (KNL) Strategy 2015-2019, combined **Collaborative Learning** (to build on experience and exchange), **Purposeful Innovation** (to introduce new ways of working that are conducive to innovation), and **Transformational Change** (to consciously adapt the way we organise our work in response to our environment).

Reflecting on our experiences since 2015, these areas make sense as an integrated approach to supporting knowledge sharing, learning and innovation. The following is a brief summary of the key lessons learned from our experience with the 2015-2019 KNL Strategy:

#### ***Lesson 1: Effective knowledge sharing and learning are more about individual competencies and behavior than they are about tools or approaches***

Helvetas has a solid set of tools and methods for effective implementation and related learning. These are widely shared through day-to-day collaboration, Pamoja, advisory missions, and strategic events (e.g. Shareweeks/Sharedays involving hundreds of staff). However, there is wide variation across the organization in the familiarity with and consistent use of those tools and methods. The behavioral aspect is also important: we need to provide clear incentives for people to proactively share their knowledge and outputs beyond their immediate working contexts.

#### ***Lesson 2: Implementation without reflection is a significant barrier to learning***

The results of all Learning NGO Surveys<sup>1</sup> in Helvetas between 2005 and 2019 highlight continuing concerns of Helvetas staff that they do not have sufficient time for reflection on their work. The consistency of this response over a decade is a strong indication that we need to do more to create space for staff and partners to think about and discuss their joint experiences.

#### ***Lesson 3: Our approach to the use of IT tools for virtual collaboration requires regular review***

The rapid pace of technological change is becoming accepted as normal, but it introduces new and exciting possibilities at the same time as it can be disruptive of existing ways of working. It is crucial to periodically reflect on and balance these tensions and make decisions about which tools to use for different purposes based on such reflections and our understanding of how they will contribute to our learning goals.

#### ***Lesson 4: Our Monitoring & Evaluation requires a holistic approach, taking our processes, behaviors, methodologies and attitudes into account***

Helvetas has made substantial improvements in its Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) systems, including a recently revamped Results Framework as well as positive changes in reporting that put

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<sup>1</sup> The LNGO Survey has provided snapshots of staff perceptions of Helvetas as a Learning Organization, and has been used to evaluate successive Knowledge and Learning strategies since the early 2000s.

more emphasis on analytical thinking. However, the link between more reliable and useful information from our M&E activities and future planning needs to be improved. This corresponds with the realization that Helvetas needs to improve on its use of digital tools to support M&E.

### **Lesson 5: Innovation needs to be steered to better serve organizational goals**

The pursuit of Learning Expeditions – intensive conceptual and field-based explorations around selected key topics – had an inspiring start with the topic of behavior change in the WASH sector. Progress around other topics (urban engagement, migration) was positive as well<sup>2</sup>. We also had examples of emergent innovation, some of which was recognized, *inter alia*, through the Helvetas Innovation Award. However, gaining organization-wide traction has been more of a challenge, partly due to a lack of person-time dedicated to follow-up.

## 2. Our understanding of Learning & Innovation

### Objective

*Grounded by the competence and commitment to work in truly collaborative ways, in multistakeholder contexts and through the leveraging of relevant technologies, Helvetas staff, partners and primary stakeholders effectively share knowledge, collaborate, learn and innovate together, leading to higher levels of self-determination and sustainable development solutions.*

We use **knowledge** in all of our work. Whether it is technical know-how, such as construction of water supply systems, or process know-how, such as how to engage multiple stakeholders for effective planning, implementing, monitoring and learning from development activity, it is all about knowledgeable people working together to create positive outcomes.

So, having, using and creating knowledge is ‘the way we work’. Knowledge is active: it is only when we use our knowledge that it is fully visible.

We add to or change our knowledge by **learning**, and it happens at various levels within the organization as well as outside it. Learning is an essential aspect of competence building, of

**Knowledge** is what we use in our work.

**Learning** is how we increase or enhance our knowledge.

**Innovation** is how we leverage knowledge & learning to significantly increase/accelerate impact.

<sup>2</sup> The Learning Expeditions have resulted in a variety of lessons as well as training materials and guides. For example, resources on Behavior Change in WASH and on Urban Engagement can be found here: <https://pamoja.helvetas.org/display/advisory/%5BWIN+Library+%3E+Water+Supply%2C+Sanitation+and+Hygiene+%3E+Guidelines%2C+Manuals+and+Tools%5D+GENERAL+DOCUMENTS> and here: <https://pamoja.helvetas.org/display/ACCENTS/Urban+Engagement>

knowledge enhancement, and of **innovation**<sup>3</sup>. In addition to this learning foundation, for innovation to succeed and to contribute to organizational goals, it must be closely linked to ongoing challenges. The more innovation is a response to identified needs, the greater potential it has to make a meaningful contribution to our work.

Learning and innovation have been features of Helvetas knowledge-sharing strategies for over a decade. This is based on our human-centered orientation towards organizational knowledge management (Helvetas staff, partners and the stakeholders they interact with are where the knowledge comes from). Building on this foundation, Helvetas is in a good position to further explore how we can improve the depth of our learning and innovation, as well as their relevance for all aspects of our work.

## 2.1 What learning means for us

It has long been a position within Helvetas that **learning and competence building happen primarily through direct experience or through reflection on experience** (ref. [HRD Strategy 2018-2020](#), successive [Helvetas Knowledge and Learning strategies](#)). It is the combination of concrete implementation, systematic observation of results and critical reflection on what worked, what did not and why that has the greatest learning potential. Learning is also a fundamentally social activity, where exchange of beliefs, ideas, perspectives and practice enrich everyone who is involved.

In order to learn and improve on an ongoing basis, we need to have processes and methods that allow analysis (joint reflection), understanding (reports, knowledge products), knowledge sharing and effective and adaptive decision-making.

We can achieve better effectiveness, efficiency, outreach and impact of what we do when we learn on a continuous basis. Sometimes the improvements we make are adjustments or refinements of current practice, and sometimes they go further, leading to incremental or transformative innovation. The latter is described in more detail in the following section.

