JOB DESCRIPTION

ROLE DETAILS

Job Title:	Executive Director - HELIX: The Humanitarian What Works Centre
Reports to:	Elrha CEO Accountable to HELIX Steering Committee (SC): CEO of Elrha and the Senior Vice President for Research & Innovation, Airbel Impact Lab, IRC
Line management responsibility:	HELIX Programme Team – will initially consist of 4 staff (to be recruited), but significantly expanding over the first years of initiative operation
Budget responsibility:	HELIX Budget ~23 million GBP
Job Level:	A – Executive Director
Location:	London UK or remote within the UK.

We operate a remote first working environment whereby staff are able to choose to work from home or their office of reference. For this role, we anticipate the Executive Director will take regular in-person meetings with partners and IRC/Elrha staff in London several times a week.

Hours: Full time (35 hours per week)

We aim to support flexible working as much as possible and requests for non-standard or part-time hours will be considered.

TEAM - HELIX: THE HUMANITARIAN WHAT WORKS CENTRE

HELIX is a major joint initiative between Elrha and IRC's Airbel Impact Lab. The Centre focuses on adapting and scaling solutions to humanitarian problems — specifically targeting where evidence is needed but where evidence alone cannot unlock scale. The Centre's distinctive contribution is the combination of four tools rarely held together in one place: adaptation and innovation, rigorous research, frontline operational insight, and systems change. HELIX brings these capabilities to bear to unlock scale through agile, unconventional combinations of actors — researchers, private-sector innovators, frontline implementers, local organisations, and systems-level delivery and financing partners — sequenced to the proof points and bottlenecks each Challenge faces.

JOB PURPOSE

The Executive Director leads HELIX: the Humanitarian What Works Centre, providing the strategic, operational, and external leadership necessary to realise the Centre's full ambition. They are the Centre's executive leader, translating vision into strategy, decisions, culture and performance across a team spanning two organisations. They are accountable to the Steering Committee for the delivery of HELIX strategy, workplan, and budget, and act as the lead representative for the Centre globally.

A critical measure of success in this role is the Executive Director's ability to actively leverage the complementary strengths of Elrha and IRC Airbel. The Executive Director will bring together Elrha's convening authority, grant-making infrastructure, and research and innovation sector positioning with IRC's technical research and innovation capacities, operational scale, and in-country presence, to produce a Centre that neither organisation could build alone.

The Executive Director ensures that the Centre operates as a transformative force in the humanitarian sector — one that identifies important problems, backs promising solutions, and creates the evidence, influence, and partnerships needed to push those solutions to scale. The Executive Director is jointly responsible, with Elrha and IRC Airbel, for positioning the Centre as a public good, for sustaining and growing its funding base, and for ensuring its work shifts what the sector believes is possible, not just what it does next.

The postholder brings strategic vision, intellectual originality and deep knowledge of the humanitarian sector, together with the stature needed to convene and challenge global humanitarian actors. They are a credible disruptor as much as a credible insider: someone who understands the humanitarian system well enough to know where it is failing, and has the courage and creativity to do something different about it. They carry credibility within the humanitarian research and innovation community, they possess the diplomatic judgement needed to represent the Centre externally while navigating the interests of two organisations, without becoming beholden to either. They are comfortable operating with real, bounded authority and building a genuinely shared team identity across different organisational homes.

KEY ACCOUNTABILITIES

1. Strategic Leadership

- Take accountability for identifying, adapting and scaling innovations to serve humanitarian populations at scale working through agile, diverse, cross functional consortia.
- Set and communicate the strategic direction of HELIX, translating the Centre's mandate into coherent, time-bound plans that command confidence across the Steering Committee, Elrha, IRC, funders, and the wider sector.
- Engage with the HELIX Steering Committee to make final resource-allocation decisions based on rigorous processes.
- Actively identify and create conditions for Elrha and IRC Airbel to contribute their respective and complementary strengths to the Centre's work, including convening authority, implementation reach, research capacity, and donor relationships.
- Drive original thinking about what the HWWC is for and how it works, including the intellectual challenge of problem selection, evidence generation, and systems influence.
- Produce sector-facing intellectual outputs (writing, frameworks, public argument) that builds the HWWC's thought leadership identity and challenges the sector's assumptions from within.
- Lead the development and iteration of the Centre's model: the challenge identification and selection process, consortia formation, research and innovation pathways, and scale and handoff strategies.

