

**RESEARCH REPORT
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**



**MAPPING
INNOVATION
THINKING,
CULTURE, AND
PRACTICES
AMONG FORUS
MEMBERS**

DECEMBER 2020

PREPARED BY
Ana Luísa Silva



INTRODUCTION: THE ROLE OF INNOVATION

Over the past twenty years, **innovation has emerged as a key narrative in international development cooperation.**

The innovation for development discourse reflects the complexity of international development cooperation policies, agendas, and actors, as well as the challenging goals set by UN 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda. Much has been written about the need for innovation in international development cooperation, **but less is known about the role that networks of Civil Society Organisations (CSO networks) are playing in innovation for development.**

In their study of innovation in social sector organizations, Christian Seelos and Johanna Mair argue that to innovate is first and foremost about managing uncertainty. **Forus' 2021-2025 Strategy A positive Agenda for Civil Society** highlights how the current global context of extreme environmental, social, political, and economic uncertainty is having a clear impact on the daily lives of people in all the countries where Forus members work.



The space where organized civil society operates is undergoing profound transformations, with citizen action taking different shapes, instances of civic and democratic space shrinking, and the private sector becoming a much more visible international development player. Additionally, the unknown effects of the Covid-19 pandemic in the long-run adds to the complexity of our current reality.



STUDY APPROACH

Forus collaborated with PhD researcher Ana Luisa Silva to situate innovation thinking, culture, and practices among its members. The study assesses innovation culture, capabilities, and barriers in CSO networks. Since innovation is intrinsically linked to learning, and the capacity to learn and to use knowledge affectively is a key dimension of the work of NGOs. The study therefore covered both learning and innovation aspects. It identifies a number of examples of innovation among Forus members, including process, product and paradigm innovation, showing that CSO networks often lead innovative initiatives for the civil society sector.

The Study included an online survey and semi-structured interviews, in English, French, Portuguese, and Spanish. **The survey gathered responses from 18 national NGO/CSO platforms** (out of Forus 69 national platform members) and two regional coalitions (out of Forus seven regional coalition members). Additionally, semi-structured interviews were carried out by **Ana Luisa Silva** based on the initial analysis of the survey responses, between August and September 2020.

HOW ARE FORUS MEMBERS INNOVATING?