Much of what we want to do is to continue good practice that is well-established, for example:

- Active **facilitation of collaborative processes** with high levels of participation and shared ownership amongst all teams (staff and partners) — a must-have to enable shared learning
- Regular exercises of critical reflection and **capitalization of experience**, to help deepen learning on the part of core stakeholders in a given project/initiative and to make that learning available to wider audiences (an excellent example of deep reflection leading to equally deep learning)
- Ensure **inputs, data and information** are high-quality, timely, useful and targeted
- Promotion of **mentoring and coaching**, to increase opportunities for those with high levels of experience to share their knowledge with others who do not have as much experience: much of the most crucial knowledge held within Helvetas and partner organizations can flow more freely through joint work of this kind

There are also a number of areas where we seek to improve/add, including:

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<sup>3</sup> Our understanding of innovation and its link to impact (see text box) resonates well with that of the [International Development Innovation Alliance](#), a donor and international organization collaborative platform seeking to strengthen the role of innovation in development.

- **Ensuring learning is used at the institutional level**, going beyond projects/programs (here, strengthening Results-Based Management (RBM)<sup>4</sup> is a key feature. See [Section 3.3 Results-Based Management](#) for more detail on RBM in the Helvetas context)
- **Communication** of achievements and learning to a broader audience
- **Learning from outside** (there might already be evidence from outside the organization on what needs to be changed/considered, which Helvetas could benefit from without needing to generate it in-house)
- **Approaching innovation in a more focused way**, recognizing and institutionalizing where feasible and investing as appropriate

## 2.2 What do we mean by Innovation?

Innovation is how we leverage our knowledge and learning to create new and better technical or methodological solutions or ways of working, which contribute to increased impact. It is generally experienced in one of two ways:

- **Incremental**: Solving an existing problem better, faster or in a more cost-effective way **by improving a known solution**
- **Transformative**: Solving an existing problem better, faster or in a more cost-effective way or solving a new problem **by finding a new, previously unknown solution**

Both types of innovation can be very effective in improving our work. From an organizational perspective, innovation can also play out in different spaces and it can have different orientations. An innovation can directly affect people in program countries (**impact programming**), or it can be more indirect, improving how the organization does its work (**streamlining**). For Helvetas, the potential for innovation to improve the lives of primary stakeholders in program countries is a priority, and it is where we will focus most of our innovation-specific resources.

The final important aspect of our orientation to innovation relates to **scale**: For an innovation to have sufficient potential, it needs to be applicable at a (national, subnational) system or organization-wide level, and backed up by ongoing learning. We want to move from interesting and useful examples implemented in one place, to more impactful relevance at a wider scale. Taking the scale aspect into account:

**Helvetas recognizes an Innovation as a process or technology that benefits at least 10% of ongoing projects or 50,000 primary stakeholders or 20% of Helvetas staff globally.**

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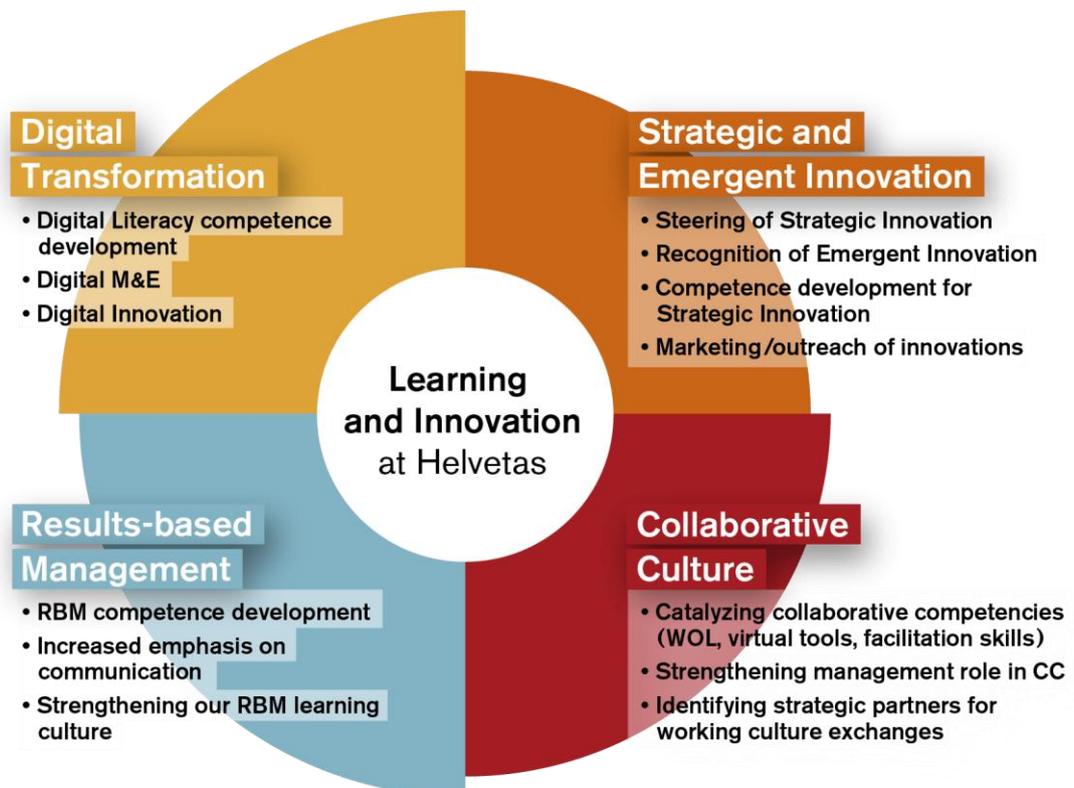
<sup>4</sup> Results-Based Management (RBM) is an approach to project/program/organizational management that focuses on: achievable results; monitoring progress towards those results; integrating learning into management decisions and periodic reporting on performance (Source: [UNDP Results Based Management: Concepts and Methodology https://cutt.ly/sqqjoUp](https://cutt.ly/sqqjoUp)).

### 3. Implications for Helvetas' work

Based on our current understanding of learning and innovation, as well as the lessons from the 2015-2020 period, this Learning and Innovation concept for the 2021-2024 period focuses particularly on the following:

- Putting a greater emphasis on **relevant competencies** of our staff and partners, as the most promising avenue for continued improvement
- Adopting a more systematic approach to **identifying, nurturing and applying innovation**, particularly in project and program contexts.

