

SOCIAL
INNOVATION
IN HEALTH
INITIATIVE

VOICES FROM THE FIELD

From local innovation to global learning

Supporting community-engaged social innovation for stronger health impact and greater social and health equity.

Executive Summary: A Snapshot of Innovator and Hub Perspectives on SIHI

The Social Innovation in Health Initiative (SIHI) is a global network that strengthens community-engaged research and supports social innovations addressing health inequities, particularly in low-resource and marginalized settings. Findings, drawing on surveys of social innovators and SIHI Hub facilitators demonstrate that SIHI delivers significant value both through its direct support to innovations and through its role as a networked platform. Innovators reported that being part of SIHI contributed to the success of their innovations and all respondents wanted to remain in the network. They especially valued the peer exchanges and capacity strengthening for engaged research. Hub facilitators reported the positive impact of SIHI Global on their work and noted increased visibility and credibility for their Hubs. SIHI affiliation enhances legitimacy, helping innovators and institutions access partners, influence decision-makers, and mobilize additional resources.

Beyond individual projects, SIHI's network effect is a core driver of impact. By convening innovators, researchers, health system actors, and communities, SIHI enables peer learning, cross-sector collaboration, and the diffusion of effective practices. Two-thirds of facilitators were aware of policy or practice changes linked to SIHI-supported innovations or Hub advocacy. Innovations were frequently adapted in response to community priorities and several were replicated or scaled across regions, generating multiplier effects that extended well beyond the original investments.

Innovators and facilitators reported improved ability to design, evaluate, and sustain interventions, with skills and relationships persisting even where individual initiatives were not continued. Facilitators indicated that participation in the network broadened their perspectives and professional fulfilment, reinforcing leadership, resilience, and long-term commitment to equity-oriented health innovation.

The findings highlight the strategic importance of SIHI as a trusted intermediary linking community-level innovation with national and global health agendas. It has built relationships through mutual learning within countries and regions, and globally for Hub facilitators. There was strong support for more interactive global and regional exchange, and improved visibility of Hub activities. There was broad support for the establishment of global communities of practice. As SIHI moves into a more interconnected global phase, these findings provide a strong foundation for strategic action to further strengthen collaboration, visibility, and collective impact.

In summary, innovator and facilitator perceptions reflect SIHI as a high-value, cost-effective network that builds capacity and strengthens ecosystems that support sustainable health system transformation and broaden the reach of social innovation in health.

Voices from the Field: A Snapshot of Innovator and Hub Facilitator Perspectives on the Impact of Belonging to the SIHI Network

The Social Innovation in Health Initiative (SIHI) is a global network that promotes collaboration in community-engaged research and support for social innovations in health. The SIHI Network has strengthened the ecosystem for social health innovations and has created a critical mass around the Hubs to extend their reach to marginalised communities. SIHI Hubs are established in Latin America and the Caribbean, Africa, Asia and the Middle East, with associate Hubs and partners in Europe and North America. The country-led research Hubs identify effective social innovations in health and strengthen their sustainability and scale-up by generating actionable evidence and connecting innovators with policymakers, researchers and implementers. Some of these activities can be accessed on the SIHI website: <https://socialinnovationinhealth.org/>

Strategically situated within academic and research institutions, SIHI Hubs serve as convening platforms for fostering collaboration and uniting social innovators, community members, health system stakeholders and donors. These Hubs have played a pivotal role by rigorously identifying and supporting promising social innovations. The Hubs offer training and networking. Where funds allow, they link innovators to essential research grants and technical support. The Hubs facilitate comprehensive impact monitoring and evaluation research to ensure the efficacy and sustainability of the innovations. An important aspect of SIHI is strengthening its networking role by promoting collaboration through platforms for engagement at country and regional levels for innovators and health sector actors.

Individual Hubs operate differently, but all are engaged with a wide range of social innovators, providing them with training and facilitation that encourage uptake, research and documentation of the process. To varying degrees, and using different approaches, each Hub links social innovators to national health systems and advocates for government and partner support to promote the sustainability of the innovations. Where possible, these efforts also help to connect and create a network of national or regional innovators.

