CHA

CENTRE FOR
HUMANITARIAN
ACTION

Takeaways of
CHA's Workshop on 27th June 2022

Online Workshop on Data and Digital Accountability in Humanitarian Action

Background & Objectives

In the light of European data protection standards and Germany's strong civil society and localisation approach, the debate around digital technologies for strengthening accountability to affected populations appears to be particularly relevant for German humanitarian actors. Yet, German humanitarian actors are hardly involved in international fora discussing pros and cons of the sector's overall digital transformation process, not to speak about digital technology to facilitate participation and two-way communication on the one hand and strengthen accountability on the other. The challenges towards digitalisation rather seem to hamper German actors to strategically as well as operationally discuss about innovative and inclusive ways to engage affected people by using digital technologies.

This workshop followed a Roundtable discussion organised in December 2021 and was part of a series of workshops to be organised throughout 2022/23 in addition to a publicly available study and concluding international conference in 2023. The workshop aimed to facilitate a discussion about digital approaches for more participation and engagement of affected people in humanitarian programming and to inform the focus of CHA's project on data and digitalisation, which looks at the tension between digital opportunities and mitigating protection and exclusion risks while enhancing digital literacy of German humanitarian actors. The topic will be analysed and addressed through literature review, a series of workshop discussions as well as key informant and expert interviews representing a wide range of international and German humanitarian actors.

Participants' Expectations

At the beginning of the workshop, participants expressed the following expectations:

- Learning because every working field is unique
- Learning in digitalisation as a result of the COVID-19 crisis
- Learning to what degree donors support the humanitarian digitalisation process
- Sharing experience and learnings, e.g. from the cash response in Ukraine
- Establishing „weapons" to solve generational conflicts on digitalisation
- Learning and exchanging German perspectives on digitalisation and how German organisations address those issues

Setting the Scene

The discussion was then followed with two prompting questions which showed the participants' rather positive attitude towards the topic of digitalisation.

In response to the question what words come to one's mind, when thinking of the digital transformation in the humanitarian sector, terms like innovation, speed, chance, transparency, efficiency dominated the screen.

This first impression was confirmed by the second survey question to which the majority of participants agreed that opportunities outweigh the risks.

The humanitarian 'digital divide': Understanding the impact of technology on crisis response – Input by the Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG) / Overseas Development Institute (ODI)

Key findings of HPG's research project

Why can humanitarians no longer ignore digitalisation?! Even if one is not interested in digitalisation, the humanitarian sector is already confronted with digitalisation. There are new technologies like biometrics (digital fingerprints, iris scans) as well as predictive tools and forecast-based financing models that increase machine learning to trigger the release of funds to the humanitarian community. At the same time, there is a huge growth in the digital humanitarian movement through tools like open-source mapping. All in all, a huge range of digital tools is already used by diverse humanitarian stakeholders and the pace of digitalisation across those stakeholders is further picking up. Still, the humanitarian sector is accused in lacking behind other sectors. One of the key problems refers to the fact that all these tools are not really applied in a systemic and organised fashion, and despite the growing number of guidelines and shared principles (e.g. data responsibility, data protection and privacy guidelines). But the sheer number of new actors (private sector, consultancies, NGOs, etc.) that are getting involved in this space every day threatens to delude these shared principles and approaches. The transition and reform agenda, however, cannot be informed by the marching orders of the technology alone and generally needs tighter monitoring requirements of the sector to manage unknown trade-offs, mitigate risks and respond to the sector's narrative towards a greater efficiency by doing more with less.

Even if one is not interested in digitalisation, one has to acknowledge that all other issues and problems in the humanitarian sector are nowadays impacted by digital tools (e.g. inclusion, communication, participation). Inclusion can happen as a consequence of using digital technologies, but it has to be considered very consciously and built into programmes and systems to minimise the digital divide and avoid effects of exclusion. In addition to the digital divide, there is also a data divide by extracting people's data versus making use of such data and potentially locking-in exclusive practices and reflecting existing inequalities of already marginalised groups (Lanier, 2011). So, there are threads but a lot of new participation approaches, too.