- Champion inclusive, equitable, and locally led approaches across all HELIX activities, ensuring that the Centre's work reflects the priorities and knowledge of diverse partners and crisis-affected communities.
- Serve as an active member of Elrha's Directors Group, contributing to organisation-wide strategy, collective leadership and decisions on organisational risk and resources, and ensuring that HELIX's implications for Elrha and its dependencies on the organisation's systems and people inform those decisions.

2. External Engagement & positioning

- Act as HELIX's global figurehead and thought leader, to driving policy, profile and funding for the Centre, its partners and its innovations to ensure that the Centre is a trusted, credible initiative that guides policy and practice in the humanitarian sector.
- Lead resource mobilisation efforts for HELIX jointly with Elrha and IRC Airbel, identifying funding gaps and opportunities, securing new investment, and ensuring financial sustainability.
- Maintain and develop strategic partnerships across research, policy, practice, and non-traditional communities. Identify and pursue new donor relationships jointly with Elrha and IRC, including multi-donor conversations and new investment propositions.
- Actively provoke and shift sector thinking through writing, speaking, and convening, building a community around evidence-driven scale in humanitarian response.
- Engage actors well beyond the traditional humanitarian architecture: think-tanks, technology innovators, development finance institutions, complexity scientists, design practitioners, and others whose perspectives the sector has not yet absorbed.

3. Centre Governance

- Work with and report to the HELIX Steering Committee, through which Elrha and IRC exercise joint governance of the Centre, on delivery of HELIX's strategy, workplan and budget, ensuring transparent and timely reporting on progress, risk and financial performance.Lead the Centre's relationship with FCDO as a strategic partner, including high-quality, timely donor reporting and proactive engagement on the Centre's strategic direction.
- Manage and convene the HELIX Advisors, a committee of technical and humanitarian experts.
- Hold executive accountability for risk across the Centre, ensuring strategic and reputational risks are actively managed and escalated.
- Ensure compliance with agreed organisational policies, procedures, due diligences, and ethics frameworks, including the Centre's conflict of interest policy.
- Ensure the Centre's governance structures remain fit for purpose, and recommend refinements as the Centre matures.
- Maintain strong and productive relationships with Elrha, IRC Airbel, FCDO, and other core funders and partners, ensuring confidence in the Centre's governance and delivery.

4. Programme Quality & impact

- Hold ultimate accountability for the quality and impact of HELIX's Challenge cycles, including problem identification and selection, Challenge design, evidence thresholds and stage-gates.

- Lead the ongoing refinement of the Centre's Theory of Change and hold ultimate responsibility for the results framework and impact measurement.
- Ensure that decision-making across the Centre is transparent, inclusive, and actively advances more equitable power dynamics in the humanitarian system, including meaningful participation of crisis-affected communities, local organisations, and actors from the Global Majority in priority-setting and Challenge design.
- Create a culture of learning and embed in HELIX, ensuring lessons from each challenge cycle inform future design and build the Centre's cumulative evidence base, and sharing these lessons externally.
- Ensure that the quality of evidence produced by the Centre meets the standards required for uptake by funders, financiers, implementers and policy actors.
- Hold ultimate accountability to ensure that the HWWC's monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEAL) systems support iterative improvement and generate decision-relevant evidence at each stage of the Challenge model.

5. Operational & Team Leadership

- Set the strategic parameters for annual and multi-year workplans, staffing plans, and budgets; secure SC approval; and hold accountability for delivery against them, supported by senior operational leadership within the Centre.
- Ensure that fiduciary, compliance, and operational functions are delivered to the standard required by FCDO, Elrha, and IRC — and that these functions enable rather than constrain the Centre's ambition.
- Ensure the Centre's programme design, research quality, and challenge delivery are executed to the highest standard and in line with agreed strategy.
- Supervise, lead, and develop the HWWC team by fostering a high-performing, engaged, and inclusive culture aligned with the values of the Centre and its founding organisations.
- Model agile, cross-functional ways of working, and ensure effective coordination between Elrha and IRC Airbel teams throughout HELIX activities.
- Support recruitment and onboarding of HWWC staff in collaboration with Elrha and IRC Airbel HR teams.

6. Line Management

- Provide effective and timely people management and development to ensure line reports feel engaged, supported and motivated through meaningful objectives which reflect organisational priorities, enabling them to achieve high performance and thrive in their role.
- Ensure the culture and values of Elrha and IRC are reflected through all people and operational management processes to promote collaborative and positive ways of working between the team and both organisations.
- Provide effective capacity, budget and resource planning for related areas, ensuring compliance with financial, HR and operational processes.

Core Competencies for all Elrha/HELIX Staff

- Integrity & values alignment: uphold both Elrha and IRC organisational values and policies, modelling behaviours that support strategy and purpose.