Social innovators have not yet been linked with social innovators on other continents. At the global level, it is only the Hub facilitators who have been exchanging ideas and strengthening relationships. Some facilitators have met in person at TDR-WHO-supported events. Regular exchanges among Hub facilitators to share ideas take place during scheduled bi-monthly online meetings.

To move into a more interconnected global phase, it was important to hear from participants about their perceptions of the added value of the SIHI Network. Why is the SIHI Network

important? What benefits does networking bring, and what is important going forward? To assist in answering these questions, surveys were undertaken to gather feedback from some of the innovators who have been supported and from the facilitators leading and supporting the Hubs.

The purpose of the report is to hear some of those “Voices from the Field” and to provide a brief snapshot of the perceptions of the Hub facilitators and supported innovators: their views on the role the SIHI Network has played in supporting social innovations in health, the role it has played in changing community health, and the impact on their own lives, as well as the extent to which the SIHI Network has strengthened the ecosystem for social health innovations.

SIHI is a network that supports engaged research and provides social innovators with the skills to test, implement and track their innovations and impact. The Hubs at national, regional and global levels provide visibility, and all the voices in the responses attest to the very important role the Network has played in the success of the innovations and in respondents’ own lives and ability to reach others.

“Engaged research is more than a method; it is a promise that research will listen first, act with, and deliver change that matters... We live in a world of extraordinary scientific promise and yet extraordinary inequality. While new technologies emerge every day, billions remain trapped in poverty. Science and technology must serve justice; they must help us design a more humane world.”[1]

The SIHI Network, in cooperation with innovators, communities and other health actors, promotes engaged research and works to improve access to health, ensuring that it results in change that matters and improves health for all.

The Approach and Summary Results

This snapshot of the perceptions of the social innovators and the SIHI Hub facilitators was undertaken to gain feedback on the role the SIHI Network has in promoting and strengthening social innovations in health through the exchange of ideas, technical skills in community-engaged research, and the building of networks and an ecosystem in which social innovations in health can thrive and deliver health for all, including those in the last mile.

For the innovators, a limited five-question survey, with some room for written feedback, was developed. It was shared with 58 social health innovators who have been supported in one way or another through the SIHI Network. Seven Hubs (the Latin America regional Hub based in Colombia, Nigeria, Uganda, Malawi, the Philippines and Indonesia) provided contact details. The surveys were sent out in English, Spanish and Portuguese. There was a 48% response rate to the survey. All the responding innovators wanted to remain members of the SIHI Network, and there was 90% agreement that being part of the SIHI Network had contributed to the success of the innovations. Being part of SIHI had not only increased their

skills but had also helped to strengthen their credibility and that of their innovations and communities. They indicated some areas where greater exposure would be useful.

A summary analysis of the innovators' perceptions is attached as Annex 1, the questionnaire used is in Annex 4, and a story arising from the innovators' voices is in Annex 7.

The Hub facilitators work closely with the social innovators and are actively engaged in advocacy for support and policy changes to integrate and scale out successful innovations, strengthen the environment for social innovation in health, and provide visibility and skills to social health innovators.

The Hub facilitators received a much more comprehensive questionnaire with extensive space for written feedback. All active facilitators responded, and there was a very high degree of congruence regarding the important role of the Network in supporting social innovation in health. Ideas were also provided for strengthening the networking role. Some questions were deliberately repetitive, using different phrasing, to check for internal consistency and to deepen understanding of the responses. The results demonstrated strong consistency and were concordant both within the individual survey responses themselves and across all the facilitators and innovators.

There was very strong appreciation for being part of the SIHI Network and for the value of the role it has played in strengthening social innovation in health and in the lives of those participating. An analysis of the Hub facilitators' responses is provided in Annex 2, and the questionnaire is in Annex 5.