Social media case study

One of the case studies looked at the interlinkages of social media and inclusion in humanitarian action. In the 2010s, there were hopes that social media could help to democratise humanitarian assistance and open a direct line between affected people and aid providers, including more transparency and accountability. But during the era of Brexit and Donald Trump and the genocide of the Rohingya in Myanmar, it was recognised that social media can be a big thread for creating privacy risks and spreading misinformation, disinformation and hate speech. Social media is generally owned by huge companies and are often used without any proper cost-benefit analysis. So, the debate split up between these two extremes and a reality that is somewhere between these two

extremes, noting that social media is becoming increasingly important in humanitarian crises and affected people's life. Despite its importance in people's life, the case study showed that humanitarian actors lack to engage with social media on a systematic level. Given the tendency of social media to mirror an amplified exclusion of specific groups, it is important to think about how to engage more deeply and specifically with an inclusive approach, the commitment to impartiality and "doing no harm".

A case study in Uganda looked at digital rights in refugee settlements and revealed that

1. Younger people and refugees in Uganda see social media as an important part of their lives. Many of them are online, sometimes facing significant inconveniences in terms of costs implied and physical risks. In Venezuela, it was the opposite, young refugees sold their smartphones before displacement and were cut off social media and information. This underlines the importance to check one's assumptions of who is online or offline in a crisis and raises questions on what social media does offer to people in a given situation and who uses social media for what.

2. Whether or not people have access to social media is not only a question of access to technology or income but also about the policy landscape. Infrastructure and government regulations (e.g. connectivity, network rules, internet shutdown, labour restrictions) can limit people's ability to go offline and online. Policies about identity and citizenship requirements for example limit access to sim cards and purchasing power, and not having good network coverage is linked to the decision to separate refugees in remote areas which are unprofitable for network providers. Governments also intervene directly into access to social media with shutdowns during election or politically sensitive periods. Social media access is indirectly embedded in a landscape of rights and rights denial.

3. People's use of social media in crisis is complex. People use it for a wide variety of functions (business, building social capital, intimacy/love, friends, entertainment). It is a space to come together, reflect on events and share their own stories. At the same time, people experience hate speech, bullying, misinformation, harassment, which is mostly happening in English with non-anglophone people being excluded. All these dynamics occur at the same time which makes it difficult to pick out a certain aspect.

4. People in crisis and humanitarian actors seem to exist in two parallel worlds in terms of engagement and accountability. Despite some WhatsApp groups which were very much appreciated in Uganda, humanitarians rather preferred using megaphones than smartphones and applied well established top-down communication channels. There are big challenges in trying to engage affected people through online channels and issues of reputational risks, controlling narratives, staff burnout, lack of structure.

In general, the case study revealed a lack of interest in engaging people through online tools and connecting with people's life online. It is a missed opportunity and can erode if people feel like their different ways of communicating are ignored and not listened to.

Recommendations and takeaways from a policy perspective:

1. Humanitarian actors need to take a more systematic approach and integrate social media to avoid excluding themselves from the discussion.
2. Shifting away from risk avoidance towards risk mitigation and developing a deeper understanding of the specific risks and opportunities in each context.
3. Partnerships and collective action are important. Collective approaches like working on platforms can offer a way to share information and expertise.
4. Making sure that humanitarian actors remember to decentre themselves and recognise that they operate in affected people's worlds.
5. Taking seriously how people want to interact with humanitarians which may not the way humanitarian actors feel most convenient and comfortable with.
6. The sector needs to move from "yes, but" to "yes, and" approaches, to more problem solving to fix the problems than just mentioning them.

Discussion

The discussion reflected the organisations' need to work collectively on solutions to the issues raised during the input. There are no clear targets and a lack of strategic action of humanitarian stakeholders. Especially the aspect that humanitarian actors are perceived as rather using the megaphone than smartphones struck a chord and participants asked themselves how they could establish a two-way communication instead of a top-down communication. It became clear, that the digital divide is replicated within the sector with strong interlinkages to the debate on localisation. Power dynamics and inequality seem to be replicated as a default and were discussed with regard to digital mapping and inclusion (Bryant, 2021).