INNOVATION AND LEARNING AS A PRIORITY

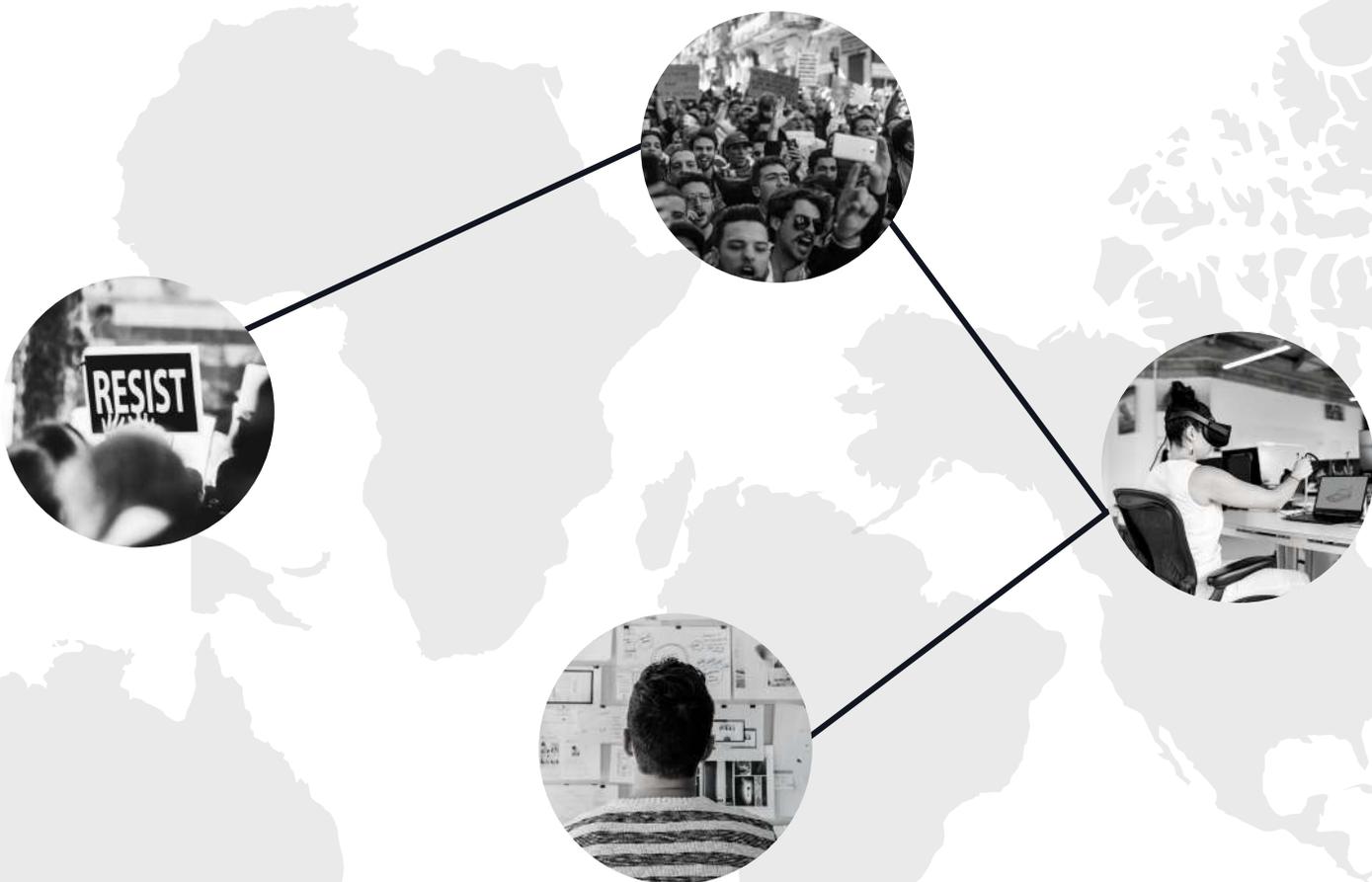
When asked if they were involved in innovative initiatives during the past three years, platforms considered themselves innovative. The initiatives identified as innovative by the survey respondents (see Annex 1) ranged from formal to informal projects/activities, externally and/or internally resourced, developed alone or in collaboration with other actors/organizations.

Both innovation and learning are clear priorities for the majority of Forus members who took part in this study. Platform staff feel like their organizations are constantly innovating, especially in order to respond to the changing needs of their members. Interviewees believe that this ability to be agile and adapt has always been in the nature of their organization, but many of them they also note that this has become even more urgent in the context of the profound international and national transformations that are change the operating context of development NGOs and threatening civic space in many places.



More than half of the platforms encourage partnerships and collaboration among their members (75%), help members disseminate their work (65%), and provide online resources and materials (55%). Almost half (45%) of the platforms provide training on innovation-related topics and skills, as well as research and knowledge creation.





CURRENT INNOVATION PRACTICES

Analyzing the innovative initiatives identified by survey respondents, we can observe different types of innovation practices:



1. PROCESS INNOVATION

Most initiatives identified as innovative by survey respondents are **process innovations**, i.e. initiatives that change the way platform products and services are provided to their members. This means that, although platforms see innovation in their work directed both inwards and outwards, platforms are first and foremost concerned with providing better services for their members, not necessarily new services, but better services that can respond to the current needs of their members.

BOX 1. AN INNOVATIVE PROCESS:

THE UGANDA NATIONAL NGO FORUM'S CITIZENS MANIFESTO, A TOOL TO INCREASE AND SUPPORT A CONTINUOUS COMMITMENT TO CITIZEN'S DEMOCRATIC PARTICIPATION

The Uganda National NGO Forum (UNNGOF) is an independent and inclusive national platform for NGOs in Uganda, with a membership of over 650 members. One of UNNGOF's main areas of action is civic space and governance monitoring, which includes citizen action and participation. UNNGOF belongs to and currently hosts the Uganda Governance Monitoring Platform (UGMP), a coalition of CSOs established in 2004 with the aim of monitoring trends in governance in Uganda.

