



N E T W O R K

2021 PUBLIC FORUM REPORT



Relevance, capacity and remote localisation: Technology and Power in Aid

Insights from the 2021 CDAC Public Forum: Part Two

The internet has really become part and parcel of many societies around the world, and therefore access to the internet – in my view – should be seen as a right. People should have the right to access the internet because through the internet, they can access a multitude of avenues for help. It's still not being accepted globally that this is a right.' So said Dr Agnès Callamard, the Secretary-General of Amnesty International, when she addressed the CDAC Public Forum.

To Agnès, being hooked up to the internet has become fundamental to ensuring that people have access to everything from applying for jobs, to online banking and health services. Given all the benefits the internet can bring, can it also drive greater localisation in humanitarian action, displacing the need for international expertise on the ground?



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Localisation from afar?

The COVID-19 pandemic forced many people to get to grips with remote working as offices closed, public transport was shut down and face-to-face contact was discouraged. Some found they could do their jobs from thousands of kilometres away, thanks largely to the use of digital technologies.

Community engagement and accountability work did not escape this shift to the online world. Affected communities are online more frequently, while better remote monitoring tools mean data and feedback can be shared across the world in real time. But can humanitarian workers really know what affected communities are thinking without even leaving their desks? And are the important decisions still being taken in Geneva, New York and, increasingly, at kitchen tables around the Western world?

Day 2 of the CDAC Public Forum heard first from Stijn Aelbers, the senior humanitarian advisor for Internews. Before COVID struck, he spent a lot of time in the air as he travelled to oversee accountability activities in projects across the world. Stijn said he used to jump on a plane and focus on one project. Now, working from home, he could devote time to dozens of projects and cross several time zones in the course of a single day: ‘The digital possibilities and opportunities have also created a workflow and expectations and a way of working that has put us behind our laptops 24/7, almost.’

The humanitarian project manager at BBC Media Action in Bangladesh, Khandokar Hansanul Banna, said digital technology meant he and his colleagues had more access to international staff like Stijn. But the flipside of using the internet was that he and his team spent more of their time in virtual meetings, with less opportunity to go into the field.

Dealing with data

Humanitarian workers on the ground have had to adapt their data-gathering techniques during the pandemic. Samuel Kapingidza is the regional programme officer for social protection and inclusive growth at the UNDP Regional Service Centre for Africa. He said COVID-19 restrictions had cut down a lot of data-gathering activities, and organisations were having to rely on information that might be two or three years old.

Khadiga Agab was the CDAC Senior National Coordinator in Sudan and is now with UNICEF. She was concerned that the need for data to fill unconnected spreadsheets and dashboards meant that people in affected communities were being approached too often: ‘At the humanitarian and inter-agency level, we need to find a data-sharing protocol because we don’t need to repeat ourselves again to the communities, collecting the same data which has been collected by other colleagues.’ It was important to avoid ‘fatigue’ in those communities, she said: ‘Everyone is trying to do his own, to report to his donor or his manager without having a common approach for coordinating this data and making sure that the output of this data collection is to be applied according to the best interests of the people.’

Khadiga also said it was vital to have ‘full, two-way communication’ and for communities to be confident their views were being heard. When communities realised their feedback – whether negative or positive – was resulting in real change, it increased trust and built ‘credibility on the field level’.

Banna said that feedback from communities had to have the power to change strategy and policy: ‘When you have this change, you go back to the community and talk about this issue and say ‘based on your feedback, I changed this and now I’m doing this entirely differently’. Then, you will definitely have the trust back.’



Towards the decolonisation of aid?

Samia Qumri has worked throughout the Middle East and North Africa in humanitarian responses. She described her experiences working with Iraqi and Syrian refugees in camps in Jordan, then asked why humanitarian organisations brought in their own staff – on big salaries – rather than recruiting locally from affected communities. Samia concluded many humanitarian agencies liked to retain control rather than share it: ‘There is ego. There is power. There is bureaucracy. I don’t know when we can break this hierarchy.’ Despite that, she added: ‘People from the ground, from the communities themselves, are finding their own solutions and deciding what they want and are running the camps.’

So why have efforts towards localisation in the humanitarian sector not gathered more pace? The panel were asked if localisation was genuinely a means of giving more power to local organisations and communities, or merely a way for the big humanitarian players to offload risks to local actors while retaining control and resources at headquarters.

In Stijn’s view: ‘It’s not enough that you work through implementing partners and slap your logo on everything, and then get the biggest salary and be able to showcase all of the good that you’re doing around the world. Structurally, that is problematic. Is that really decolonising our aid? It still feels very colonial.’ He said the challenge was for international organisations to bring greater diversity into their headquarters and support national staff in stepping up to the next level.