The introduction of the Transversal Topic of Learning and Innovation in our Organizational Strategy 2021-2024 recognizes that there is not a great need to change **what** we are trying to do. It is rather a shift in **how** we expect to accomplish it. We therefore continue to emphasize collaboration, participation, shared learning and innovation, but focus more on how we enable them in the organization and in our work with partners. To provide a frame for this, we have identified four main areas of focus. Here are the key Focus Areas for the Learning & Innovation topic, which are further elaborated below:



### Learning & Innovation at Helvetas

The Focus Areas together are aimed at achieving the learning and innovation potential of Helvetas and its partners by integrating them more deeply in our day-to-day work. As each area develops further, it reinforces our work in the other areas, building a high level of resilience:

- The stronger our **collaborative culture** is, the more it will support **learning, innovation and effective adaptation** by making it easier for ideas and solutions to be shared
- An **RBM approach across the organization** increases demand for effective monitoring, supports the incorporation of learning into operations, and increases our agility to explore innovation
- Understanding the **implications of a rapidly evolving digital world** gives us a stronger foundation on which to practice RBM and to innovate through increased awareness of what is happening in the world
- Putting **relevant digital tools to strategic use** helps us increase both our efficiency and the quality of our collaboration through increased connectedness

## 3.1 Strengthening Strategic & Emergent Innovation

We can catalyze **strategic and emergent innovation** by creating spaces and mobilizing resources to explore new topics, technologies and processes as well as recognizing innovative ideas. While we give priority to innovations that improve lives of people in partner countries, they can also be related to improving operations and processes within the organization.

Innovation occurs at different times, in different places, and can be spontaneous or a result of intentional direction. Having an innovation-friendly working environment contributes greatly to emergent innovation, but it is not enough. In order for innovation to contribute consistently to organizational goals and to reach the desired scale, **reliance on emergent innovation needs to be complemented with strategic innovation**. In other words, innovation can happen:

- Through the use of targeted resources aimed at addressing specific challenges (strategic), or;
- As a result of ongoing learning and individual or group insight into a new or improved way of doing things (emergent)

**What is an innovation-friendly environment?** In order for innovation to thrive throughout the organization, we need:

- A solid collaborative culture
- Decision-making processes that are open to new ideas
- A tolerance for 'failure' (ie. Unexpected results of innovation, which are inherently unpredictable)

### 3.1.1 Strategic Innovation to confront complex challenges

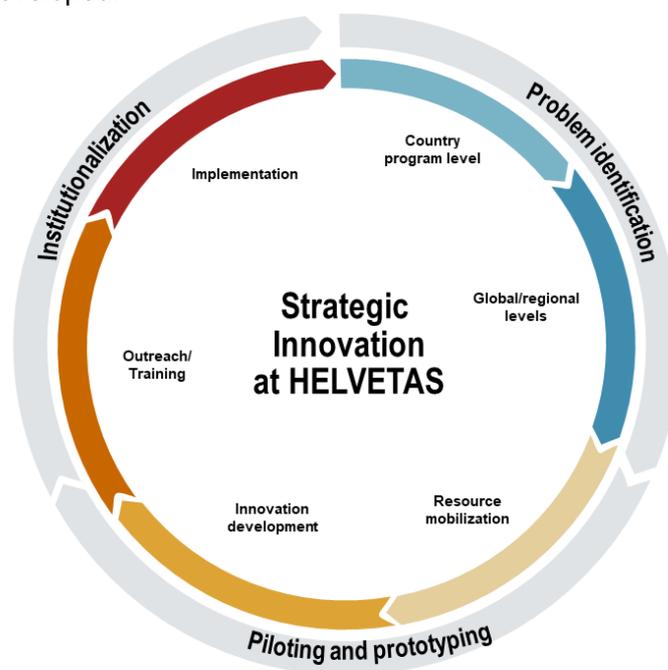
In order to strategically take up innovation opportunities, we need to develop a common understanding of how they can be identified and supported. To facilitate this common understanding, Helvetas will establish a process to **identify, develop and institutionalize innovation** (not only within Helvetas, but beyond as well) that contributes directly to our overall goal of supporting poor and disadvantaged women and men in their efforts to improve their living conditions in a sustainable

manner. At the same time – and in recognition of the fact that Helvetas has limited resources, most of which are dedicated to ongoing work – the process also needs to be simple, focused and anchored as much as possible in the realities of our interventions in the field.

Strategic innovations, by their very nature (being new and unproven), involve a certain amount of risk: we do not know in advance if a new idea or technology will be fully effective, or if it will work in the ways we expect it to. This means whatever process we adopt needs to include clear milestones and indicators at each step to provide arguments whether or not to go ahead with further development.

**Lean innovation** is an approach that drives innovation by stakeholder feedback and encourages experimentation rather than expensive and detailed planning, adopting instead an orientation of continuously improving on initial ideas.

A powerful way to ensure that our strategic innovations are anchored in local realities is by adopting a **lean innovation**<sup>5</sup> approach, which focuses on establishing and maintaining a close connection with direct stakeholders of a project or program as an innovation is developed.



### 3.1.1.1 Strategic Innovation Step 1: Problem identification

The first step in undertaking strategic innovation is to clearly identify the most important problems or challenges that are faced in our projects, programs or across the organization as a whole.

These problems could be related to technology, organizational processes, influences from project or program contexts, etc. This will lead to a limited number of challenges that can then be used as starting points to explore innovative approaches or technologies. This has the added benefit of

<sup>5</sup> See <https://www.northeastern.edu/graduate/blog/what-is-lean-innovation-and-why-use-it/> for more detail on lean innovation.

building on a strong foundation of demand (real challenges) that will help to generate the energy necessary to take those innovation opportunities up.

1-2 of these problems per year will be prioritized for further followup, based on agreed criteria such as relevance, feasibility, scalability. One element of this followup will be to validate the problem definitions with the main stakeholders involved through the use of ***design thinking***<sup>6</sup>, an essential building block of lean innovation.