The Citizen Manifesto process started in 2009, when UNNGOF and its UGMP partners designed the first bottom-up manifesto: citizens from different regions of Uganda came up with their own aspirations and demands, a political agenda which is delivered to electoral candidates during campaigns and which can be used by the citizens to hold their leaders accountable. The initiative is thus both a process and an output which can be used as an accountability tool.

Many other activities of the coalition were anchored in the manifesto, including its participation in the anti-corruption campaign Black Monday Movement.

From the 2016-2021 Manifesto: "The primary audience of this Citizens Manifesto is we; the citizens' each of whom must care about, and take responsibility for changing the social, economic and political trajectory of our country. The Citizens Manifesto is a statement of what we want as citizens, what we deserve as a people of this great country and what we will do to make our lives and our country better. It is also statement of what we demand from those who seek our mandate to lead our country."

Sources: Interview conducted for this study with UNNGOF staff; Nkatsibwe, Chris (2016) "The Citizens' Manifesto Case Study: Recounting a citizen-led advocacy agenda in Uganda", in Research Roundtable: Governance, Society and Development in Africa, A Report of the Building Bridges Programme, Graduate School of Development Policy and Practice, University of Cape Town



2. PRODUCT AND SERVICE INNOVATION



A handful of platforms is designing **innovative products and services for their members**. Good examples are CODE-NGO's Centre for Humanitarian Learning and Innovation (CHLI) in the Philippines, and the Cooperation Committee for Cambodia's Civil Society Fund.



BOX 2. AN INNOVATIVE PRODUCT:

COOPERATION COMMITTEE FOR CAMBODIA'S CIVIL SOCIETY FUND, ENHANCING THE FINANCIAL SUSTAINABILITY OF LOCAL GRASSROOTS CSOS.

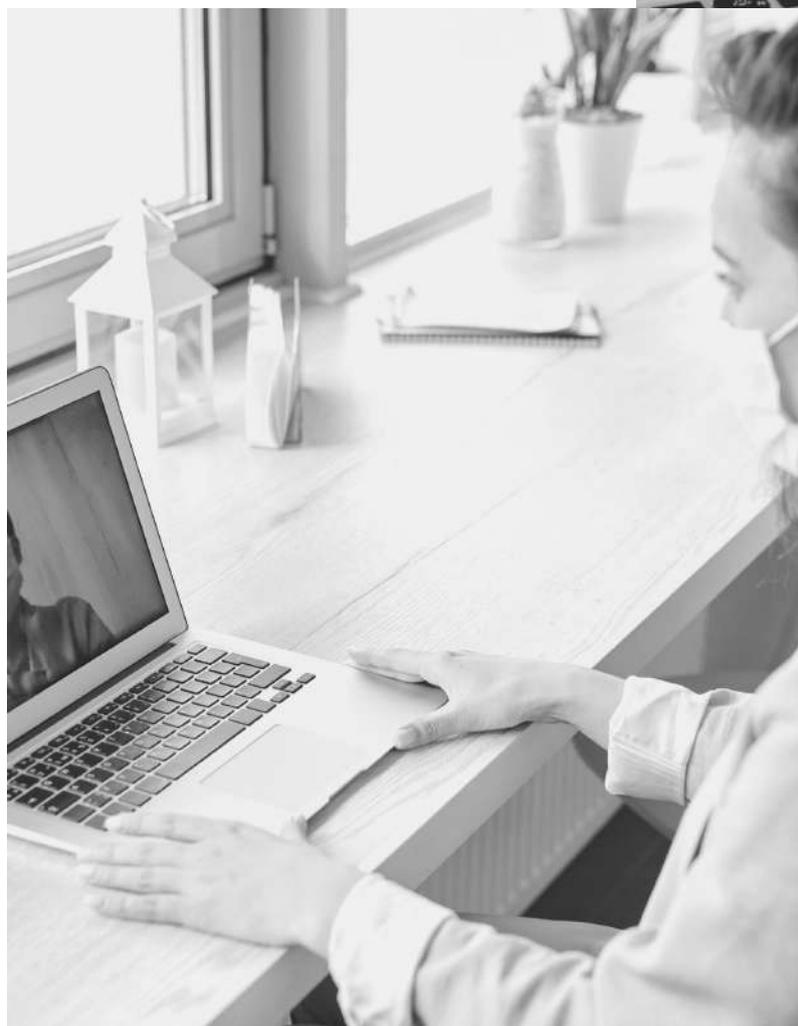
The **Cooperation Committee for Cambodia (CCC)** is a membership organization gathering 175 organisations across the country. Achieving **financial sustainability and diversifying funding sources** are among the key challenges faced by Cambodian grassroots CSOs, CCC's members.

