Digital accountability: The untapped potential of participation when using technology in humanitarian action
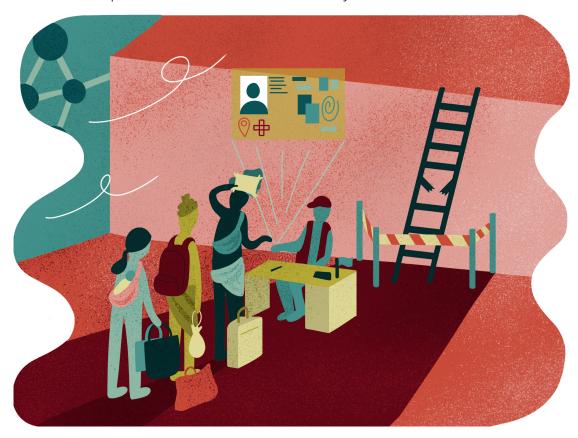
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Over the past few decades, digital technologies have seen a massive increase in use and have profoundly shaped the humanitarian sector. Their exponential growth has greatly increased the amount of data to be managed and accelerated the speed with which information travels. This growth has triggered discussions around the efficiency of humanitarian services needed to respond to rising humanitarian needs and sector-wide funding cuts by fostering evidence-based programming, improved coordination, and increased accountability. Digital tools have become indispensable and humanitarian

How do humanitarian actors hold themselves accountable when using digital technologies ?

organisations are busy digitising and digitalising their business processes while others digitally transform their entire business model.

This paper examines the tension between digital technologies, participation, and accountability by exploring their interlinkages, benefits, and challenges. It analyses the ways in which humanitarian actors hold themselves responsible and accountable when using digital technologies and shows ways in which affected people can hold organisations to account. This paper then delves into an international context, as German humanitarian actors have encountered difficulties in addressing digital accountability due to a lack of capacity and digital maturity.

Illustration: Although affected people give their data for aid, they do not get the chance to climb more steps on the "ladder of participation".

Key Findings

The findings prove that digital technologies are indeed a viable option to strengthen the participation of and accountability to affected populations, provided they are embedded in long-term digital transformation aimed at improving the humanitarian system. It is not only a matter of using digital tools for specific business processes but integrating technology in systematic ways that trigger a mindset shift and system-wide change.

Humanitarian organisations do not fully leverage the full potential of technologies for digital participation and accountability, and often prioritise potential risks over

Humanitarian organisations put potential risks before actual benefits.

actual benefits. While affected people worldwide use digital tools to communicate with each other, this is not the case with humanitarian actors. People's apparent communication preferences conflict with data protection and privacy concerns making it challenging for organisations to fulfil their commitment to respect people's preferred communication channels while avoiding digital harm.

In turn, digital tools are mainly used for sharing information and only a few organisations apply digital tools to communicate with affected people. Resource constraints, privacy concerns, and political will are the main bottlenecks to exploring new ways of engaging affected people in a virtual space, leaving trade-offs like misinformation, disinformation, and hate speech widely unnoticed. Digitised feedback systems, which are generally only used for specific projects, are another missed opportunity to learn and inform organisational and system-wide change.

In sum, digital technologies in humanitarian action have the potential to contain new accountability needs but also reveal important gaps which raise questions about legal, social, and technical accountability. While legal accountability is primarily associated with collecting meaningful consent and technical accountability with applying industry standards, social accountability is yet to be explored.

Affected people are rarely consulted during technology-related decision-making. The humanitarian crisis in Ukraine highlights the importance of digital literacy in enabling people to claim their data rights, take informed decisions, and engage digitally. New approaches need to be considered in order to increase digital accountability alongside people-centred perspectives in technology and a whole-system approach to raising awareness about new responsibilities. Simple answers are needed to address complex issues and the dilemma of increasingly replicating offline issues in an online environment.

Recommendations

Vision and mission

- Digital transformation and accountability need to be driven by mindset shifts, change, long-term strategies, and learning.
- Jointly agreed standards are necessary to integrate digital accountability into programme quality approaches, including the Core Humanitarian Standards.

Capacities and learning

- A nuanced approach is key to respecting people's preferred communication channels and balancing potential risks.
- Resources for digital accountability, transformation, and learning are essential to reduce power imbalances, alongside research to gather more evidence and inform decision-making.

People, purpose and process

- Digital tools support engagement and diversifying two-way communication while being mindful of misinformation and disinformation.
- Feedback data needs to be shared beyond isolated projects and inform organisational and system change.
- Local partners and affected people need to be adequately informed and actively involved in data and technology-related decision-making.
- New profiles and capacities are needed to promote digital literacy and data agency.

Methods in Brief

The paper is based on a literature review and 22 qualitative, semi-structured interviews with 21 different organisations representing German and international NGOs (12), the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (2), United Nations (2), and humanitarian and private sector networks (5). Several in-group discussions following Chatham House Rule were organised in support of shaping and validating the research.

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