***Design thinking*** requires observing the situations of key stakeholders, and discussing identified problems with them (either directly if Helvetas is working directly with those stakeholders, or indirectly through partners if Helvetas' partners are the primary project implementers) and together creating a clear problem definition.

A second element of follow-up will be to further support the innovations along the path to institutionalization<sup>7</sup>. This implies selecting relatively few problems for strategic innovation, as experience has shown that a 'scattergun' approach of supporting dozens of ideas will result in insufficient resources being devoted to the innovation process, leading to frustration and limited impact.

The above does not mean that most problem identification at project/country levels will be a waste of time. On the contrary, the identification process will create excellent opportunities to focus energy on priority areas for improvement, independent of the strategic innovation process<sup>8</sup>.

### 3.1.1.2 Strategic Innovation Step 2: Piloting and prototyping

The second step is to develop responses to problems and challenges by engaging a representative group of key stakeholders in a meaningful way, and by considering implementation at scale from the beginning. There are two aspects to this step:

- 1) ***Developing relevant innovations***. Using an identified problem as a starting point, appropriate innovations (either technology oriented or process oriented or a combination of the two) will be piloted by Helvetas staff, partners or others contracted for this purpose. Here again, it is crucial to keep the lean innovation orientation, which involves rapid prototyping with frequent feedback loops from key stakeholders. Prototyping in this kind of collaborative way will ensure a close link to the reality we aim to improve. As part of this process, we will conduct scoping reviews into innovations that may have already been developed by others to address similar challenges.
- 2) ***Mobilizing resources***. The prototyping also requires dedicated resources to make it happen. These resources can come either from internal sources or by tapping into those available from outside. Internally, existing program or project funds may be available. The Helvetas Acquisition desk will also support exploration of possibilities for external funding. Here our

<sup>6</sup> For more information on design thinking, see <https://www.interaction-design.org/literature/article/what-is-design-thinking-and-why-is-it-so-popular>

<sup>7</sup> An assessment framework will be developed to enable an efficient process of narrowing down the topics for strategic innovation support. For this, criteria will need to be developed such as "# of individuals that will benefit", "costs", "time", "possible barriers" "conducive conditions", "motivation of partners" etc.

<sup>8</sup> For example, the Guatemala country program's CASA process (Knowledge-Learning-Sharing-Implementation. In Spanish Conocimientos-Aprendizaje-Socialización-Aplicación) supports Helvetas staff around the country to meet regularly to: a) identify topics for joint learning, b) share and discuss own experiences, and c) have a social event to know colleagues better and build a team.

engagement with Swiss academic institutions, for example, could create opportunities. We will also track and submit bids to innovation-focused donor programs.

### 3.1.1.3 Strategic Innovation Step 3: Institutionalization

Some or all of the prototypes identified and developed in Steps 1 and 2 would be approved for further application in additional projects/programs or throughout the organization. The decision whether or not to go ahead with each innovation will be based on results from prototyping exercises. Those that are not approved can still be used for learning purposes, as the unintended results can be highly informative and relevant for future actions.

The ways in which specific innovations are embedded in projects and programs will vary depending on the innovation, available resources and external demand, but what will not vary is the need to have a detailed, practical plan for scaling the refined prototype, for example by using a Business Model Canvas<sup>9</sup> or similar tool to effectively define an innovation's value proposition, key stakeholders, channels through which they are engaged, main initial activities, required resources, etc.

Other important pieces of the puzzle in terms of institutionalizing strategic innovations include:

- **Effective communication** around the innovations: proficiency in the area of communications/marketing among program colleagues is needed to be able to package innovations in attractive ways, which will help them to propagate throughout Helvetas and beyond
- Our **acquisition processes** will include an element of 'innovation radar', in order to be able to reference key innovations and include them in our acquisition efforts
- In order to **ensure awareness of innovations** across the organization – and to provide an avenue for those that do not meet the aforementioned threshold to be taken up as strategic innovations – an Innovation Fair (perhaps in the form of a Shareday) will be held biennially, to promote innovations over the previous period, and to link up potential champions in different programs
- The IP department and the respective Working Area Advisors will be tasked with **exploring replication** of Strategic innovations in different contexts

### 3.1.2 Cultivating and recognizing Emergent Innovation

Aside from strategic innovation for which the above structured process was created, a highly important and complementary type of innovation is **emergent innovation**. This takes place in a variety of ways in the course of the daily work of staff and partners, where challenges are encountered, and possible solutions and new ideas are discussed and developed.

The primary driver behind emergent innovation is not innovative individuals, though such individuals can add great value to an organization's work. It is rather an **innovation-friendly environment** that is a crucial precondition for emergent innovation.

Aside from the cultivation of a collaborative culture (described in more detail below in section 3.2 Building on our Collaborative Culture), it is important to also **recognize emergent innovation** as much as possible, in order to both motivate staff and partners to continue to undertake innovative activity and to create opportunities for cross-fertilization across projects, countries and regions. The

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<sup>9</sup> For an annotated example of a Business Model Canvas, see <https://www.businessmodelsinc.com/about-bmi/tools/business-model-canvas/>

Helvetas Innovation Award over the past several years already did this to a certain extent, but there was insufficient follow-up to further promote the recognized projects and teams.

Instead of an annual award, in the new strategy period Helvetas will offer individuals and teams the chance to spontaneously share and discover innovation ideas in an online Innovation Marketplace.