The Civil Society Fund (CSF) in Cambodia, a unique and distinct type of civil society fund, is a platform established in 2017 to provide and manage small grants to grassroots CSOs.

The CSF is the result of a vast body of research and a series of consultations with cross-sector experts within the development sector: NGOs, development partners, and the government. The CCC team spent about half a year in 2018 focused on developing all systems and tools to manage the initiative. In late 2018 the first call was released, with funds from the European Union and Bread for the World. In 2019, the first batch of small grants (worth 15,000€ each) were awarded to nine small grantees from different provinces, on a wide range of development issues (including green agriculture, to promoting art/culture, supporting youth education and promoting corporate social responsibility).

So far, the CSF has proved an appropriate funding modality for local grassroots CSOs. Evaluations processes such as the mid-term review of CCC's Governance Hub Program (internal) and the EU's result-oriented monitoring visit (external) have highlighted the CSF's positive effects in increasing access to financing to grassroots level organisations who cannot compete with larger, well-established CSOs in Cambodia. The CSF will release another batch of financial supports to enable grassroots CSOs to cope with the negative impact of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Sources: Interview conducted for this study with CCC staff; [CCC's website](#)





3. PARADIGM INNOVATION

Some platforms are working to **change the paradigm of civil society action** in which they normally operate. These are platforms like **ABONG in Brazil, and Coordinadora ONGD in Spain**, that are using their structure and existing services to fulfil a wider enabling role for other civil society actors (citizen activists, social movements), as well as to assert a more politically active role for themselves and their members against threats to national-level democratic participation and to our collective existence.

BOX 3. AN INNOVATIVE PARADIGM

ABONG'S PACT FOR DEMOCRACY, DEFENDING DEMOCRACY IN BRAZIL

Abong, Associação Brasileira de ONGs, is a Brazilian national platform established to strengthen civil society organizations working to defend and promote common rights and goods. The platform works in partnership with social movements and governments towards a world with climate justice, equal rights and free of all forms of discrimination.

The Pacto pela Democracia (Pact for Democracy) was born as a response to the political and social turmoil that preceded the Brazilian elections of 2018. Its goal was to promote wider democratic participation and dialogue to protect the Brazilian democracy from the authoritarian threat. The Pacto pela Democracia uses **“technology as an ally to bring citizens closer to politics”**, including social media and digital communications, in an effort to counteract the polarization tendencies brought many of those same tools. Members want to fight the tendency for building bubbles and echo chambers. More than 60 organizations and social movements initially gathered in June 2018, including Abong as one of the founding organizations, and the Pact brings together more than 150 organizations, groups and movements, as well as citizens from different parties. A distinctive principle of the Pact is plurality in the political space.



“The pact is a plural, nonpartisan space, open to citizens, organizations and also to political actors who share the commitment to rescue and deepen democratic practices and values in face of the numerous challenges that Brazil has faced over the last years.” Executive secretary Ricardo Borges Martins.

Sources: Interview conducted for this study with Abong staff; [Pacto pela Democracia’s website](#); [Interview with Ricardo Borges Martins to Redação Globo](#), 24/08/2018



BARRIERS TO INNOVATION

The **three main barriers** for innovation and learning identified by survey respondents are similar: **lack of funding** (especially for innovation, at 94%), **lack of human resources** at member level (56%-50%), and a **lack of understanding of the needs of members of these topics** (31%-38%).