Participants described the difficulty to decide whether it is better to use open source with more control over one's data but lack of clarity and resources versus off-the shelf solutions provided by private companies. The role and need of biometric data were also questioned, varying from testing of the technology to actual requirements or efficiency and cost-saving reasons.

In general, participants acknowledged that there has been a lot of emphasis on identifying the risks and opportunities, without much focus on how to operationalise those in the humanitarian sector. In this regard, it was considered important that all stakeholders are included in this discussion not only those who are interested but also people across different departments and levels of hierarchy. To allow a holistic discussion on digitalisation, all the different perspectives from specific departments (compliance, management, finance, communications, programme etc.) need to be reflected and integrated.

Using digital technologies to strengthen participation and accountability – Input by the German Red Cross

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the need to use digital technologies in order to engage with communities remotely and gather their perception to better inform programming which is reflected in IFRC's data playbook and best practices. The German Red Cross does not directly engage affected people but is involved in capacity strengthening of National Societies.

Turkish Red Crescent: Real-time tracking of community views (IFRC 2022a, 2022b)

When the COVID-19 crisis started, the first step was to understand people's information gap and information needs. A KAP survey of more than 200 people in 2020/21 was conducted to help understand people's Knowledge, Attitudes, and Practices (KAP), as well as their information needs. In addition, staff and volunteers were trained to use KoBo Toolbox (open-source, data collection tool) to record and submit people's feedback that was shared with them. Based on the existing capacity and available skills, the Turkish Red Cross was able to deliver the surveys and collected feedback in-house. The use of the KoBo Toolbox sped up the entire process and allowed Information Managers to analyse and visualise the data on a standalone website, where results and findings could be easily used and shared within the national society. Furthermore, the use of digital technologies enabled to triangle the results that they received through feedback but also through the KAP surveys themselves. Based on this information, the messaging was adapted and programme activities adjusted accordingly.

Lebanese Red Cross: Development of a complaints and response mechanism

The Lebanese Red Cross set up the first element of their complaints and feedback mechanism in 2014. The national society back then had expressed an interest and started using very basic digital tools with the mechanism being developed successively and organically over time. The need to have something more systematised became more apparent when the amount of information which the team had to manage and analyse increased. As a result, an in-house solution was developed to allow categorising and prioritising calls and making the mechanism more efficient by logging-in and following-up cases, i.e. closing the feedback loop in addition to using the data for analysis and visualisation. The other added value of the new system included the data entry conducted by the operators using Standard Operating Procedures that defined case type and supported the automatic case referrals to relevant programmes and focal points. The data was further used for making changes in project design and inform hotline resourcing.

Malawi and Cote d'Ivoire Red Cross: Building trust through 1:1 digital conversation

KatiKati is a web-based platform allowing National Societies to have two-way engagement with communities, staff, or volunteers in local languages through digital channels. Using

predictive analysis, the Katikati platform enables National Societies to combine the reach of messaging and a unique human interaction with community members. The platform can be integrated into existing programmes in order to strengthen accountability to and participation of target audiences. The insights from this data are analysed and used to strengthen and inform existing social and behaviour change activities.

Reflections

In sum, digitalisation enables evidence-based decision making through proper follow-up and programme adaptation and providing faster and more accurate data collection that avoids putting additional burden to staff and allow operations to be more efficient. Based on the data collected, the organisation can better identify relevant trends and thereby inform future responses.

In turn, one of the main challenges includes data protection and privacy, as highlighted by the recent ICRC hacking which led to more than 300,000 records leaked. One further challenge is the lack of capacities and resources to properly manage digital technologies and tools, in addition to ensuring that those are accessible to all groups of society (inclusion). In certain contexts, digital tools are not trusted so it is important to build community trust. A more overarching challenge is that there are issues with advocating for additional funding and resources. There is still a long way ahead but digitalisation is taking place and it is important to keep the main challenges and opportunities in mind.

