USAID’s Global Development Lab was created in April 2014 with the ambition of accelerating science, technology, innovation and partnership development to improve human lives and end extreme poverty by 2030. In this exclusive interview, International Innovation speaks with Executive Director Ann Mei Chang and the Lab’s Center for Global Solutions Director Lona Stoll about some of its most innovative projects to date.

Can you briefly introduce your role in the US Agency for International Development (USAID)’s Global Development Lab and explain which aspects of your diverse background facilitate your work here?

AMC: I come to the Lab with a passion for finding innovative, evidence-based and scalable solutions to some of the most pressing development challenges of our time. From my time working in Silicon Valley at companies such as Google and Apple, I experienced first-hand the power of technological innovations to transform lives around the world. From my experience at the Department of State, I gained a deep appreciation for the power of government to lead and make a difference in the world. Additionally, at Mercy Corps – an international NGO – I gained an intimate perspective on both the massive challenges and opportunities in the on-the-ground fight against extreme poverty and how donor incentives can often discourage innovation. Having seen the critical pieces of the puzzle each sector brings, I believe that scaled impact will only be possible when we work together in partnership across organisations and sectors.

Could you provide an example of the Lab’s effort in this particular area?

AMC: A key example is our effort to combat a leading cause of infant mortality: infection. In Nepal, USAID is supporting the use of chlorhexidine (CHX), a low-cost antiseptic used to prevent umbilical cord infections in newborns. At US $0.23 per dose, CHX is an extremely low-cost, scientifically proven innovation that has been shown to reduce up to one-third of newborn deaths. With nearly 70 per cent of infant deaths occurring during the first month of life – and the most common cause being infection – this intervention has the potential to dramatically reduce preventable child deaths.

After scaling the innovation to 22 new districts in Nepal over the course of a year through the Saving Lives at Birth programme, a total of 5,757 health workers and 15,722 female community health volunteers were trained on the use of CHX and are now providing services at public health facilities in the community. The 26 total implementation districts have 253,568 expected live births per year, covering 36.6 per cent of the total live births per year in Nepal. In 2011, Saving Lives at Birth committed $2 million for a transition-to-scale grant that is currently being used to expand the use of CHX across Nepal. Our hope is to work with the rest of USAID, local governments and pharmaceutical companies to scale the use of CHX globally – with the potential of saving 300,000 infant lives each year.

On a personal level, what inspired you to work for the Global Development Lab?

AMC: I honestly couldn’t imagine a more inspiring job. The goal of the Lab is to leverage modern tools and techniques to ‘bend the curve’ of progress towards eradicating extreme poverty. It’s an audacious goal, but what makes it so exciting is that in designing the Lab, USAID has assembled the most important elements that together have the potential to achieve that goal. The combination of harnessing scientific and technological breakthroughs; opening development to people anywhere with good ideas; taking evidence-based and iterative approaches; and promoting and deepening a wide range of partnerships will help us reach and improve the lives of hundreds of millions of people.

Do you have any specific aims for driving the impact of the Lab in the next few years of your leadership?

AMC: The Lab has a wide set of capabilities, from geospatial and data analysis, to digital development; sourcing, testing and scaling of new technologies; and forging partnerships. I look forward to working with other USAID leaders to identify how this full set of capabilities can be focused to accelerate our impact when it comes to...
to our most critical development challenges – such as the Ebola outbreak in West Africa, urban sanitation and financial inclusion.

The Global Development Lab is organised into five centres and two offices. How has it ensured effective cooperation between these divisions in order to achieve its goals?

LS: The Lab has a very flat structure, with three fewer layers of traditional hierarchy, a senior leadership team that invests significant time together in forging a common strategic vision and an operational plan. The Lab utilises cross-centre teams to achieve Agency development priorities. These project teams ensure collaboration and learning across the Lab.

What response have you had so far to your Development Innovation Ventures (DIV) competition? Could you discuss some of the most promising projects that have been funded through this competition?

AMC: We’ve had an incredible response to our open competition; since 2010, we have received over 6,000 applications – 66 per cent of them new to USAID. DIV is continually reaching new global audiences. In 2014, we received over 4,000 applications, 1,100 in the third quarter (April–June) alone. DIV also successfully transitioned to a rolling application system, which allows for applicants to apply 365 days a year and allows for a quicker application process. In total, DIV has invested in more than 100 solutions that address challenges in areas including economic growth, global health and food security in 35 countries around the world.

