



Concept Note

Accountability in the Age of the Algorithm

Championing Pathways to Inclusion in Tech Driven Futures

CDAC Annual Public Forum 2020: 27-28 October 2020

The Humanitarium, ICRC, Geneva, Switzerland

The responsible and ethical use of emerging technologies within humanitarian systems requires intentional, democratised design with diverse perspectives to ensure that technological futures do not exacerbate past inequalities. Inclusive futures that impact all of us cannot be designed by just a select, privileged few.

The global humanitarian system is increasingly intersecting with the technological revolution that is already fundamentally altering the way we live, work and relate to one another¹. While some aid organisations are approaching it tentatively and in a piecemeal way, others are embedding digital innovation and processes enthusiastically and holistically across the board. Currently humanitarian organisations are testing the opportunities afforded by digital technologies in some of the following ways:

1. As a means to provide more affordable and faster ways to access and share real-time information, connect and organise (particularly in the area of Communication and Community Engagement)
2. To increase the agency and dignity of the people they serve and to ensure no one is left behind²
3. Understanding communities and populations, needs and environments - often in the forms of maps, data visualisations, or statistical outputs
4. Providing precision service delivery - through emerging technologies like drones, 3D printing and satellite imagery
5. Tackling, compiling and verifying information as evidence with technologies such as distributed ledgers, and digital artefacts
6. Forecasting trends through predictive analytics³

¹ <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2016/01/the-fourth-industrial-revolution-what-it-means-and-how-to-respond/>

² As articulated in the 2030 agenda on Sustainable Development.

³ http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_Civil_Society_in_the_Fourth_Industrial_Revolution_Response_and_Innovation.pdf

Progress and innovation have always been driving factors for societies and the way we live. Yet AI-based technologies stand out as a game changer with the potential to affect the core of our societies. While their benefits can be manifold, they raise complex and urgent legal, ethical, policy and economic questions with thus far uncertain implications. The intersection of the global humanitarian system and technology systems, both arguably fundamentally patriarchal and hegemonic, raises concerns about the implications for the most vulnerable.

Concerns, increasingly backed by evidence, about the dominance of technology globally and its influence in development and humanitarian assistance raise important questions about the risks such technologies can present in a variety of situations, including that of armed conflict (Rahman, 2018; Thomas, 2018). Rather than overcoming the considerable power imbalances already present in the humanitarian sector, fears that technology will maintain and even further the exclusion of vulnerable populations have been raised, particularly in connection to issues around refugee data and identity, fake news propagated by social media and the trialling of technology on the most vulnerable populations (Hosein and Nyst, 2013; Jacobsen, 2015a). There are worries that agencies engaging in digital transformation are not doing enough to be ‘intentionally inclusive’ or to avoid unintentionally excluding groups who may already be left out of current approaches (Chernobrov, 2018). Moreover, there are uncertainties around both how to ensure this impact does not further marginalise the hardest to reach or those already left behind and how to mitigate the biases of the technology sector⁴.

“So far, no system has been designed to allow end users to trace their own transactions or verify that they received the correct funding from donors – a feature particularly relevant for P2P systems.”⁵

Chinmayi Arun argues that “vulnerable Southern populations in particular are at risk from the surveillance and other forms of discrimination, bias and poorly tailored outcomes that will result from AI that is designed with no regard to their local contexts”⁶. Mirca Madianou further argues that “techno colonialism captures the convergence of digital developments with humanitarian structures and market forces in reinvigorating and reshaping colonial relationships of dependency”⁷.

For much of the world **algorithmic accountability goes unchecked**.

Those that are working on current digital policy frameworks tend to be predominantly from small communities of public-private, academic and technical actors from the global north. The challenge with designing digital policy from a dominant narrative is that it runs the very real risk of reinforcing power imbalances, without considering the cascading impacts of such policy decisions on those most affected by them.

