



2021

Digital Communication and Accountability

Insights from a year of discussions with CDAC Network

Through its public events this year, CDAC Network has been exploring digital communication and accountability—in particular, asking ourselves how technology could offer a tipping point in shifting the power in aid. We began the conversation with a degree of optimism, hopeful that the change required to manage a pandemic may have altered the dynamics in aid design and delivery.

Over the year, we explored peer to peer communication, locally led technological innovation, the flow of humanitarian data, the access and distribution of digital technology, among many other topics. We discussed how the pandemic has given rise to local and global solutions to communication that sit outside of the humanitarian sector. We spoke about the opportunities and risks of using digital tech to boost accountability and restore trust with affected communities. With the pandemic-driven shift to online work, we considered how digital technology could facilitate localisation of the humanitarian sector.

These topics around digital technology and accountability were not new to CDAC Network members – many are thought leaders, advocates and practitioners that are active in this space. But it was through this combined expertise that the conversation shifted to reflect on how most issues surrounding technology are not with the technology itself, but are rooted in the deeper issues that underpin the humanitarian system. We raised issues around digital colonialism, the system’s resistance to ceding power and the pervasive tendency to leave behind the most vulnerable - but now with digital access.

We concluded that technology itself may not trigger systems change - the people and systems behind the technology must be ready, willing and able to drive the change that we seek in aid design and delivery. Despite the pandemic driving disruption at all levels of society, the change we need to shift the power in aid continues to lag behind.

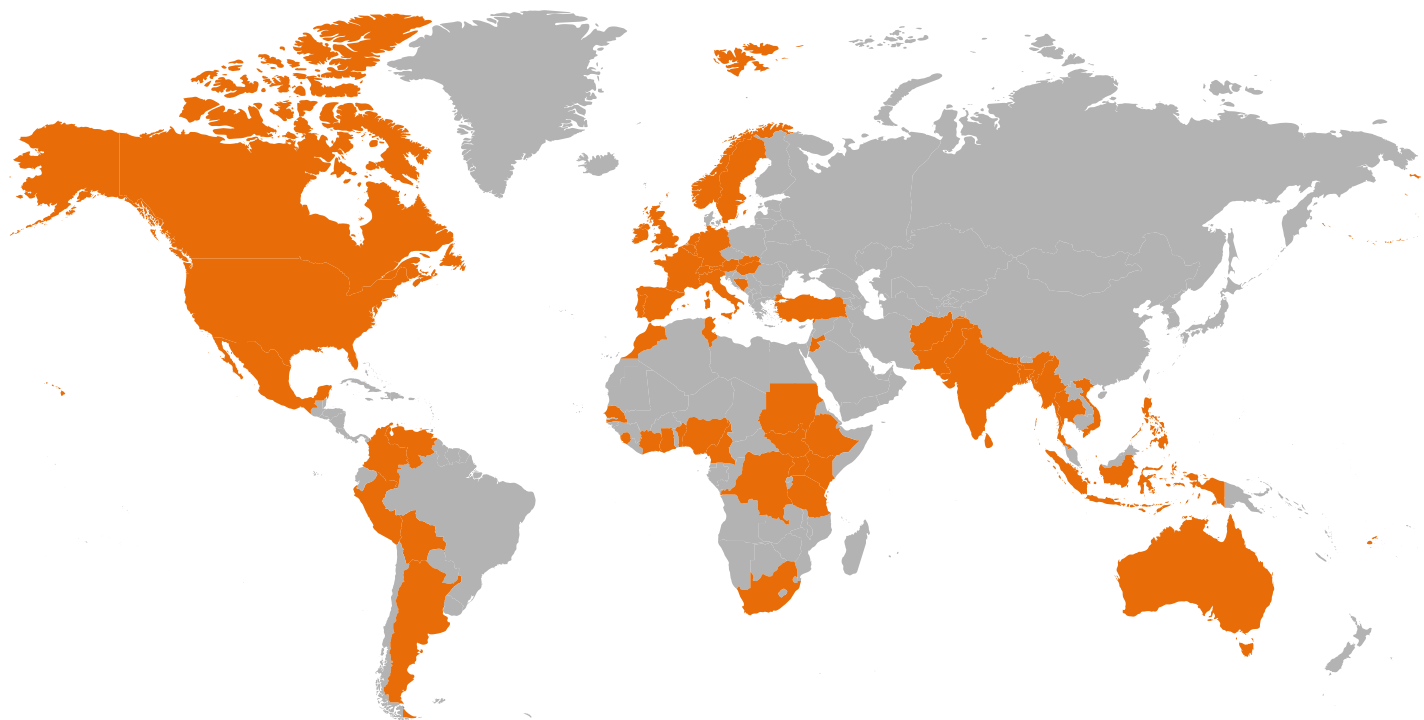
*“As technology and AI recasts our understanding of ourselves and our place in the world - it also provokes new answers to the question - **how then might we live? What does it mean to be human in a digital future?**”*

Aarathi Krishnan, Technology and Human Rights Fellow, Harvard Kennedy Carr Centre and Affiliate, Berkman Klein Center, Harvard University, at the CDAC 2021 Online Annual Public Forum



Our global engagement

Over the year, we engaged more than 300 participants from 60+ countries in this conversation. Our 24 speakers across four key events represented civil society, local NGOs, think tanks, international humanitarian organisations, media development organisations and UN agencies.



