

Fighting poverty by working with those most affected Department for International Development

The Innovation Hub in DFID's Policy Division is a small team which looks at ways we could do what we do better. We work in partnership with teams across DFID to try to understand how we can seize opportunities to tackle poverty more efficiently and more intelligently. We set ourselves the challenge of making both our funding and our programmes more open, collaborative and flexible.

Why be open? Why be concerned about collaboration and flexibility? Staff across the organisation often tell us that while our partners do great work, they tend to come from a small pool of organisations. This isn't intentional, but the burdens of writing funding applications favour larger organisations with established resources and know-how. We also hear that we can be overly-rigid in the way we work, focusing on programme operations rather than outcomes, and even our pilot programmes tend to be large and sometimes unwieldy. We also recognised that we have few mechanisms that allow our partners to collaborate. If we set up a challenge fund, we're inherently calling on partners to make closed, competitive bids for a single pot of funding – competition can produce great results, but not in every circumstance, and this process offers no rewards for working together or learning from each other.

So what did we do? In order to really be open we knew we had to work to bring in new partners and new voices, so we set out to design a flagship programme that would attract fresh perspectives; that might allow smaller and less established organisations to propose ideas and bid for funding. We wanted a programme that would be able to respond to the needs of the user and be flexible, able to change programme activities in response to circumstances and feedback and above all, one that could reward and embed openness and collaboration from the very beginning.

We worked with our partners [IDEO.org](https://www.ideo.org) to design a new programme, called Amplify. Amplify is a five-year project, set to tackle 10 poverty-related challenges. It does this by setting a poverty-related question to IDEO.org's online community – [openIDEO.com](https://www.openideo.com) – such as our first challenge 'how might we make low-income urban areas safer and more empowering for women and girls'. OpenIDEO.com, a community of over 50,000 users, works through a [four-stage design process](#), tackling the question in phases, from research, through to an open call for ideas, into shortlisting and refinement, and finally evaluation and funding.

OpenIDEO provides a platform where people with good ideas for tackling poverty can talk to each other, collaborate and ultimately bid for DFID funding to put those ideas into practice. But OpenIDEO is not the only important part of the programme. We chose to work with IDEO.org not just because they brought access to a [creative online community](#), but because they also had excellent experience working with people who rarely access online platforms at all. IDEO.org use human-centred design to design development programmes in collaboration with poor communities, building projects which

are built around the behaviour and needs of the user. Their recent work with low-income urban communities in Ghana, supported by Unilever, Water and Sanitation for the Urban Poor (WSUP) and DFID, to improve sanitation options, won a Civil Service Award. The ultimate vision for Amplify is an online design process that will be at every stage informed, shaped and challenged by users who can test and prototype the strongest emerging ideas.

What happens?

Each challenge begins with research. The Amplify team conduct a scoping visit to hold workshops and meetings with organisations that work directly with users to sketch out opportunities for innovation and change. On openIDEO.com, we ask users for their knowledge of success stories, insights, studies and notable failures in this space. For our first challenge, we received 771 research contributions in a matter of weeks, illuminating examples of good practice, providing interviews and making surprising analogous connections. By comparison, if DFID wants to learn about an area of work, stocktakes of existing projects can take months. Simply understanding what is already happening in a specific area of development is surprisingly tough, and while the research phase only provides a snapshot, its insights and breadth were robust and valuable.

The second stage is an open call for ideas on the site, during which users can team up and build on each other's submissions. In the third stage, the Amplify team take a shortlist of the strongest ideas and refine and prototype on the ground, using feedback from small communities of users.

In this first challenge, we coupled the online ideas and refinement phases with gathering the views of user communities in Delhi, who often don't have online access. Members of the Amplify team set up an Interactive Voice Response (IVR) number in partnership with two popular radio stations in Delhi. Listeners to the radio are told about the project in short programmes and spots and given a number to which they make a missed call (so they don't need to spend money on pay-as-you-go phones). The automated line calls back so they can offer views, which are recorded and transcribed online. Although this was only a pilot, our plan is to expand this aspect of the programme, so it incorporates the feedback of users as we go.

The final stage comes when the strongest ideas to emerge from this process receive funding from DFID (from a \$500,000 fund) and 14 weeks of design support from IDEO.org.

Our first challenge has just reached stage 3 – a shortlist of the 53 strongest proposals from the 580 ideas submitted is live on openIDEO.com now. Some of the proposals come from design students from New York University. One of them is from an Indian NGO with over 15 years' experience working with young people who live in slums. Another is from a 14 year old girl. Some of the proposals come from people who are talking about problems they want to solve in their own neighbourhoods, who have plans for pilot projects involving just a few streets and families. When the Amplify team went on our initial

research trip to gather contacts and insights for the project, a member of an NGO told us 'DFID is not interested unless you already work with millions of people'. That NGO, a women's only taxi company which trains marginalised women to drive, is now on the shortlist for funding, with their proposal for using innovative ways to expand their business model to more cities.

We don't know where the programme is heading yet. Working with new people carries risks – some of our proposers don't speak English fluently, some of them don't have a lot of experience running projects. But we knew when we started that not everyone would have the implementing capacity or the experience to simply absorb a funding award and run with it – which is we structured the programme to involve refinement phases as we shortlist, so we could test and prototype before selecting the top ideas. The use of milestone funding, and the provision of design support from IDEO.org is also part of the push to help smaller organisations take their ideas forward. Despite the extra complications this involves, the programme is fundamentally committed to working with new people in new ways, because we believe there is inherent value in increasing the number of people who can work with us and each other to fight poverty – in empowering people who want to be part of solving problems they face themselves, rather than keeping those people out of the debate. In putting our challenge online and working to gather the views and insights of users in poor communities, Amplify has acted to cast a much wider net and draw in all these interested parties with different skills and expertise. In the end, we're confident we have gathered a stronger and more flexible group around this critical problem than a closed bidding process would have done. Why not be a part of it? Sign up now and add your voice.

Lessons Learned

- Openness takes work – people won't offer their ideas automatically just because you've made it possible. The Amplify team has been tenacious and direct about reaching out to contacts to participate.
- People are nervous of the internet – especially civil servants! Making a process open means people often feel their ideas are subject to scrutiny, but when they receive positive feedback and engagement they respond with enthusiasm. You need resources for this. OpenIDEO.com has a dedicated community manager and a number of volunteers who help encourage people to add to their posts, make connections and team up with likeminded members.
- Getting online and offline communities to talk to each other is tough – but not impossible. Whether it's the Amplify team bridging the gap by uploading and summarising insights from interviews and workshops with users – so members of openIDEO know, for example, that smartphone apps are not a great solution for most of the urban poor – or using SMS or IVR to bring offline groups into the conversation.
- Online collaboration can help you overcome logistical problems – like translation. The Amplify team is working on a volunteer translation project

which uses OpenIDEO's large diaspora community to help translate posts from users who do not speak English.

- Being open and flexible can be difficult when you need to track your programme using logistical frameworks and theories of change. It's best if you bring in evaluators from the start, and figure out ways you can incorporate hard-to-measure concepts like collaboration and iteration into their workplan together.

Find out more

The Amplify programme on IDEO.org <http://www.ideo.org/amplify>

Challenge one in progress online

<http://www.openideo.com/challenge/womens-safety/refinement>