### How we will strengthen Strategic & Emergent Innovation

- 1) Strategic Innovation requires steering. As such an **Innovation Working Group (IWG)** of 6-8 people will be initiated by the Executive Director and populated with members who are collectively representative of Helvetas staff globally (e.g. Country Directors/Deputies, Project Managers, Switzerland-based Senior/Middle managers). The IWG will help to create guiding documents (in collaboration with the LNI team) as well as identify innovation ideas and determine which will receive strategic support.
- 2) The competence development for Collaborative Learning will set the stage for boosting emergent innovation. In order to thrive and have maximum impact, our emergent innovations need to be recognized and communicated to others (in the region, in the organization, amongst our partners). The recognition will come through an **Innovation Marketplace** on Pamoja (created by LNI, facilitated by the IWG), a digital hub where different types of innovation-related activities, resources and references (both internal and external) will be documented. The marketplace can also host biennial Innovation Fairs.
- 3) Effective strategic innovation also requires building relevant competencies: 1-2 staff members in each project (and Switzerland) where a strategic innovation has been identified by the IWG will be coached/trained on the use of **Design Thinking**. This will ensure a close link with the needs of primary stakeholders in identifying and addressing problems. Following this, the same colleagues will be coached/trained on **Lean Innovation** methods. Ideally, coaching/training can be provided by local providers and a team of mentors built up over time. LNI will accompany this process and promote mentorship development.
- 4) Successful innovations also need to be well-communicated within and beyond Helvetas. The IWG will identify cases where competence needs to be developed to **'package' and market successful innovations** (whether they be emergent or strategic). Resources will need to be identified to support such competence development. The Marketing & Communications department will liaise with those who are undertaking innovations to communicate internally and/or externally about their work to ensure consistent branding and messaging are applied.

### 3.2 Building on our Collaborative Culture

Cultivating a **Collaborative Culture** within the organization and with partners will maximize learning in multiple directions, enable working across thematic and geographic areas, and invite free exchange across hierarchical levels<sup>10</sup>. At the same time, we need to recognize that Helvetas is a decentralized, multilingual and diverse organization, so strengthening of such a culture will require ongoing efforts amongst a wide variety of staff and partners.

Much of what needs to happen in terms of learning and innovation is up to individuals to sustain. It is not the various tools, methodologies and approaches that create a collaborative culture, it is the attitudes and working modes of **people**. However, for Helvetas staff and partners to participate in such a culture, they need to see that sharing and collaborating are valued and recognized (by their peers, by supervisors, by the organization as a whole), as well as being aware of how to make them happen.

Fortunately, we can benefit from staff in various parts of the organization who already have a great deal of experience in facilitating collaborative work internally as well as with partners. Although they are fully occupied with existing responsibilities, there is potential to leverage these human resources for the benefit of others without huge investment or disruption of our working environments.

To enable Helvetas staff to continue to build and sustain a collaborative culture, we will support and encourage:

- 1) **An organization-wide culture of feedback and transparency**, through Working out Loud<sup>11</sup>, working with HR to strengthen competencies and attitudes towards a feedback culture, which will encourage people to share relevant outputs on social media, Pamoja and elsewhere. This kind of culture will be strengthened by integrating desired behavior in job descriptions and the Annual Appraisal process and by building on good practice (e.g. consulting colleagues as a default behavior, occasionally reaching out to those with whom we do not normally work to generate fresh ideas, etc.). It is also important to link up with existing complementary initiatives such as the Global HR and Leadership initiatives, the mentorship program, etc.

**Working Out Loud (WOL)** – WOL is a way to build a practical network of peers to tap into the collective wisdom of the group. When we share our strategies, proposals and workplans at early stages of development, we create opportunities for others to contribute meaningfully to them. At the same time, we share our ways of thinking and working, which can also be a learning experience for others. Over time, the habit of WOL can dramatically increase collaboration, learning and innovation.

- 2) **Modelling by management**. Managers at all levels are key influencers on working culture, as well as being nodal points in the flow of information and decisions between levels. As such, the modelling of collaborative behavior is a key management responsibility at the same time as it is an enabler of such behavior in others. Managers can be supported in this role by peers as well as by organization-wide guidance and competence development opportunities

<sup>10</sup> Here we need to appreciate that culture change (whether it is in relation to Helvetas, to its partners or to the wider societies within which our programs are implemented) is not something that happens quickly or without a large amount of effort. This means that progress towards a fully collaborative culture across the organization and in our work with others will be uneven.

<sup>11</sup> For additional information and resources relating to WOL, see <https://workingoutloud.com/>

around cultivating a collaborative work environment. This includes **collaborative behavior**, the **use of appropriate tools** for virtual exchange and information sharing, and co-developing **key messaging** in relation to collaboration (e.g. announcements of relevant opportunities for training, targeted learning initiatives, interdepartmental task forces, webinars and other events such as Sharedays, which provide opportunities for meaningful engagement).

- 3) **Working collaboratively with partners.** Having a strong learning and innovation orientation requires us to live that orientation in our work, much of which is with partners. This obliges us to – as far as possible – work with partners in similar ways to our work with internal colleagues, and to encourage them to do the same. At the same time, developing truly collaborative partnerships creates possibilities for deeper mutual learning and opportunities for innovation.

### How we will strengthen Collaborative Culture

- 1) The LNI team will continue to play a catalytic role in **building collaborative competencies** (WOL, use of virtual tools, facilitation skills) in the short term, with this role increasingly being taken up by a peer support network made up of collaboration champions from each region. In this way, new methods and tools will be tested, and guidance documents/videos/tutorials developed, contributing to the development of competences in a cascading manner with other persons in the organization taking them up as appropriate (for example, this has already started to happen with webinars, blended learning, virtual facilitation)
- 2) The LNI team will support (and train where desired) a group of **'early adopters' amongst middle and senior management**, on WOL, cultivating a feedback culture, and using collaborative tools to do so. These managers will also be encouraged to join the abovementioned peer network, to promote further development of these competencies throughout Helvetas. Training providers/coaches/mentors are TBD
- 3) The Partnership & Capacity Development Coordinator will work closely with the LNI team to identify strategic partners with whom the pursuit of a **collaborative partnership culture** could be further developed, taking similar principles in the LNI concept into account