The UN Secretary General’s high-level panel on digital co-operation recognised this and called for an inclusive digital economy and society, one that accounts for local conditions, human rights and barriers faced by marginalised groups. In a speech on multilateralism at the Italian Senate, the UN Secretary-General reiterated his concern about a growing technological faultline that threatens to further divide the world, emphasising that “Technology must be a tool for peace, for social progress and reducing inequalities.” Furthermore, in remarks at the Internet Governance Forum (IGF) in Berlin,

⁴ https://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/resource-documents/digital_divide_lit_review_web_0.pdf

⁵ HPG, GAHI, ODI, HPG Commissioned report, February 2019, “Blockchain and Distributed Ledger Technologies in the Humanitarian Sector” by Giulio Coppi and Larissa Fast, HP

⁶ Arun, C; ‘AI and the Global South: Designing for Other Worlds’; Oxford Handbook of Ethics of AI, 2019

⁷ Madianou, M; *Digital Innovation and Data Practices in the Humanitarian Response to Refugee Crisis*, Social Media + Society, Sage Publications, 2019

the [Secretary-General](#) cautioned that the internet was at risk of splitting across three related divides: a digital divide, a social divide, and a political divide, and he warned against a major international governance gap on new technologies.

How civil societies will thrive in a technology-driven 21st century is challenging how humanitarian organisations understand themselves. Without textured conversations around how rights holders across different cultures and domains experience humanitarian digital policy, we run the real risk that future digital systems will exacerbate vulnerabilities in humanitarian contexts.

CDAC wants to change this.

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How can we radically re-imagine digital humanitarian policy to be centred around community agency, knowledge and needs?

We have an opportunity to reimagine humanitarian communication and community engagement in a technology age that does not replicate the inequalities of the past. *Who gets to speak, who gets spoken at and who gets completely missed* are perspectives that we need to interrogate to ensure that people who access humanitarian services and are most affected by digital developments can have a greater say in what this might look like.

The objective of CDAC's 2020 Annual Global Forum is to engage in a critical and inclusive discussion with global leaders from different spheres for a multi-disciplinary and multi-stakeholder dialogue. When most convenings and conversations around AI and ethics are focused in the global north, this conference aims to act as a platform to shift the emphasis and discourse from top down technology solutions and humanitarians to one that is far wider ranging and inclusive in its perspectives. We seek to amplify different values, ethics, philosophies that drive the majority of the world's cultures to have a greater influence in how we collectively think about our futures. We seek to pull out biases, exclusionary practices and mental models, and to challenge our assumptions about *why* we (or society) think current actions are ethical (or not), *how* we arrive at such views, and *whether* we are justified in thinking so.

This conference seeks to interrogate the following questions:

- How do people on the receiving end of aid experience humanitarian technologies, and what are we missing from these experiences
- Whose priorities and values matter in these futures?
- How might we govern and be accountable in more equitable ways?
- And how might people, most impacted by these technologies in humanitarian settings, have greater agency to shape the type of technology futures they will live within?

It is organised around 4 main themes that constitute the central pillars CDAC feels are core to ensure a reimagining of more equitable technology futures, one that is grounded in the rights, views and perspectives of people most affected by them.

Proposed Themes

Theme 1: Algorithms and accountability

- Algorithmic discrimination – who is likely to be discriminated against and what implications might this have on real life aggression and exclusion?

- What principles should underpin accountable algorithms?
- How do we unpack the black box of responsibility? Who is actually responsible, who *ought* to be responsible?

Theme 2: Decolonising Digital Governance and Ethics

- What could 21st Century Geneva Conventions look like? How might humanitarian principles need to evolve in the age of algorithmic accountability?
- What are some different philosophies and cultural values that should influence digital ethics?
- Digital humanitarianism – is this a force for good or an extension of the white person’s imagination?

Theme 3: Whose experiences matter?

- How are people’s identities and experiences being impacted by technologies?
- Tech and feminism: How can feminist approaches to technology systems influence more equitable humanitarian outcomes?
- What types of wisdom do we need in our complex futures? How can indigenous philosophy and cultural anthropologists help us reframe our thinking?

Theme 4: The Ecosystem

- What does the digital ecosystem actually look like? Who are the *unusual* actors that are doing meaningful work that humanitarians can learn from?
- Re-thinking networked collaboration – how can we shift our asks and expectations of stakeholders and partners?
- What new forms of networked accountability is required? How do we hold each other to account?

About the CDAC Network

The CDAC Network is the global alliance of more than 30 of the world’s biggest humanitarian and media development organisations – including UN agencies, the Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement, INGOs, media and communications organisations – committed to putting the power in humanitarian action back in the hands of communities. We believe that, when communities have the information and the resources to make their own decisions, they will find solutions to even the most challenging problems.

The CDAC global public forum will be hosted by the ICRC in Geneva between 27-28 October 2020 (followed by the CDAC General Assembly on 29 October 2020). The event will host approximately 200 people working in the humanitarian, development, academic, technology and media development fields. We also expect this forum to be streamed live to a global audience.