



N E T W O R K

2021 PUBLIC FORUM REPORT



Start ups, Trust and Letting go: Technology and Power in Aid

Insights from the 2021 CDAC Public Forum: Part One

'Refugees are often left out of conversations around technological development, and, like other marginalised communities, they often become guinea pigs on which to test new surveillance tools before bringing them to the wider population.'

So said Aarathi Krishnan, a technology and human rights fellow at the Harvard Kennedy Carr Centre, delivering the keynote address to this year's CDAC public forum. She argued that digital systems exist within complex formations 'built on imperial rivalries and a tech worldview that imagines some figures as outside the world of tech itself'. For Aarathi, digital colonialism was 'rooted in the design of a tech ecosystem for the purposes of profit and plunder'.

Digital tools are now a commonplace reality for everyone. So, how should the humanitarian sector set about tackling this 'digital colonialism' and yet at the same time open the opportunities for expanding and deepening the accountability that this industrial revolution in communication provides?



“Whichever technological advances that the humanitarian system brings, it has to be a human-centred technology; a technology that takes into account the voices of the people”

Digital communication and accountability in action

Day one kicked off with a session on ‘Listening versus ceding: changing the decision-making table’. How could humanitarian workers on the ground ‘shift the dial’ from listening only to the channels designed by their own organisations, towards using community channels to actively discuss, and share decision-making, with the communities they serve?

Since CDAC was set up 10 years ago, there has been a big rise in the awareness of the need to gather feedback from those receiving aid. But the systems used are predominantly designed by the humanitarian community, without reference to affected communities – even though digital technology means people can share ideas and feedback more easily than ever.

Khin Ohmar, from the Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict, is also the founder of the Progressive Voice policy research and advocacy group in Myanmar. She described how authoritarian regimes had ‘silenced’ people for decades. Ohmar criticised some of the big hitters in the humanitarian sector for not listening when they should: ‘We need the international actors and [OCHA] to listen to the people of Myanmar, which is something that’s always been a big miss.’ She described the ‘lack of will’ among UN and humanitarian organisations to make local people and agencies an integral part of decision-making as a ‘big challenge’. She concluded: ‘The international aid agencies and donors need to put their trust in our people – the local agencies on the ground.’

Bahana Hydrogene, a refugee who has begun several tech businesses from within the Kakuma Refugee Camp in Kenya, agreed that humanitarian actors needed to listen ‘more systematically’ to refugees. He said affected people were ‘best placed to identify sustainable solutions for our own problems. Whichever technological advances that the humanitarian system brings, it has to be a human-centred technology; a technology that takes into account the voices of the people.’

Fernanda Baumhardt is the advisor on Accountability to Affected People and Community Engagement for OCHA in Latin America and the Caribbean. She argued that digital technology could make a situation worse if, for example, organisations used it to set up helplines for affected communities but failed to act on any feedback. The message, said Fernanda, would amount to: ‘Call us – but perhaps we don’t care.’

Digital tech can help restore damaged trust

The session also heard from Marvin Parvez, who has 30 years’ experience in humanitarian relief, development and advocacy in Asia, Europe and the Pacific. He believed digital technology has both held humanitarian workers who have abused their positions to account, and it could also potentially redress this harm: ‘We need to find ways to be more publicly accountable to communities that we serve. Communities have read about all our scandals, and that has really damaged our credibility as a sector.’

Marvin said tech could be used to regain that lost credibility and improve accountability, thereby rebuilding trust. That could include, for example, live-streaming a local cluster meeting to demonstrate where power lay: ‘They will see the people on the chairs will be from the UN. Right behind them would be large INGOs. Most of the local NGOs and CBOs are in the corridor. So, you can see how this power is being kept in one place. When it comes to accountability and localisation, we have definitely not moved and not delivered on our commitments and promises.’

Data, data everywhere – but are we using it effectively?

We know humanitarian organisations collect huge volumes of data. But are we asking the right questions and using feedback effectively?

Ohmar said INGOs should escape their preoccupation with collecting data. Many missions in different contexts had failed, she said, because they put data before people's lives and stories.

