

# SESRI Policy Brief

## Survey Insights on Humanitarian Innovation Expectations in Qatar

Needs, Preferences, and Recommendations of Charity Executives and Experts

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*Following an expression of interest by charity professionals to benefit from humanitarian innovation, the Social and Economic Survey Research Institute (SESRI) of Qatar University conducted a survey in February and March 2017 of over 50 Qatar-based charity executives and experts on their opinions concerning the launch of a humanitarian innovation lab in Qatar. The idea of a humanitarian innovation lab involves a combination of interdisciplinary research, capacity building, and engineering for adapting, designing, and/or testing practical solutions for humanitarian challenges such as water and sanitation, healthcare, distance education, improved shelters, etc. The survey sample represents a high proportion of individuals involved in Qatar's small but influential humanitarian aid sector, at the senior level. The results of the survey shed light on the needs, preferences, and recommendations of stakeholders on key decisions related to subject specializations, governance structure, and funding model that should be instituted by the forthcoming Qatar Humanitarian Innovation Lab (Q-HIL).*

In recent years, considerable attention has been given globally to creating processes and tools to spur and make greater use of innovation within the humanitarian field. The idea is that much more could be accomplished, without always increasing the funding needs. This has led to several innovation labs and similar organizations being established independently, or as part of universities, NGOs or UN agencies all over the world, though not in the Gulf region. Yet Qatar's aid charities play a crucial role in the global humanitarian system, particularly in delivering emergency assistance in war-torn countries of the Middle East, such as Syria, Yemen and the Gaza strip. Better use of innovation in the humanitarian field presents a strategic opportunity for charities to keep on improving their impact, in an environment that constantly demands more assistance, despite constrained funding resources.

Among Qatar-based charity executives and researchers, the idea to launch a

Humanitarian Innovation Lab (HIL) in Doha generated a strong interest and a willingness to benefit from global innovation, both locally and in the field. Qatar University's Social and Economic Survey Research Institute (SESRI) conducted a survey of 52 local stakeholders (29 charity executives and 23 experts and government officials) in March 2017 to identify the main objectives, specializations, and the governance architecture that they recommend for a Qatar-based Humanitarian Innovation Lab (Q-HIL). The survey results are intended to help make the Q-HIL a relevant, well-integrated and valuable component of Qatar's humanitarian ecosystem.

### General mandate vs. specialization

To understand precisely what are the fields in which Qatar's humanitarian charities and development organizations would like to benefit from a local HIL, the survey first asked, if the lab should cover all sectors of humanitarian work generally or if it should

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specialize in specific fields.

Among charity representatives surveyed, responses were fairly evenly split, but with a small preference for specialization. Out of all respondents from charities (29), more than half (16) explicitly opted for a specialized HIL against 13 who recommended that the lab pursue a more a general approach. Most respondents also provided complementary information to this question and explained that they did not strictly favor one approach over the other.

Most respondents who suggested a generalized approach expressed that they wanted to ensure that the lab would be open to working on diverse projects, depending on their evolving needs — in other words, no rigid agenda. On the other hand, those who suggested a specialization were also eager to suggest multiple areas of (broad) specialization.

When asked to list the most important sectors for a potential specialization, respondents provided a broad array of answers (up to five per respondent). The specializations proposed represented over thirty categories, most of which received little support. However, as figure 1 illustrates, specializations related to education, health, and water were very strongly demanded,

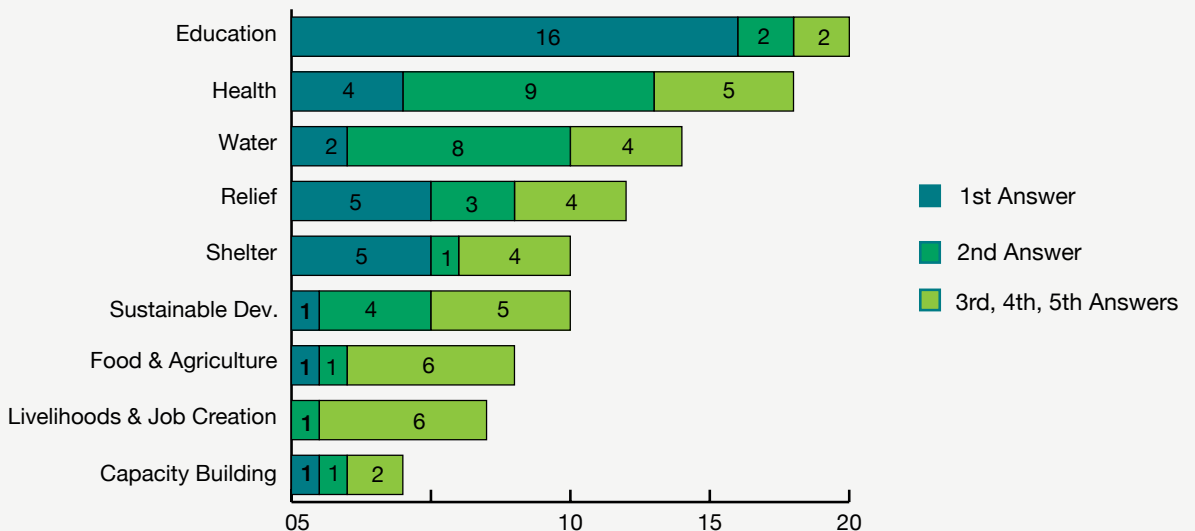
followed by relief, shelter and sustainable development.