In summary:

- 96% of respondents felt that their engagement with SIHI innovators and Hub partners had deepened their fulfilment and widened their horizons.
- 92% said that being part of SIHI Global had had a positive impact on their own work in social innovation in health; 8% said it might have, but they were not sure.
- 81% said that being part of the SIHI Global Network had raised the profile of their Hub.
- Two-thirds (67%) said that there had been positive spin-offs as a result of innovations supported by the Hub; one-third were uncertain, and one-third did not know of any.
- Half indicated that one or more of their supported innovations had been adapted in response to the needs of the communities. One-third knew of an initiative that had failed, although this was clarified as not so much failing as not being sustained beyond the engagement period.
- 80% indicated positive impacts as a result of bringing health actors together to support one or more of the innovations. Two-thirds (66.7%) were aware of policy

changes that had resulted from either the innovations or the advocacy of their Hub.

- The contact Hubs had with their innovators, past and current, varied considerably. The results were complicated by responses from the SIHI Global Secretariat, where the experience is slightly different. However, there was strong consensus that there is real value to be gained by creating a space where social innovators in health can share experiences and interact.
- There was also strong consensus that regular participation in the Hub facilitators' meetings increased access to information and helped to form relationships. There was a request for these bi-monthly meetings to be more interactive to foster stronger partnerships and greater collaboration.
- There was again strong consensus that having SIHI Hub activities included on the SIHI Global website was important. In fact, there was a call from some respondents to have more than their annual reports available on the SIHI Global website.
- 92% were in favour of establishing Communities of Practice to strengthen opportunities to connect globally.

A very short follow-up survey was sent to all social health innovators and Hub facilitators to gather feedback on interest in establishing a Global Forum to promote the sharing of experiences and provide exposure to new advances and opportunities. These results are presented in Annex 3, with the questionnaire in Annex 6.

An Overview of the Voices of Innovators and Facilitators

These voices come from across South America, Africa, Asia and Europe. They represent a wide range of individuals, from those operating in very small individual or community initiatives to employees in large institutions; from CBOs to global research centres; from universities and government departments to NGOs and the private sector.

Responses from the survey indicate that the SIHI Network is recognised as a transformative association that supports innovators in embedding community-driven solutions within their health sectors through more evidence-based approaches and shared experiences. All the social innovators who responded would like to continue being members of SIHI, although the areas in which they benefited most differed. The overall sentiments expressed are captured in one innovator's response:

“Being part of SIHI has empowered us to grow, connect, and sustain innovations that change lives.”

For some, the impact has been nothing short of life-changing. One member shared how SIHI LAC's work has ***“enabled both institutional and personal transformation... strengthening the integration of social dimensions across research, while deeply***

enriching me as a public health professional and reinforcing my conviction about working from the ground up with communities.”

These sentiments were strongly echoed by the Hub facilitators, who reflected effects spanning capacity-building, networking, community impact, organisational development, personal growth and collaborative culture. Facilitators and innovators alike see the Network as enhancing the delivery of community-led health to support universal health coverage for all, while strengthening their own careers and life fulfilment.

“Being part of the SIHI Network has greatly raised the visibility of our Hub’s work and strengthened partnerships across countries and institutions. It has created opportunities to share innovations and shape health policy conversations. Personally, engaging with SIHI innovators and partners has been deeply fulfilling. I have upskilled, gained international exposure, and worked with colleagues from diverse countries...”

“It is a big network with many Hubs and global partners. This is appealing and offers credibility.”

This credibility strengthens institutions, supports innovators and inspires individuals who are committed to addressing inequities in health.

“Learning about what’s happening on the other side of the world and seeing the incredible work others are doing is deeply inspiring. It sparks motivation and even collaboration,” says one of the Hub facilitators, recognising the important role peer learning plays, not only in improving efficacy but also in providing inspiration.