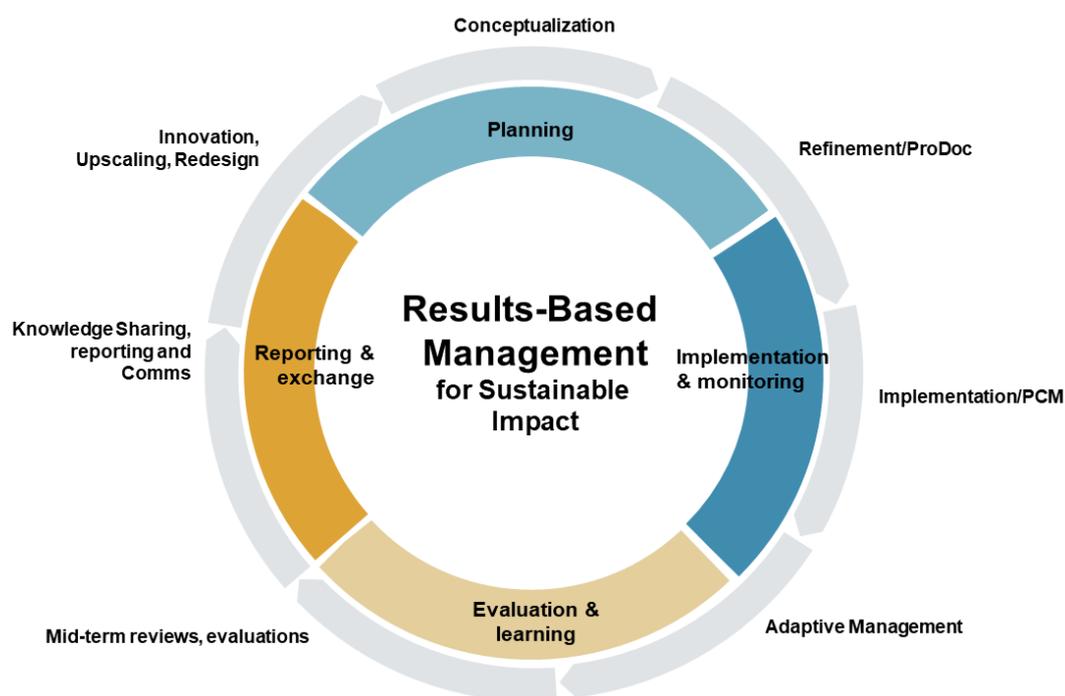
### 3.3 Results-Based Management

The growing relevance of adaptive, Results-Based Management is undisputed. Quickly changing contexts require continuous adaptation of programming, which relies on timely, useful information and processes that support reflection and adjustment. Donors require high-quality information on outcomes and impact. As a result, how we conduct our Project Cycle Management (PCM) is receiving increasing attention.

Helvetas strives to be a learning organization and stimulates staff to include feedback loops and reflections in many exercises and activities (e.g. monitoring, capitalization of experience, evaluation). We also put emphasis on the obligation to be accountable to our direct and indirect stakeholders. Our accountability is multidirectional and involves demonstrating the following commitments:

- To ensure that our projects contribute to positive impact for primary stakeholders
- To make the best use of funds received from donors
- To work in transparent and collaborative ways with our implementing partners

Because of our learning and accountability goals, we are motivated to use RBM as a way of working that enriches PCM and establishes a firm link between action and desired results. For us to fulfil these accountability obligations, we need to combine our well-established institutional database which compares expenditures to achieved results on output, outcome and impact levels for learning and accountability to donors and implementing partners with other evaluation processes and tools. These include client satisfaction surveys, peer reviews, Participatory Impact Assessment (aka Beneficiary Assessments), and social/community audits for accountability to primary stakeholders as well as for learning. It is therefore important that we have strong competencies in our country teams to apply such methods to assure the sharing, validation and discussion of results amongst a wider set of stakeholders.



**What is RBM?** It is an approach aimed at *realistic planning* for expected results, *monitoring progress* toward those results, *integrating lessons* learned into ongoing work and meaningful *reporting on performance*

### 3.3.1 The building blocks of RBM

Access to data from many sources as well as the availability of tools to generate, process and use information have increased exponentially in a relatively short time. The challenge that organizations are facing is not a lack, but an overabundance of data and information. How to make sense of data and information and how to use them for decision-making and for adapting projects are crucial aspects.

Helvetas manages a complex results framework or **Management Information System (MIS)** at an organizational level that is designed to be used for PCM and for related steering, accountability and learning. At the same time, the quality of M&E systems varies significantly across projects and countries.

The use of digital tools for data gathering in the field has been initiated in various countries over the past few years, creating a pool of experiences that can be quickly built upon to improve the quality of information that feeds into our RBM. In 2021, the Digital M&E initiative will explore how we can integrate these tools into a more efficient and more effective organization-wide MIS system for learning, steering and reporting. This is an excellent opportunity to engage staff and strengthen Helvetas' RBM culture.

#### 3.3.1.1 Strengthening relevant competencies and capacities

Helvetas global staff and partners have a broad range of experiences, competencies, capacities and knowledge on development topics, regional and local contexts, methodological means and application of concrete tools. These competencies and capacities are not evenly distributed and not all colleagues have access to such relevant expertise.

At the same time, Helvetas, as an organization whose staff are working together for joint goals and in collaborative ways, is interested in anchoring core values as well as core competencies in every (project and country) team. These competencies include: a results orientation; accountability; critical reflection and learning; PCM and adaptive management; knowledge-sharing and targeted communication.

It is important to develop a more detailed picture of existing competence development initiatives in different countries, and where there are effective approaches that others can learn and benefit from. The existence of Helvetas staff who already have field experience and RBM competencies should be leveraged in our efforts to increase our overall capacities. Combining this with awareness-raising and training offered at regional and global levels will contribute to further improving our program and project implementation.

#### 3.3.1.2 Linking M&E with learning

Development organizations strive (and feel pressure) to continuously improve the *efficiency* of their work and Helvetas is no exception. This aspect of our work should be pursued in tandem with improving our *effectiveness*: doing the right things to achieve our goals. There is a need to

continuously improve critical analysis and share the conclusions of reflective practice to enable institutional learning. Institutional learning requires focused, collective effort.

Growing financial and time pressures as well as attitudes can be significant barriers to learning. Our efforts towards strengthening our collaborative culture (as outlined in section [3.2 Building on our Collaborative Culture](#)) will go a long way to overcoming these barriers. We can complement this with particular attention to the learning element within M&E, which is a central rationale of RBM. For example, within the digital M&E initiative, if we see project teams with a strong engagement in the process of analysis and interpretation of data, this will be a good indicator of their interest in learning about and from M&E efforts.