“Education” – which included ‘e-education’ and ‘education in rural/emergency contexts’ – was the most requested specialization overall, and the one cited most often as a first choice by respondents. More than a 1 in 4 of total respondents indicated that innovation in health and water should be a priority as well. It is worth noting here that in the sub-group of charity professionals alone, health was the most requested specialization, before education.

From a broader perspective, the Q-HIL should probably specialize in several broad areas but also remain opened to projects that are of interest to charities but not necessarily within those clear specializations. Regarding health and education, there exists organisations in Qatar, such as WISE and WISH, which are devoted to spur innovation in these sectors, yet not primarily in the context of humanitarian assistance. It would be highly advisable that the Q-HIL closely collaborates with such organisations, for the benefit of all, including aid charities operating in difficult humanitarian contexts.

*The top three most requested specialisations were Education, Health and Water*

FIGURE 1:  
Most Requested Specializations (up to 4 answers per respondent)



## Governance

The survey wanted to explore what organizational structure the stakeholders would consider most appropriate and effective. When asked about the setting and level of independence of the Q-HIL, a majority of respondents wanted the lab to be either directly under an existing institution, or at some level, be “linked” with one (figure 2). At the same time however, a large number of respondents commented that the HIL needs to have decision-making and operational autonomy. When asked about which institution they would like to see the HIL under, a clear majority preferred to have it hosted by university(ies), while the second most given answer was under a government body (figure 3).

## Representation

In terms of governance, the survey gauged respondents on whether it would be beneficial to have most or all of the local charities represented on the advisory board. A large majority of respondents (35 out of 52, or 67%) agreed. Respondents who had alternative priorities for choosing board members emphasized the need to select experts from non-charity backgrounds (e.g. scientists, academics, private sector professionals) and government officials. Based on this feedback, the HIL should probably incorporate an advisory board that

includes a mix of representatives from most local charities as well as experts and the government.

In terms of how to elect the Chairman of the Board, most respondents suggested that a rotational system with a two-year mandate would enable transparency and power-sharing, while still allowing for adequate continuity and time to complete long-term project cycles.

## Funding

Public sources of funding for humanitarian purposes are carefully controlled in Qatar due to declining oil and gas revenues. When asked about potential funding sources for the Q-HIL, all government representatives interviewed, except one, recommended against relying on the government as the primary source of funding.

As for the extent to which charities should contribute to the Q-HIL, 3/4 of all respondents recommended that charities provide some funding, with answers widely ranging from “a minority of funding” (the most cited answer) to “a majority of funding” (the least cited answer), but with “around half of all funding” being the second most cited answer (figure 4).