Innovators recognise not only the opportunities that come from being part of the SIHI Network, but also the opportunities given to them. As one indicated, ***“It has increased my quest for innovativeness and networking. Underserved populations have benefited from the innovation due to increased accessibility.”***

The narratives from the surveys show that SIHI’s influence extends beyond technical health innovation to influencing governance approaches, intersectoral collaboration, research capacity, community empowerment and the scaling of innovations.

Through mentorship, workshops and implementation research, SIHI equips individuals and organisations with skills to design, evaluate and scale solutions. Many describe becoming more strategic and results-oriented, with an improved ability to serve marginalised communities.

“SIHI has strengthened my research skills and improved our ability to track our impact.”

The voices of both innovators and facilitators form a narrative of SIHI as a catalyst for transformation: uniting people, strengthening institutions, empowering innovators and nurturing a global community grounded in purpose, learning and equity. The training engagements were most highly valued by the innovators.

The effects of SIHI strengthen the facilitators and ripple outwards to innovators and communities, where the practical value of the Network becomes vividly clear. Innovators have gained skills, visibility and support: ***“Engagement with SIHI through training, access to grants, and dissemination of their work has helped them gain further support and scale their innovations.”*** These opportunities often lead to deeper community impact. As one Hub reported, ***“Initiatives that began with one objective discovered that community priorities lay elsewhere, leading them to transform their focus. Others strengthened leadership, social capital and even local organisations, showing how SIHI builds community resilience.”*** These voices illustrate how social innovations can adapt and become catalysts for broader social change when supported effectively. ***“One initiative initially focused on maternal health, for instance, adapted its strategy to provide education, effective communication and guidance on COVID-19 management, thereby expanding its reach to other community groups.”***

The innovators feel a strong connection with the Hubs and appreciate not only the financial and technical support, but also the manner of engagement. ***“There is a felt generosity of spirit in SIHI that we truly appreciate,”*** said one innovator. Another commented, ***“The work of SIHI is important. But the character of the people behind SIHI is equally so. They are concerned with our work and relate to us in a personal way. It is like they are building a community of engaged and caring innovators.”***

SIHI Hubs and the innovations they support have resulted in changes in health policies at local (including municipal ordinance) and national levels. ***“Individual innovations, like those on community health workers, the private sector and child health, have provided substantial evidence, including published evidence, that has informed policy on the management of childhood illnesses.”*** Examples were given by most of the Hubs. ***“Even when innovations do not immediately transform health systems, many establish collaborations with governmental health entities, complementing existing public programmes with the expectation that, over time, these innovations may be adopted and sustained by local authorities.”*** The SIHI Hubs have also had an impact on the universities in which they are hosted and, in some instances, have influenced not only curricula but also the adoption of new programmes and joint research.

The innovators recognise the value of the skills gained, and some of the Hubs try to provide ongoing training, even without additional resources, by moving online. Virtual cafés, webinars and training are provided, and regular engagement creates an effective learning and sharing environment. ***“Creating spaces for exchange and interaction among innovators, ideally in person but, if not possible, virtually, across the region has been one of the Hub’s most enriching experiences.”*** As another said, ***“Learning about what’s happening on the other side of the world and seeing the incredible work others are doing is deeply inspiring. It sparks motivation and even collaboration.”***

However, as some respondents indicate, especially innovators, online engagement requires constant revitalisation: ***“...because it was held online, the engagement was quite low.”*** Most innovators indicated that they are prepared to engage online to share their experiences and learn new skills, although all valued in-person engagement for building relationships. One Hub noted that ***“strengthened networking among SHI innovators can best be***

facilitated through hybrid in-person and virtual knowledge exchange forums, periodic mentorship clinics, and collaborative learning platforms.” This requires more resources and, especially for digital events, it is important to overcome language barriers more effectively and find ways to animate online engagements and make them more participatory. ***“These spaces are important for learning about what other Hubs are doing, but I feel they could be more interactive among participants.”***

Both innovators and Hub facilitators appreciated SIHI, particularly for the opportunities to engage with partners, and referred to success in generating additional support through government, bilateral and other funders as a result of SIHI Network links.