In terms of funding, public and private grants have a similar weight in the funding of the innovation initiatives identified by survey respondents. Interviewees described different innovation funding processes, including using the platform's unrestricted funds, directly responding to donor calls, and negotiating with existing funding partners. The European Union (EU) and multi-donor funding mechanisms for civil society were often mentioned as funding partners open to funding innovative initiatives by interviewees.

Nonetheless, all respondents stated that they would like to do more in these fields. **Training and funding for innovation are two of the areas where platforms would like to do more, as well as organizing innovation prizes.**



CONCLUSION: WAYS FORWARD

Forus is seen by its members as an important ally in the development of new initiatives, either by direct collaboration or indirectly through its knowledge sharing and peer-learning work. In the current context of critical environmental, social, political, and economic transformations, **Forus members specifically feel the need to innovate in the way they advocate for wider social change.** Platforms with greater funding agility and/or who are facing stronger challenges to their national operating spaces are changing the paradigm of civil society action as organized civil society active. They are doing this by actively seeking to collaborate, support, and establish alliances with other actors, such as individual citizens, social movements, and academics, towards a more plural and politically active notion of civil society.

Based on the findings of the Study, there are **four simple ways Forus can add value to the work of its members in the areas of learning and innovation:**

1. Peer-learning and knowledge sharing: Peer-learning is seen as particularly useful by platforms wanting to use innovation tools and to innovate in their work, so innovation peer-learning programs could be developed. Continuing to use Forus existing communication channels (website, social media, General Assembly) to share innovative initiatives is welcome by platforms.

2. Funding for innovation and learning: Funding was one of the key barriers identified by study participants. An innovation fund for platforms at different innovation journey stages would fill an important gap. A list of funding opportunities for innovation for networks would also be useful.

3. Innovation survey tools: Survey respondents identified the need to better identify their own members' priorities in terms of innovation/learning. Forus can provide the tools for members to carry out their own innovation surveys/assessments, using existing tools that are easy to implement with simple and remote guidance.

4. Innovation training and resources: Forus could provide a selection of free innovation training/resources on its website. It could also be interesting to explore potential partnerships to support platforms in this area, for example with CODE-NGO's Centre for Humanitarian Learning and Innovation (CHLI). Courses on innovation developed with members and at an accessible price could provide important opportunities for training.

ANNEX

LIST OF INNOVATIVE INITIATIVES (IMPLEMENTED IN THE PAST THREE YEARS) IDENTIFIED BY FORUS MEMBERS

PLATFORM	NAME OF INITIATIVE	PRODUCTS/ SERVICES	PROCESS	POSITION	PARADIGM
RED ENCUENTRO, ARGENTINA	DIÁLOGOS SOCIALES DE INCIDENCIA POLÍTICA SOBRE OBJETIVOS DE DESARROLLO SOSTENIBLE Y ACCIONES DE COOPERACIÓN AL DESARROLLO	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
CODE-NGO, THE PHILIPPINES	<u>CENTER FOR HUMANITARIAN LEARNING AND INNOVATION (CHLI)</u>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
NFN, NEPAL	SDGS PLANNING, MONITORING AND REPORTING TO HLPF. STUDY ON INTERVENTION APPROACH IN DISASTER RISK RESPONSE AND MANAGEMENT	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
COORDINADORA DE ONGD, SPAIN	<u>QUORUM GLOBAL</u>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
LITHUANIAN NGDO PLATFORM	<u>SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT EXPERTS' NETWORK</u> , WITH EXPERTS MEETING ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT, SEEKING TO FIND SOLUTIONS FOR EFFICIENT SDGS IMPLEMENTATION IN COUNTRY.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
PFNOSCM, MADAGASCAR	IMPROVING INFORMATION FLOW IN THE CSO NETWORK THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
UGANDA NATIONAL NGO FORUM	"CITIZENS MANIFESTO", A TOOL THAT CITIZENS USE TO ENGAGE CANDIDATES DURING AND AFTER CAMPAIGNS	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
CCC, CAMBODIA	<u>CIVIL SOCIETY FUND</u> E-COMMUNICATION AND LEARNING THROUGH AN ONLINE PLATFORM	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
REPAOC, WEST AFRICA	USE OF DIGITAL TOOLS TO FACILITATE MEMBERSHIP ENGAGEMENT	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
COPERATION CANADA	PROMOTION OF THE TRANSFORMATIVE ELEMENTS OF 2030 AGENDA IMPLEMENTATION, INNOVATION COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE DEVELOPED BY GOVERNMENT	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