Fostering exchange between the Acquisition Desk (regarding competencies) and AS and IP (bringing in organizational learning) will also raise awareness on the relevance of RBM, M&E and Innovation. New projects and mandates will reflect Helvetas' M&E and learning culture in an explicit way and contribute to positioning and distinguishing Helvetas as a center of expertise in RBM.

### **3.3.1.3 Integrating a communications perspective**

The need for audience-targeted communication cannot be underestimated: in a world of massive quantities of information, the need to adjust the content, form and timing of communication and smart information-brokering is key for success in exchanging relevant knowledge, advocacy and reaching out to internal as well as external decision-makers and thematic champions.

Helvetas staff need to think about their main audiences and the ways in which those audiences can be reached with different forms of communication and on different channels (social media, formal reporting, document, video, audio publishing). It is not a question of making everyone a communications professional, which would not only be unrealistic, it would also not be cost-effective. It is rather ensuring a minimum level of awareness and skills around communication, and access to appropriate thematic and content management support as required.

## How we will strengthen Results-Based Management

- 1) Continuation and enhancement of **PCM competence development**, with particular emphasis on ToC, IH and the creation of robust monitoring systems
  - a. Efforts will be made to work with RCs, CDs and others to ensure the PCM e-learning curriculum continues to be relevant to learners.
  - b. PCM training is seen as a small but important part of ongoing competence development efforts and needs to be integrated into those efforts (ensuring new learning is quickly put into practice, providing feedback on curriculum development, identifying how further learning can be supported, e.g. with mentoring/networking)
  - c. The digital M&E initiative will deepen knowledge on Helvetas RBM culture and principles
- 2) Strengthening existing and as appropriate adding new processes aimed at **improving the link between planning & implementation and learning & innovation**. Examples of existing processes include management responses to evaluations/impact assessments and mentoring arrangements between more experienced and less experienced staff. Principal enhancements will be around facilitating greater reflection on the part of main project/mandate stakeholders at key moments (e.g. mid-term reviews, evaluations/impact assessments, capitalizations of experience) and better integration of downward accountability into project planning, monitoring and implementation
- 3) Staff and partners will be supported in **reporting and linking M&E to outreach and communications** as well as country specific and donor-related communication and knowledge products

### 3.4 Embracing digital transformation

To harness the potential of digital transformation, HELVETAS has drafted a vision on digital transformation aiming at a variety of objectives. For LNI the following are the most relevant:



To foster a **digital culture** (that supports learning);



To leverage digitalization to increase efficiency and **outreach in communication and marketing**;



To **use and promote** digital technologies in proficient ways.

The above only scratch the surface of what will continue to be an 'ongoing revolutionizing' of the digital environment, impacting all aspects of our work and the lives of people around the globe.

Through the lenses of the Learning and Innovation Focus Areas, we intend to harness digital technologies in **support of learning and innovation at the same time as we help to build awareness (both internally and with partners) around inherent risks to their use.**

### 3.4.1 Understanding and tapping into digital transformation

Of particular interest in the context of the Learning and Innovation Transversal Topic are the ICT4D and Digital M&E workstreams. ICT4D will feature strongly in the area of Strategic Innovation, as we expect much innovation in our project and program contexts to include a technology element. During the 2021-2022 period a digital M&E system will be developed in order to improve data reliability and timely access. The system will enhance our M&E processes by increasing the efficiency and depth of data collection and analysis. At the same time, efforts to enhance readability of results dashboards will contribute to enhancing our L&I and RBM capacities.

#### How we will strengthen Digital Transformation

- 1) The importance of virtual collaboration will continue to increase over time. A core **digital literacy** element will therefore be included in our competence development efforts around strengthening our collaborative culture. This will be done by LNI, ITS and HRD
- 2) The **digital M&E initiative** will contribute to transforming our overall approach to M&E within Helvetas
- 3) We will put particular emphasis on **digital innovation** in our recognition and support of emergent and strategic innovation

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## 4. Monitoring Framework

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It is important to establish a monitoring framework that provides the necessary data and information to practice an adaptive management approach to the overall Learning & Innovation transversal topic. However, particularly with such abstract notions as knowledge, learning and innovation, identifying meaningful and easy-to-monitor indicators is not straightforward.

On the learning side, Helvetas has a very well-established means of gauging staff experiences of learning through the Learning NGO (LNGO) Survey. With relatively few modifications to factor the changing technology environment into account, LNGO surveys have been periodically conducted within Helvetas since the early 2000s. The survey consists of 40+ questions covering the following 8 dimensions:

- Creating a Supportive Culture
- Applying the Learning
- Integrating Learning into Strategy and Policy
- Developing an Organizational Memory
- Gathering Internal Experience
- Communication Systems
- Accessing External Learning
- Mechanisms for Drawing Conclusions

It can be seen from the above that the LNGO Survey will provide insights into Helvetas as a learning organization. In addition to the LNGO Survey, more targeted M&E exercises will be applied to the range of activities that contribute to achieving the goals of the LNI Transversal Topic. These M&E efforts are summarized by Focus Area in [Annex 2: Learning & Innovation Intervention Areas & Indicators](#). In addition to the tasks and indicators associated with each Focus Area, we have identified three milestones for the LNI Transversal Topic over the 2021-2024 period. (The means of verification for each milestone are included in Annex 2.)

L&I Milestone 1

By 2024, a majority of HELNETAS staff recognize an improvement in their learning environment (meaningful exchange around topics of interest, mechanisms for reflection and incorporation of learning, access to relevant information, exposure to innovative ideas and practices)

L&I Milestone 2

By 2024, at least 5 successful innovations (process or technology) each benefitting at least 10% of ongoing projects or 50,000 primary stakeholders have been implemented

L&I Milestone 3

By 2024, an organization wide digital M&E system has improved reliability and timeliness of data and increased efficiency and depth in data collection and analysis

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## **Annex 1: List of Acronyms**