Overall, the voices have articulated:

- strengthened capacity at both individual and institutional levels
- the importance of shared learning and platforms of engagement
- community empowerment and ownership shifts from externally driven to community-driven
- improved visibility and credibility
- strengthened networks and knowledge dissemination platforms

The data also highlights sustainability and scalability as significant spin-offs. Projects received municipal and other government policy support, and some leveraged sustained funding and institutional backing, allowing them to continue after formal project completion. A few of the successful innovations were replicated or scaled across multiple regions and countries, reinforcing SIHI’s role in facilitating the diffusion of effective practices. Some of the Hubs have successfully strengthened their universities or research agency hosts, while others have successfully raised resources to expand their activities through the contacts made and the credibility gained as part of the SIHI Network.

The voices of the innovators and facilitators are rich. The quantified analysis shows strong congruence regarding the ability of the SIHI Network to engage and strengthen the adoption of innovation. The qualitative responses give deep voice and meaning. There is a great deal of material to draw on to take the SIHI Network forward. The appendices provide more detail on both the innovators’ and facilitators’ responses.

The Way Forward

Overall, SIHI is positioned as a vital convener and enabler within the social innovation in health landscape, with demonstrated success in building capacity, strengthening ecosystems, influencing policy and nurturing collaborative environments that support long-term health system transformation. The SIHI Network has strengthened engaged research, innovator support and networking to meet community needs and deliver health for all.

The findings demonstrate that SIHI’s support catalyses multiplier effects that enhance resilience, collaboration and the long-term sustainability of social health innovations. Strengthening monitoring frameworks and documentation practices will be essential to fully capture and demonstrate these transformative impacts. The SIHI Network is doing excellent

work and will need to deepen and expand its impact through its convening role and its ability to bring diverse actors together within countries and regions, as well as globally. There was a call for SIHI Global to include a brief summary of activities at the different Hubs on its website. “If SIHI Global or the Secretariat could identify and highlight each Hub’s key priorities and core activities on a shared platform, it would help facilitate cross-learning and collaboration among Hubs.” This would also be very useful to international partners who may want to see where their own research programmes could connect, and it would also raise the visibility and credibility of the Hubs and innovators when they approach partners for funding.

SIHI is a network dedicated to ensuring that health systems engage with communities and supporting health systems in using all available technologies. It supports innovators on the ground to address bottlenecks and generate solutions that are adopted and can then be scaled out to reach the last mile. There was a call for stronger efforts to link the innovators and the Hubs with partners to raise funds and to reinforce and extend Hub support for social innovation and advocacy.

The innovators and facilitators found engagement across the Network to be transformative and supportive. SIHI Global is well positioned to continue strengthening this engagement across the Hubs, both virtually and, where possible, in person. It will be important to find ways to reduce the language barrier and encourage more participatory engagement. TDR-WHO has an important role to play in continuing to engage the Hubs and innovators in research initiatives, where the early involvement of Hubs and social innovators can help strengthen the adoption of research outputs. TDR-WHO can also help to connect experts with fora where innovations are shared and skills strengthened.

The voices from the surveys reflect the narrative of SIHI as a catalyst for transformation, uniting people, strengthening institutions, empowering innovators and nurturing a global community grounded in purpose, learning and equity. Visibility and connection have been very important. “The SIHI Network has given us visibility among other health innovators, has contributed to our process of strengthening innovation skills, and has allowed us to connect with other organisations.” The SIHI Network will need to continue providing that visibility and opportunity to engage. A proposal to meet these needs is the formation of a Global Forum that will connect innovators, Hub facilitators, health experts and researchers to discuss more effective ways to strengthen social innovation in health for all. There was support for Communities of Practice to be included in a discursive forum. Such a forum will need to find ways to overcome the language barrier and strengthen active engagement and participation.

[1] Dr Fulufhelo Nelwamondo, CEO of the National Research Foundation (NRF), presentation at the “Engaged Research Conference 2025”, Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), South Africa.