Global participant engagement: Over 60 countries represented at CDAC's 2021 Annual Public Forum

Our events in 2021

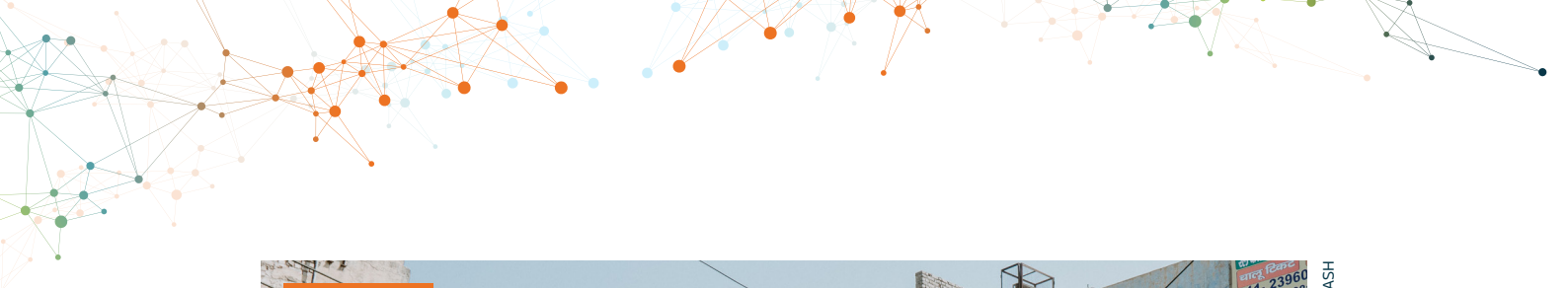
- [Peer pressure: How deepening digital access is transforming communication as aid](#)
 - 2021 Humanitarian Networks and Partnerships Week
- [Communication and Aid in the Digital Age](#)
 - 2021 World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) Forum
- [Digital Communication and Accountability: Is Technology Tipping the Balance of Power in Aid?](#)
 - CDAC 2021 Online Annual Public Forum
- [Why aren't digital technologies revolutionising accountability in humanitarian action?](#)
 - ALNAP 2021

Our key takeaways

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We learnt a lot over the year, but here are our key takeaways on digital communication and accountability, and how we can move forward.

- 1. Technology and digital platforms present an important opportunity to include more people in dialogue and communicate more effectively.**
 - Even where digital access has not increased significantly, new tools, platforms, and how they are used can make information sharing, direct dialogue, and communication more efficient and effective.
 - Digital and technology growth has meant that more people can engage, share feedback and connect with others.
- 2. The use of digital platforms is accompanied by risks that humanitarian actors must fully reflect in their planning.**
 - Increased ease of communication and information sharing has proliferated hate speech, mis and dis-information. Over-reliance on networks that can be controlled, monitored and weaponised by governments and non-state actors can put communities and people affected by a crisis at increased risk.
 - Mitigation of such digital risks should be higher up the humanitarian agenda.
- 3. People use many communication channels to learn from and participate in information and dialogue – the most trusted of these are personally or locally driven.**
 - Since the emergence of Covid-19, digital access has increased, as has local and national technology platforms, locally driven technologies, private sector engagement and peer to peer communications.
 - Investing in solutions to which people are already gravitating, is the most efficient use of resources. Usually, these are driven locally.



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4. The growth of digital access is far from homogeneous – investment in sustainable solutions must build on context analysis, include infrastructure and prioritise digital literacy.

- In many cases, this growth has excluded demographically and geographically. In many contexts, particularly in areas of conflict, digital access has been reduced, while at the same time, its geographical inclusion widens across borders.
- Understanding the communications ecosystem provides an essential foundation.

5. The humanitarian sector is behind when it comes to technology and is over-incentivized by the need to innovate. This has contributed to a mismatch between the demand and supply of humanitarian technology solutions.

- Transparent conversations need to continue to examine how the evolution of technology will impact the role actors should, could and will have in the coming decade.
- Partnerships with communities, civil society, media entities, and private sector entities are needed to understand the gaps that cannot be ignored.

6. Poor capacity, risk aversion, and data colonization act as barriers to positive advancement in power-sharing and accountability through technology

- The humanitarian sector must continue to unpack sector incentives, standards, risk appetite and the purpose and transparency of data gathered from people affected by crises. This requires join up between different disciplines and expertise.
- As we increase engagement in digital communication, considering developments that pre-position support and investment and consider the environmental impact of any shifts in practice will be paramount.





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CDAC is a network of more than 35 of the largest humanitarian, media development and social innovation actors – including UN agencies, RCRC, NGOs, media and communications actors - working together to shift the dial on humanitarian and development decision making – moving from global to local.



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