Bahana said refugees were often seen as numbers rather than human beings, and their views simply ignored: 'It's high time that humanitarian actors designed technological tools that take into account local perspectives, because refugees are not just people seeking aid – they have a wealth of expertise. We are spoon-fed whatever is brought to our table. We don't have the opportunity to put our views forward.'

And what about the participation of affected people in decision-making? Were they being actively engaged, or merely taking part in 'tick-box' exercises?

Fernanda said some organisations, such as the Red Cross/Red Crescent, had already embedded affected communities in their whole programmes, but many had not. The challenge was to keep putting it on the agenda.

Bahana believed refugee organisations had been 'stepping up', particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, and were using digital solutions to make sure their voices were heard. Ohmar said international organisations consulting affected communities was, all too often, 'tokenism', with people confused by the exclusive language used.

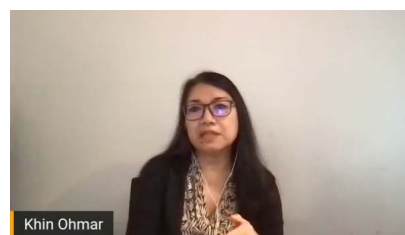
Those watching the discussion were asked to write down what they saw as the barriers to humanitarian organisations actively discussing decisions with affected communities. Top of the list were 'donor arrogance', 'time', 'language', 'trust' and 'incentives'. But perhaps the last word should go to a member of the audience who asked: 'Can we ever really cede decision-making with an aid system in which only the donors determine not just what aid is allocated, but they also decide what is the 'impact' – and who has the expert knowledge?' That was a debate for another day.

Using information harvested by digital technology to inform decision-making and increase accountability to affected communities

The forum then looked at more direct uses of technology in community engagement and, particularly, in accountability. As computing power has increased and become cheaper, humanitarian organisations have been able to collect, store and access a huge amount of information. The question facing our panel was: how can data collected by digital channels be used to inform decision-making and increase accountability to affected people?

Sophie Tholstrup has worked extensively in community engagement and technology, especially financial engagement technology to deliver change. She is currently the head of technology for the Development Policy Unit at the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change.

Sophie said standing still was no longer an option for humanitarian organisations, particularly as climate change meant crises would become worse. 'Doing business as usual, we have absolutely no chance of meeting the humanitarian challenge,' she said. Sophie rated the humanitarian sector as being '30 years behind' in terms of its use of technology, although the COVID-19 pandemic had forced an 'irreversible push' into working remotely, using data and working more scientifically.





“Digitally, communities can decide to meet with each other and talk to each other and agree and coordinate and support each other during a crisis now. They don’t necessarily need to talk to OCHA or UNHCR or UNICEF or WHO. COVID has shown this very well.”

Anahi Ayala Iacucci has been a leader of the conversation on community engagement, and the better use of technology and communication in humanitarian responses, for more than a decade. She is the digital inclusion and participation consultant for UNHCR.

Anahi said there had been a huge change in the past 20 years in the way data flowed between humanitarian organisations, authorities, third party actors and communities. The debate was not only about how that power was distributed, but also about having systems in place to ensure that power was shared more equitably. Humanitarian organisations were still falling short in not allowing affected communities to take part in writing proposals or to share the relevant data.

But developments in technology meant those communities are now able to bypass traditional humanitarian organisations to facilitate these conversations: ‘Digitally, communities can decide to meet with each other and talk to each other and agree and coordinate and support each other during a crisis now. They don’t necessarily need to talk to OCHA or UNHCR or UNICEF or WHO. COVID has shown this very well.’

Turning ‘bad news’ into a positive

And what about feedback data from communities which suggested that a humanitarian programme was not as effective as it should be?

Sophie said the most powerful data was often that which humanitarian organisations did not want to hear: the ‘bad news’ that feedback suggested affected communities were not receiving what they needed. ‘There is no incentive in the system to share that information,’ she said. ‘At best, that information will be used to reshape a specific programme, but it won’t go outside that programme. It won’t go to the management of that organisation and it certainly won’t go across the response to other organisations and other communities – and that’s where the learning happens.’



To combat that, donors had to help create an environment that was ‘non-hostile’ to sharing learning, and to develop a culture that recognised that humanitarian action was ‘far from perfect’. Programmes would be strengthened and improved by listening to negative feedback, involving communities in decisions, constantly testing assumptions and working collaboratively. If a programme were changed in response to negative feedback, donors had to stop seeing that as a failure.