Samuel said the organisations which could exert control were those with the money. But the ideal way, ‘is the one to say ‘control to the people, to the communities’. Let’s really work with them as partners, not as beneficiaries. But for now, interest and control still belong to those who fund the humanitarian interventions.’

Samuel also pointed to the use of a handful of languages, such as English and French, which had been dominant since colonial times. Some countries had different communities speaking many different languages, but humanitarian agencies persisted in using languages which excluded many of the people they were trying to help.

Flying visits – good or bad?

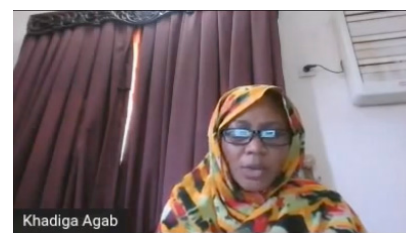
The audience were asked: ‘New communication technologies are making remote working in humanitarian action easier. Should there, therefore, be less travel by senior humanitarian management?’ The results were an overwhelming 76% in favour of a reduction in journeys. 14% of those responding thought there should be the same amount of travel as before the pandemic, while 10% thought senior managers should be making more journeys.

Banna said senior managers did need to travel on occasion, in order to meet staff and share experiences. There was a danger that managers could lose touch with the reality on the ground if they were away for too long. But there was also a ‘lot of travel for visiting only’, he added, which served mainly to increase the stress on staff on the ground.

To Samuel, organisations should fund ‘more activity on the ground with communities and lower-level staff. Some of these travels would blow the budget – without much output!’

Stijn said visits by senior managers could bring big benefits, as it might be useful for staff working on a project to get a view from outside the local context. ‘Because I’m an outsider, I can bring that different perspective,’ he said. ‘It’s not always easy to do that from afar because I’m cut off from the right arguments and the examples that I will find on the ground.’

The limits of technology for accountability: how to ensure that the digital divide does not silence the most vulnerable.





“None of the digital platforms have a public interest mandate. They only have an economic and private profit mandate. This is just impossible, to have the needs of the people match the objective of these platforms”

One of the major challenges facing humanitarian workers is trying to ensure that vulnerable communities are not left behind when it comes to accessing the digital technologies which have the power to connect people more intimately than ever.

Dr Gaya Gamhewage is the Director for the Prevention and Response to Sexual Exploitation, Abuse and Harassment at the WHO. She was the WHO's global lead for risk communications for nearly 10 years. She said that while the COVID-19 pandemic had resulted in many people using technology much more, it also demonstrated that people's access to tech was determined by iniquities stemming from factors such as poverty, geographical location and gender. People still had to choose between paying for food or data.

Dr Gaya was clear that humanitarian and development projects had to be equally accountable to all the communities they helped, regardless of their degree of connectedness. She acknowledged that large groups of people were being left behind, and there was a need to advocate with national governments - which control technological infrastructure - and the private sector. But innovation, she said, had to be local: 'Local solutions work for the most vulnerable communities.'

For Dr Gaya, there was no single means to ensure that communities were fully engaged: 'Technology is an amazing tool but we must not drop that blended approach we take in engaging communities - the face-to-face, the community radio, the trusted networks. We should not trust only one tool.'

She said digital tech could be enlisted to help reduce the 'colonialism' of humanitarian aid systems: 'Technology allows greater participation of citizens, of communities, that holds authorities to account. We have to build the capacity of the humanitarian development sector and national governments on how to empower this participation because there's aWhile digital tech is often held up as increasing engagement and accountability, there are also arguments that it creates a two-tier system for those who have access to it, and those who do not.

Sulemana Braimah is the Executive Director of the Media Foundation for West Africa, based in Ghana. He believed some people in affected communities were being left out of conversations with humanitarian actors because they lacked access to technology. Even those who had access, and the money to pay for it, might not have the skills to connect and engage. Or, they might be excluded because they did not speak a language favoured by the humanitarian community.

Many digital technologies are owned and operated by lar lot of frustration - people have things to say, they want to participate, but the structures are not there for meaningful conversation. It still tends to be tokenistic. We must evolve the systems that created our situation today.'

Technology - bridging the gap or reinforcing it?

ge, commercial enterprises. How can tech be democratized by companies which exist to make a profit?