Discussion

Regarding the question of the impact of digital tools on accountability and actual programme adjustment, the discussion has shown that before the COVID-19 pandemic the digitalisation process was rather slow and less formalised while nowadays it seems more comprehensive, and technologies are increasingly used to answer programme related questions and assess community perceptions or community views. During the pandemic, digital tools enabled organisations to gather information for programme design and implementation. The digitalisation of the sector is ongoing and inevitable. The only question is how to reach the people, safeguard their rights and monitor the sector's responsibilities. Hence, the conflicting accountabilities, including the tension to report to donors versus affected populations was discussed. One strategy to avoid such tension could include an increased engagement and inclusion of communities from the very beginning of the programming. However, every context is specific and there is no one size fits all approach; contexts are often shaped by politics and conflicting interests of donors, organisations and finally affected people (decision-making power, needs versus offering).

Participants seemed to agree that digitalisation itself does not cause the problem, it is rather a means to an end and not the end itself. Challenges evolving from digital processes are based on existing problems that are exacerbated through digitalisation. Therefore, one has to look at the whole system and learn from the many things that work well. For example, the more one reaches out to and communicates with communities the

more trust is created and the easier the tools can be identified, selected and contextualised. Asking the communities about the communication channels they prefer is key and built on trust or personal relationships that are easier to develop offline, i.e. in person, than online. In some contexts, digital tools might be more useful for collecting general feedback, but sensitive issues however might be rather communicated in face-to-face interactions with trustworthy staff. Participants did agree that feedback can be powerful when used for operational programme adjustment. According to the experience of the German Red Cross, power imbalances might be difficult to change. Nevertheless, there is always space for change, no matter how small, and even if changing the whole system might seem difficult. National Societies support in finding this small space, the niche that identifies interested staff and provides scope for testing.

The type of digital tool is usually selected by the National Society that leads on the decision-making process and identifies tools as per their capacities and funding availability. The German Red Cross provides technical and peer-to-peer support, capacity strengthening, advocacy and additional funding, as required.

Participants agreed that digital tools can support decision-making and scale organisational processes, if used in a responsible and forward-looking way. To avoid data mining and mitigate risks, practices need to be developed first, the purpose for collecting which data points defined before the collection and decisions revised as conditions and context might differ. Another aspect includes the attitude and bias of German donors towards those organisations processing and reporting on big data, and their "softness" to define data standards by negotiating minimum data points to be collected by humanitarian actors.

Key Take Aways and Follow-up Actions

Key take aways

There is a lot of options and focus on 'what is available' but not as much on 'how to implement it'

There is a digital divide within the sector itself on utilizing best practices/tools (well-funded org vs. not-so-well-funded orgs)

Taking into account local context and community needs before rolling out digital tools

Allowing for flexibility in funding and project design to take into account information recieved from communities

Are we designing tools/mechanisms that affected populations actually want to use? In what situations do they prefer f2f interaction?

developing programs in a participatory way is key

Need for capacity-building for staff implementing digital mechanisms - for set-up but also analysis

digital tools are only as good as the process and the people behind it

Hear to what affacted population needs is still most important

Key consideration: how much personal/ sensitive data is needed to take a better informed decision in a crisis context? who can decide that?

Room for improvement in implementing two-way accountability/communication - currently frequently top-down

Digitalisation is happening whether we like it or not. We have to better harness its huge potential and possibilities.

Need for more inclusive deisgn and implementation - from the outset.

Tools need to be as easy to use as possible to have entry barriers low

Targets (why we need data, how we use it need to be claer

Follow-up actions needed

I would love to see IRC's data collection standard on CFM when it is ready! 👍 (Cassie,NRC)

Hearing from other organisations on their experience with working on digitalisation initatives with partners

practical presentation of low level tools

more good presentations like this one

How can you make sure of data protection in a crisis context? How can you make sure that people are commited and following up properly?

References referred to during the workshop

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Appendix: Pre- and post-surveys

A comparison of the pre and post surveys was not possible, as only two responses for each survey were received.