Several respondents proposed that a sensible way to structure funding would be

*65% of respondents wanted the lab to be part of a host institution*

FIGURE 2:  
Independent vs. Non-Independent

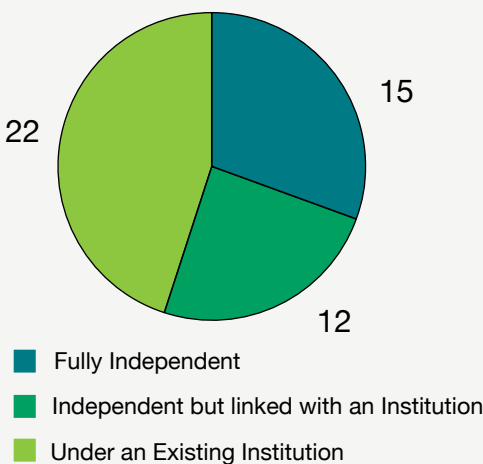
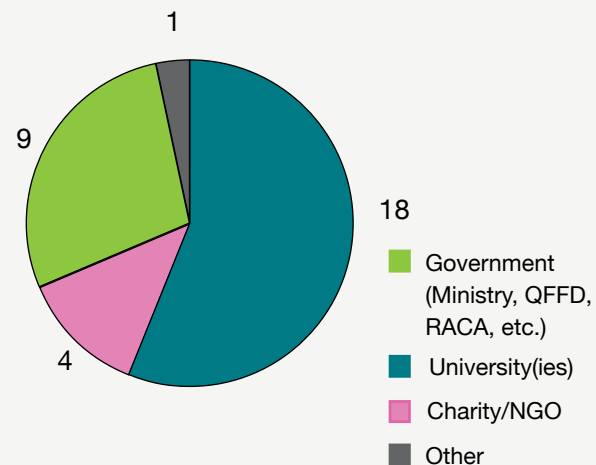


FIGURE 3:  
Preferred Host Institution

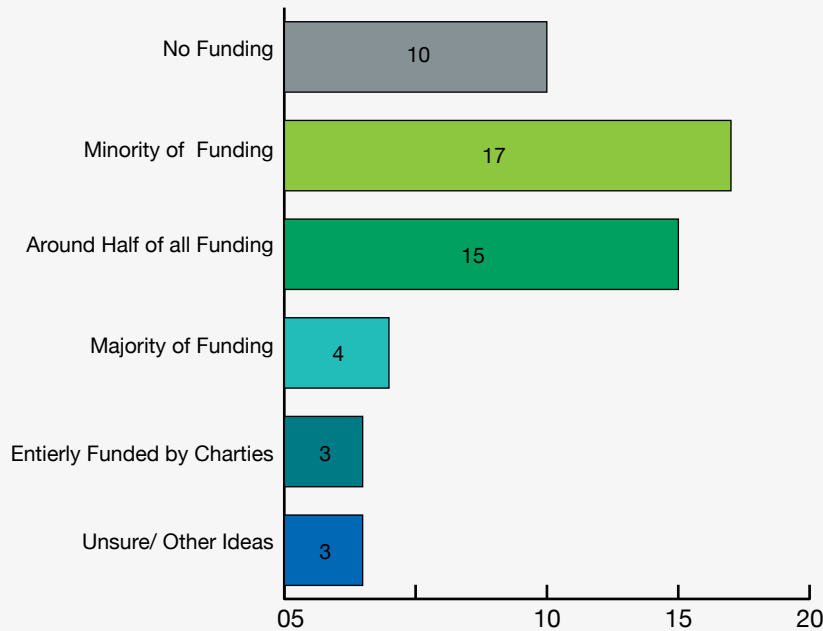


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to have a host institution cover some fixed operational expenditure (e.g. office space, office equipment, etc.), while charities may fund, partly or wholly, specific projects and initiatives that they wish to particularly

benefit from. Overall, respondents were of the view that the HIL should develop a diversified and balanced mix of funding sources from governmental bodies, charities, and even the private sector.

FIGURE 4:  
Proportion of Funding from Charities



## Policy Summary:

Humanitarian actors in Qatar have understood the many benefits that technological and process innovations could generate for the benefit of all. Results from the survey of charity executives and experts show a preference for the HIL specializing in certain sectors (chiefly education, health and water, but also relief, shelter and sustainable development), though with an open approach towards working on other requested projects from charities. The HIL should also partner with specialised research institutions in Qatar to create synergies, eventually co-create innovative solutions and serve as a clearing house to highlight the most relevant humanitarian innovations.

Most survey respondents suggested that the lab should have a large degree of autonomy but be hosted under a university - or group of universities -, which could provide administrative and in-kind support such as office space and laboratory facilities. Most survey respondents also suggested that charities should be involved in funding the HIL at some level. Representatives from the government on the other hand, favoured that the lab seek essentially non-public finances. Charities could contribute a share of the funding (to be defined) and/or in-kind resources needed for projects that are of special interest to them. Though not mentioned by respondents, research grants and special UN funding and support are available.

For guidance and strategic direction, the survey results suggest an advisory board composed of representatives from charities in Qatar as well as subject-matter experts and government representatives.

*To serve as host institutions, universities and the government were respectively first and second most cited answers*