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A2015 – Alliance 2015

CP mgmt. – Country Program management

ED – Executive Director

EPFL – École Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne

ETH – Swiss Federal Institute of Technology

FS – Finance & Services

HR – Human Resources

HRD – Human Resources Development

ICT4D – Information and Communications Technologies for Development

IH – Impact Hypothesis

IP – International Programs

ITS – Information Technology Services

IWG – Innovation Working Group

KNL – Knowledge and Learning

LDD – Learning & Development Domains

LNGO – Learning NGO Survey

LNI – Learning and Innovation

LNI TT – Learning & Innovation Transversal Topic

LSP – Local Service Provider

MC – Marketing & Communications

M&E – Monitoring and Evaluation

MIS – Management Information System

NGO – Non-Governmental Organization

PCM – Project Cycle Management

RBM – Results-Based Management

SDC – Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation

SDGs – Sustainable Development Goals

TT – Transversal Topic

ToC – Theory of Change

WASH – Water, Sanitation & Hygiene

WOL – Working Out Loud

## Annex 2: Learning & Innovation Milestones, Intervention Areas & Indicators

The first table below lists the three milestones identified for the LNI Transversal Topic as a whole and the means of verification for each milestone. The second table summarizes the tasks associated with each Focus Area under the LNI Transversal Topic, the main responsible teams/departments/bodies, and their respective success indicators. Regarding responsibilities, some groundwork needs to be done in 2021 to establish the necessary working relationships and oversight for these initiatives (e.g. Collaborative Culture peer support network, Innovation Working Group) to ensure there is consistent follow-through on tasks related to the LNI Transversal Topic.

### Learning & Innovation Transversal Topic Milestones

		Means of Verification
<b>Milestone 1:</b>	By 2024, a majority of HELVETAS staff recognize an improvement in their learning environment (meaningful exchange around topics of interest, mechanisms for reflection and incorporation of learning, access to relevant information, exposure to innovative ideas and practices)	LNGO Survey, institutionalization of strategic innovations
<b>Milestone 2:</b>	By 2024, at least 5 successful innovations (process or technology) each benefitting at least 10% of ongoing projects or 50,000 primary stakeholders have been implemented	Strategic & Emergent Innovation monitoring by IWG
<b>Milestone 3:</b>	By 2024, an organization wide digital M&E system has improved reliability and timeliness of data and increased efficiency and depth in data collection and analysis	Analysis of digital M&E system

### Learning & Innovation Intervention Areas and Indicators

Focus Area	Intervention	Lead Role	Success Indicators
<b>1. Strategic &amp; Emergent Innovation</b>	1.1 Steering of Strategic Innovation	ED	Creation of Innovation Working Group (IWG) (2021)
		IWG, LNI	Establishment of Strategic Innovation process (2021) and related guidance materials (2022). At least 6 strategic innovations (2024)
	1.2 Recognition of Emergent Innovation	LNI, IWG	Innovation Marketplace (2021). At least 3 emergent innovations/year shared
	1.3 Competence development for Strategic Innovation	IWG	At least 10 staff trained/supported and using Design Thinking, Lean Innovation or similar approaches
	1.4 Marketing/outreach of innovations	LSPs/CPs/LNI	1) At least 2 innovative projects per year are supported to market themselves. 2) At least two Innovation Fairs are held during the strategy period
<b>2. Collaborative Culture</b>	2.1 Catalyzing collaborative competencies (WOL, virtual tools, facilitation skills)	LNI	1) Creation of global network of ≥15 staff who help identify priority competence development needs (2021); 2) Evolution of the network to become the primary source for Collaborative Culture competence development in Helvetas (2024)
	2.2 Strengthening management role in Collaborative Culture	LNI	1) At least 3 managers in 2.1 global peer network (2022); 2) At least 20 managers demonstrating consistent Collaborative Culture behavior in their daily work (2024)
	2.3 Identifying strategic partners for working culture exchanges	CapDev Coord, LNI	At least 10 implementing partners with whom Helvetas actively explores the collaborative culture between our organizations (2024)
<b>3. Results-Based Management</b>	3.1 RBM competence development	LNI, IP	Survey of country competence development needs & capacities (2021)
			Annual PCM course refined in 2023 (based on needs and capacities)
	3.2 Increased emphasis on communication	LDD, IP, MC, HRD	Organization-wide virtual communications training/coaching for staff in various depts
	3.3 Strengthening our RBM learning culture	Peer network	Taking up of RBM as a topic within the Collaborative Culture peer support network
<b>4. Digital Transformation</b>	4.1 Digital Literacy competence development	LNI/ITS	Organization-wide digital literacy competence development initiative launched by 2022
	4.2 Digital M&E	LNI, IP	Establishment of a Helvetas digital M&E system (2022), including at least half of project portfolio (2024)
	4.3 Digital innovation	IWG	At least 30% of strategic innovations include a strong technology element

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## Annex 3: Learning & Innovation Activity Lines 2021-22

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Operationalizing the Learning & Innovation Transversal Topic (LNI TT) is a complex undertaking, involving interdependent elements across the four Focus Areas of Strategic & Emergent Innovation, Collaborative Culture, Results-Based Management and Digital Transformation. In addition to this complexity, there are two prerequisites for the LNI TT to be effectively pursued. The first is **active engagement on the part of key actors** within Helvetas (for a first approximation of who these actors should be, see [Annex 2: Learning & Innovation Milestones, Intervention Areas & Indicators](#)) and in partner organizations. The second is **dedicated (human and financial) resources** for such things as:

- Facilitation of peer support network
- Exploration of the collaborative culture element with strategic partners
- Facilitation of Innovation Working Group
- Creation and nurturing of Innovation Marketplace
- Communications competence development and support
- Competence development around digital literacy
- RBM competence development
  - Strengthening the learning culture associated with M&E

The LNI TT activity lines in general have no or very limited direct budgetary support toward realizing the goals outlined in this Strategy. This is partly reflected in the proposed activity lines 2021-22 below. The intention for 2021 is to initiate the LNI transversal topic, to start to establish its different aspects, and validate/adjust activities based on where there is traction within the organization to further develop and support different aspects. This should also clarify the levels and types of support needed in subsequent years to make the LNI TT feasible as an initiative to support collaboration, learning and innovation. The chart below differentiates between:

- Activities that are expected to be led by the LNI team (in blue)
- Activities that need to be taken up by colleagues in different departments (in green)
- Activities that cannot be fully taken up without having dedicated resources (mostly human, but also some financial resources – in red)