Are we really listening?

The session then heard from entrepreneur and former rocket engineer Jim Fruchterman, the founder and CEO of Tech Matters, a non-profit that creates tech solutions for the social good sector. He said many non-profit organisations were using ‘rudimentary’ tech which was 10-15 years behind the times. Whereas commercial companies used secure, cloud-based systems to store data, non-profits might have staff in the field carrying round insecure personal hard drives with confidential information about affected people, in breach of data processing regulations, as well as demonstrating how little they were respecting the data taken from people.

Jim said it was widely acknowledged that affected communities were seldom given access to the data that rightfully belongs to them, and which they need to make informed decisions. That data was also often analysed elsewhere, ‘without the local context, and certainly not for the agency and autonomy of the people that we serve – maybe [if they had this data] they can make better decisions in the first place and not need our help’.

Anahi said many data policies needed to be rethought: ‘A policy needs to allow me to do my job despite the fact that there’s a lot of risks around it. What the majority of data policies do right now, in the majority of NGOs and large organisations, is to say ‘Don’t do anything – because everything is not safe’.

Sophie said there was a problem with humanitarian organisations keeping tight control over their information: ‘Data is power, and we are an inherently competitive and centralised system. Ceding data is tantamount to ceding power, and we are not a system that is set up well to do that.’

Anahi said the humanitarian system was based on the paternalistic idea that ‘we help them – because we know better’. Organisations had to begin talking to communities as equals. To Anahi, another problem was that humanitarian organisations evaluated their own work. That could be solved by getting someone else to collect feedback, analyse it and provide recommendations to the organisation itself and to donors.

The moderator asked the audience the question: ‘What incentives should be given to persuade the humanitarian administration to be more open with their data and to use it better?’ There was one overwhelming response: ‘donor pressure’, Sophie Tholstrup thought this was too simple an answer that let the humanitarian community (who made up most of the audience) off the hook, when much more could be done now internally by organisations.

Affected communities are doing it for themselves

The session also heard from Amelia Makutu, the senior national coordinator for the Communication and Community Engagement platform in Fiji. Amelia said digital technology had made it much easier for people in affected communities to check whether humanitarian groups were good to work with.





“Without the technology we access now, you had to take [the humanitarian workers] for what they say. But now we can check and advise them”

‘Previously, without the technology we access now, you had to take [the humanitarian workers] for what they say. But now, our family, our relatives in villages and communities can call us and say ‘Have you heard of so-and-so?’ And we can check for them and advise them.’

So, will external humanitarian actors still be needed as digital technology continues to develop and put communities together? Sophie said the international humanitarian system had an important oversight role, channelling resources where they were most needed. If that system were side-stepped, there was a danger that only the communities ‘which shout loudest’ or had ‘the most charismatic organiser’ or ‘the most media-friendly projects’ would secure assistance. Anahi thought the emergencies which received most funding were those which were ‘politically important for the government putting the funding into it’.

Embracing the data revolution

Sophie envisaged the proper use of data bringing about two major changes. The first was to hold aid providers to account and to position people in crisis as ‘agents in a marketplace of ideas, active in their own recovery rather than passive recipients of aid’. The second was to use data and technology to ‘transform aid delivery, ensuring we reach the right people with the right assistance at the right time’.

Anahi’s experience was that organisations were aware of what needed to be done, but many were not ready to take on the challenge. And while ‘we’ve spent the last 10 years talking about framing accountability’, and recruiting accountability officers, the task was now to transform words into action.

Sophie believed agencies should address their ‘cultural problem’ with engaging with the private sector. Engagement was often either too late or non-existent. That meant communities were being failed, as opportunities for innovative tech providers to help come up with solutions were being lost.

To Anahi, the historical problem had been that tech solutions were too often developed by people with no understanding of the local context or physical environment. She believed it was more effective to invest in local people developing their own technology, in their own language, based on their own culture.



2021 PUBLIC FORUM REPORT

CDAC Network is a global alliance of more than 35 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. This report was developed by independent consultant Jon Holden.

Watch all four sessions of CDAC’s 2021 Public Forum. For more information, contact info@cdacnetwork.org.