- Project delivery & accountability: apply consistent and compliant operational approaches to deliver high-quality, efficient and responsible outcomes.
- Agility & learning: demonstrate adaptability, innovation and a commitment to continuous learning and improvement in dynamic environments.
- Collaboration & relationships: foster trust, teamwork and strong stakeholder engagement to enable growth and shared success.
- Organisation & resilience: maintain focus, attention to detail and effective prioritisation, delivering results even under pressure.

PERSON SPECIFICATION

Essential

Qualifications and experience

- Advanced academic degree in a field with direct relevance to complex systems challenges — including but not limited to humanitarian action, economics, public health, social science, complexity science, design, political economy, or technology and innovation, or equivalent experience
- Demonstrated executive leadership of a complex programme, centre, or organisation operating at scale in humanitarian or complex contexts, with a proven track record of strategic delivery and demonstrable impact, and a programmatic budget above £20 million.
- Deep knowledge of the humanitarian system, including its architecture, financing, policy drivers, and the role of research and innovation in influencing practice — sufficient to operate credibly as a sector leader and convener.
- Demonstrated expertise in research and innovation development pathways relevant to the humanitarian sector, including ability to appraise evidence, identify gaps, commission rigorous research designs, and apply strategies for uptake, scaling, and sustainability.
- Proven experience brokering and overseeing multi-stakeholder projects spanning organisational boundaries — including with actors from outside the traditional humanitarian architecture.
- Demonstrated ability to lead a team that spans organisational boundaries, aligning cultures, systems, and incentive structures toward a shared purpose — and a track record of making multi-organisational partnerships produce outcomes.
- Experience leading and managing governance structures, including working with or reporting to boards, steering committees, or equivalent oversight bodies, and managing advisory committees.
- Experience in securing and stewarding diverse, large-scale funding streams, including managing multi-source budgets and engaging institutional, multilateral, philanthropic and corporate donors.
- Demonstrated experience in start-up and inception phases, including establishing governance, operational frameworks, SOPs, and team structures for new initiatives.
- Strong financial literacy and experience overseeing significant budgets, with the ability to exercise executive judgement on resource allocation.
- Demonstrated ability to work at the interface of sectors, bringing perspectives, methods, or actors from outside the humanitarian architecture into their work.

Skills, abilities and attributes

- Exceptional strategic leadership: able to set direction, inspire confidence, make difficult decisions, and hold the Centre's course in a complex and contested sector environment.
- Outstanding external presence and communication: able to represent HELIX at the highest levels globally, translate complex evidence into compelling narratives for donors, policymakers, and practitioners, and change minds.
- Strong governance literacy: able to manage accountability upward to a Steering Committee while maintaining operational authority and clarity, and to navigate the interests of multiple institutional stakeholders.
- Skilled at making multi-organisational partnerships generative rather than merely functional: able to identify where two institutions' complementary strengths can be combined to produce something neither could achieve alone, and to create the conditions for that to happen in practice.
- Deep commitment to ethics, equity, inclusion, and localisation in research and innovation, including meaningful engagement of crisis-affected communities.
- Skilled in embedding learning, driving continuous improvement, and developing systems that capture and share organisational knowledge across complex programmes.
- Resourceful, proactive, flexible and with the ability to work independently in a constantly changing environment.
- High degree of computer literacy, including knowledge and experience in the use of Microsoft packages, ideally including SharePoint and MS Project.
- Strong attention to detail and organisational skills including the ability to plan, prioritise and ensure implementation of work to required standards and tight deadlines, sometimes under pressure.

Desirable

- Strong understanding of implementation science, effectiveness research, value-for-money approaches, including experience leading MEAL systems that support iterative research and innovation cycles.
- Expertise in political economy analysis and sectoral financing models relevant to humanitarian scale pathways.
- Experience in organisational development, change management, or knowledge management at scale.
- Fluency in at least one additional language (e.g. French, Arabic, Spanish).

Elrha and IRC strongly encourage people with lived experience of humanitarian crisis to apply.

Sponsorship

Elrha holds a UK Certificate of Sponsorship and is willing and able to support visa sponsorship and relocation to the UK for the selected Candidate.

Child Protection Level 1

The responsibilities of the post do not require you to have contact with children or young people.

We are committed to the safeguarding and protection of children and vulnerable people in our work. We will do everything possible to ensure that only those who are suitable to work with children and vulnerable people are recruited to work for us. This post is subject to a range of vetting checks including a criminal records disclosure.