Caroline Vuillemin is the Chief Executive of Fondation Hironnelle - an NGO which provides information to populations faced with crisis. She saw an essential conflict of interests: 'None of the digital platforms have a public interest mandate. They only have an economic and private profit mandate. This is just impossible, to have the needs of the people match the objective of these platforms.'



Caroline said control of technology and information had always conferred power on those who had it, dating back to the introduction of books, then radio and television. The digital age was no different, she said, and it was a mistake to think new technology would bring new solutions if control continued to lie in the hands of the privileged.

Sulemana echoed the assertion by Dr Agnès Callamard, the Secretary General of Amnesty International, that internet access should be a human right. He said: 'We are realising how fundamental access to technology and the use of technology is to the wellbeing, development, the health of people.' Sulemana said that in Ghana, access to sectors such as banking, government and health was being transformed by digital tech. He said internet access did need to be considered as a right, with the responsibility on governments to ensure it was upheld.

Sulemana rejected the argument that technology was already a democratising force. In remote areas of Africa, he said, only six or seven per cent of people had access to broadband internet: 'When we talk about democratising development, it's also about the steps that we take to ensure that people are on board, to be able to use the e-services that we are now all proud of, whether it is mobile money, e-passport applications or all the e-services that we talk about.'

The right tool for the job

While big claims have been made for digital tech, humanitarian workers often operate in environments without access to the internet or 'phone networks.

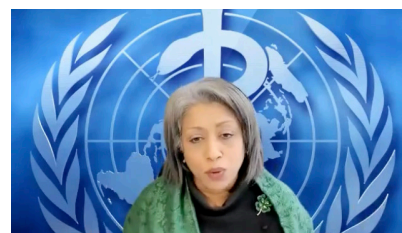
Amelia Makutu works in disaster response in Fiji, where connectivity can be very low in some regions. She told the forum that other technologies could still play a huge role when the internet and mobile phone networks went down in the face of severe storms. 'The VHF radio network, which we have been using much earlier, is sustainable,' she said. 'We are able to use that after our emergencies, during the response period. Everything else can get knocked out but the VHF radio network soldiers on and is able to provide a channel for affected communities in those really remote areas to contact the planners and those who are leading the response.'

In the final poll to the audience, we asked: 'Should we spend more funding on monitoring and evaluating fewer older ideas to see what works, and much less on new innovations, pilot studies and hackathons?'

The result was a big win for 'yes' voters, at 69%, with 31% saying 'no'.

Caroline's organisation, Fondation Hirondelle, was set up to provide people with information through radio. She said a battery-powered FM set could reach illiterate people and people 'on the move', with no need for the internet, and in several languages. Fondation Hirondelle has also introduced a service for people to access podcasts through a mobile phone, which does not have to be a smartphone. Caroline said this had proved popular in areas of Africa without FM coverage, or when radio services were down.

She said a survey in six sub-Saharan African countries showed more than three-quarters of those who took part used radio every day. Her advice was to use the technology appropriate for the environment: 'Have a good content, know your audience, know what people use, when, and how, and then use the multiple platforms that are offered – but don't go first with the technology.'





The people tasked with monitoring and improving them were being ‘left behind and not given enough consideration.’

Sulemana, too, was an advocate of radio. He said that in Ghana, internet access was confined mainly to urban areas: ‘Technology is not just about the internet. It’s also about radio and the other traditional mechanisms through which communities communicate with each other.’

Gil Arevalo is a Specialist and Coordinator with UNICEF in Tajikistan. He told us the humanitarian sector tried too hard to be repeatedly innovative, when it should instead be looking to invest and improve existing tech ideas over the long-term so they actually become useful tools and not just interesting ideas – particularly in low-bandwidth community engagement technologies.

Gil said the problem was that projects were always donor-driven and had to be implemented in a certain, and short, timeline. The people tasked with monitoring and improving them were being ‘left behind and not given enough consideration. We keep on struggling the moment there’s another emergency, because what’s happening is that either we will [be asked to] try to reinvent the process [during an emergency] or, if we really learn from that experience of the previous emergency, we come up with something that either we tweak it or simply reintroduce it [without resource to adapt it].’

But smaller-scale engagements are showing one possible way forward. Sulemana said he belonged to three local-language platforms, each with between 100 and 300 members. Participants could swap voice messages with advice on agricultural techniques, for example: ‘It becomes a powerful tool for communities to share ideas and to talk and discuss their own problems. This is an innovation from the communities themselves. We shouldn’t limit innovation to technology. Even with radio, people can have innovative ways of engaging among themselves. What we want is people’s voices, people’s empowerment and community development, and whatever it takes to do that, we should allow that.’



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