ERADICATING EBOLA

On 7 October, the Lab, together with the USAID Global Health Bureau and the White House Office of Science and Technology, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), and the Department of Defense, launched Fighting Ebola: A Grand Challenge for Development. This Challenge called for innovators from around the world to submit new, practical solutions for improving the tools used by frontline healthcare workers in the fight against Ebola in West Africa. The initial focus of the Challenge, announced by President Barack Obama on September 26 2014, is to generate pioneering solutions to improve the personal protective equipment and tools used by healthcare workers battling Ebola.

In just two months, innovators from around the world submitted over 1,500 ideas focused on helping frontline healthcare workers to provide better, more timely care and to contain the virus. Following a rigorous selection process, three innovators were identified for the solutions they presented to increase the protection and comfort of these healthcare workers. For instance, Johns Hopkins University Center for Bioengineering Innovation & Design and JHPIEGO redesigned a healthcare worker suit, or personal protective equipment (PPE). The new PPE was designed to allow for faster and more efficient doffing. Healthcare workers will be able to remove their suits in a fraction of the time needed for existing PPE, significantly reducing the risk of infection. Cooling features have also been added to allow for comfort and increased time inside the suit.

The Fighting Ebola challenge is a particularly significant achievement because we were able to conceive, launch and secure innovation submissions in a matter of weeks. The Challenge clearly embodies the new model of development embraced by the Lab – sourcing evidence-based solutions from partners outside of the traditional development sector to mount a rapid response to a pressing global issue. By working together with our partners from government, business and civil society to bring together the world’s brightest minds, we are discovering innovations that will help West Africa’s most vulnerable communities and end this Ebola epidemic.

Did you encounter any problems or difficulties in the early stages of operation of the Lab? How were these challenges tackled?

LS: The Lab was formed from the merger and restructuring of two existing USAID Offices. One of the key challenges in the early days was clearly communicating the new structure and capabilities to the rest of the Agency, so that the Lab could effectively engage and support field missions and technical bureaus working to achieve goals, such as food security and ending preventable child and maternal death. The Lab tackled this challenge through a series of engagements across the Agency, ranging from regional conversations overseas, to town halls and innovation marketplaces in Washington, DC, to a lot of targeted, one-on-one conversations and briefings.

The internal challenge of forging a new, single Lab identity and culture was also tackled head on, by a participatory, bottom-up process to lay out Lab core values and change narrative, as well as a very forward-leaning onboarding process for new Lab staff.
Are there any upcoming events that the Global Development Lab is attending or organising that you would like to mention?

AMC: I am particularly excited to be speaking at SXSW on 13 March. I’ll be talking about how cutting-edge technologies can be leveraged to improve global health. I’ll highlight the work that the Lab and the USAID Center for Accelerating Innovation and Impact are doing together to fight the Ebola epidemic, save lives at birth and alleviate postpartum haemorrhage in low-resource settings, among many others.

In the week commencing 9 March 2015, the US Department of State, in collaboration with Concordia and USAID, will kick-off its annual Global Partnerships Week (GPW) celebration in recognition of the critical role that public-private partnerships play in advancing diplomacy and development around the world. From large-scale events to intimate networking gatherings and everything in between, GPW events connect governments, corporations, civil society and faith-based organisations, diaspora communities and academic institutions as potential partners, supporters and solutions providers — providing opportunities to embrace and explore creative collaborations that enhance diplomacy and development throughout the international community.

I am also excited to lead the ‘Changing Lives Through Mobile’ workshop at the GMSA Mobile World Congress in Barcelona, Spain, on 3 March. This world-class thought-leadership conference brings together industry leaders, visionaries and innovators to explore the trends that will shape the mobile world in the years ahead.

How do you see the role of the Global Development Lab changing in the next five to 10 years, and what goals would you like to have achieved within that time?

AMC: In five years, USAID will be seen as a global leader in recognising the newest trends and most effective solutions, as well as an expert in how to transform these trends into globally impactful solutions. The Lab will be a living, learning organisation that values course correction, continuous evaluation, evidence and rapid iteration. It will use an evidence-based, open development approach to source hundreds of great ideas, and take 10 per cent of those solutions to at least 1 million people, and 10 per cent of those to global scale – improving 200 million lives around the world.

Partners from the private sector, universities, NGOs and missions, are working as a part of a Lab-centred ecosystem to co-create and scale solutions to the most pressing development challenges of the times. Evidence will show that science, technology and innovation will have accelerated USAID’s development impact in a handful of critical priority areas. And, as that happens, my aim is that our tools and techniques will become deeply integrated across all of USAID and the development sector more broadly, as best practices for successful international development.