PLATFORM	NAME OF INITIATIVE	PRODUCTS/ SERVICES	POSITION	PARADIGM	PROCESS
ESPACE ASSOCIATIF, MOROCCO	COLLABORATION AT SUB-NATIONAL TO PROMOTE ACTOR CONVERGENCE	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
PLATAFORMA PORTUGUESA DAS ONGD	<u>INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT SUMMER COURSE PEER LEARNING ACADEMY (ACADEMIA DO DESENVOLVIMENTO)</u>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
ANONG, URUGUAY	PROMOTING A CLEAR AND FIRM VOICE OF CIVIL SOCIETY (SOCIEDAD CIVIL CON VOZ CLARA Y FIRME)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
UNITAS, BOLIVIA	<u>FOROS POLÍTICOS MULTIACTOR PARA LA INCIDENCIA PÚBLICA</u> MONITORING OF THE CONTEXT AND FUNDAMENTAL FREEDOMS	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
CIONGCA, CENTRAL AFRICA	<u>MONETARY TRANSFERS</u>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
CONFEDERACIÓN COLOMBIANA DE ONG	<u>TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY INITIATIVE, INCLUDING CERTIFICATION SYSTEM FOR CSOS</u>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
ABONG, BRAZIL	DATABASE OF ALTERNATIVE PRACTICES (<u>BANCO DE PRÁTICAS ALTERNATIVAS</u>) PACT FOR DEMOCRACY (<u>PACTO PELA DEMOCRACIA</u>) INSURGENT EXPERIENCES: BLACK CONSCIOUSNESS AND RESISTANCE (<u>EXPERIÊNCIAS INSURGENTES - CONSCIÊNCIA E RESISTÊNCIA NEGRA</u>)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

BIBLIOGRAPHY AND RESOURCES

- OECD. Innovation for Development Impact: Lessons from the OECD Development Assistance Committee. Paris: OECD Publishing, 2020.
- Ramalingam, Ben, Kim Scriven and Conor Foley. "Innovations in international humanitarian action: ALNAP's 8th Review of Humanitarian Action." ALNAP, 2009.
- Ramalingam, Ben, and Kirsten Bound. "Innovation for International Development - Navigating the Paths and Pitfalls." London, 2016.
- Reilly-King, Fraser, and Gavin Charles. "Daring to Take Risk and Fail: Building an Innovation Agenda in Canada's Global Development and Humanitarian Community." Ottawa, 2018.
- Seelos, Christian, and Johanna Mair. Innovation and Scaling for Impact: How Effective Social Enterprises Do It. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017.

- DIY Practical Tools to Trigger & Support Social Innovation: <https://diytoolkit.org/>
- Nesta's Compendium of Innovation Methods: <https://www.nesta.org.uk/report/compendium-innovation-methods/>
- ELRHA's Innovation Tools and Resources: <https://www.elrha.org/tools-and-research-home/>



Forus, previously known as the International Forum of National NGO Platforms (IFP/FIP), is a member-led network of 69 National NGO Platforms and 7 Regional Coalitions from all continents representing over 22,000 NGOs active locally and internationally on development, human rights and environmental issues.



This publication has been produced with the assistance of the European Union and the French Development Agency. The contents of this publication are the sole responsibility of Forus and can in no way be taken to reflect the views of the European Union or the French Development Agency.

Photo credits: Both Nomads, UNSPLASH, SheriseomadsLi-An Lim, Ben den Engelsen, Nico Roicke, Maria Teneva, Janic, FINGO, Ana Flavia, Harrison More, Melany Rochester, Ronan Foruta, John Cameron, Pelesa Ka, Edrece Stansberry, Kosu Kunii

Contact us at contact@forus-international.org