Imagining a World Beyond White Privilege

Insights from the 2020 CDAC General Assembly and Public Forum: Part One

ADVOCACY STRATEGIST, Nanjira Sambuli says "if the fundamental premise is wrong, the details won't matter." A conference titled Accountability in the Age of the Algorithm: Championing Pathways to Inclusion in Tech-Driven Futures might well be expected to focus on details, offering a series of well-measured discussions on the issues that new technologies bring to crisis response and community development. Or ... it could open with a fundamental challenge to the systems of inherent privilege on which today's aid sector is built.

"Widespread adoption of new technologies such as artificial intelligence and Internet of Things sensors has the potential to open up many new paths for participation and engagement"

Those who caused the problem can't lead the solution

Sabelo Mhlambi, a specialist in the ethics of technology in Sub-Saharan Africa, challenged the narrative of 'localisation' led by international aid organisations, which seems satisfied with incremental surface change but leaves the basic structure of aid responses built on institutions that were conceived and built in the wake of World War II. He asked what a future would look like if 'there are no special privileges to being white'.

Stressing that inequalities present in the sector are rooted in a particular way of viewing the world, he proposed that for those raised in Western societies the embedded perspectives of individuality that frame current aid efforts are hard to see, let alone set aside. Anasuya Sengupta, founder of the feminist collective 'Whose Knowledge?', made the point bluntly. When looking at assumptions and allocations of power that are deeply woven into institutions, "those who caused the problem can't lead the solution."

The structural challenge of exclusion extends in many directions. Emily Dwyer of Edge Effect makes the case that approaches to gender, which implicitly shape the choices, priorities, and action of today's aid institutions, are rooted in heteronormative and cisnormative perspectives. For the LGBTQIA community, creating a true participation revolution requires more than simply endorsing a bit more local engagement within the current system.

Realising the true potential of a genuinely inclusive vision of aid requires disruptive thinking and an embrace of changes that eliminate fundamental causes of inequality and drive a redistribution of power. Sabelo Mhlambi makes it clear that this is not a small task, and in fact may ultimately require a redefinition of deeply held Western concepts of individualism and what it means to be human.

Technology's role in breaking systems and entrenching power

How does this type of deep change happen? Technology is one path. New technical capabilities have often been the enabler of structural change in longstanding institutions.

The power of technology to empower change and shift power has been seen in the continuing evolution of communication and community engagement initiatives. For example, national communication and engagement (CCE) platforms supported by CDAC leverage multiple channels of engagement to capture and respond to community insights. Tools like social media enable real-time two-way communications between diverse communities and local and national institutions, something that was not possible with more traditional broadcast mediums. Widespread adoption of new technologies such as artificial intelligence and Internet of Things sensors has the potential to open up many new paths for participation and engagement.

Yet, it has become clear that driving change through technology isn't without risks. Rob Trigwell of the International Organization for Migration points out that the move to advance equity and inclusion in communications can paradoxically be hindered by improved technology. If the ownership of mobile phones is itself a privilege, then greater reliance on these tools only widens the gap between those who do and do not have access to the devices or enabling services like electricity and connectivity. The Humanitarian Policy Group's Oliver Lough, takes this concern a step further, highlighting the fact that digital literacy can be an equally potent barrier to technology use.

Anasuya Sengupta, points out that men are 21% more likely to be online than women. These disadvantages are reinforced during a crisis according to Translators Without Borders' Ellie Kemp, when issues such as illiteracy, isolation, age, and language become more pronounced as conventional systems of support are broken.

As essential services are increasingly wed to new technologies, dangers associated with data security and misuse also become more widespread. These concerns can be particularly urgent when technologies gather personal and biometric information that is a precondition for access to critical services. Emily Dwyer and Laura Carter described the hard choices faced by LGBTQI individuals, for whom being outed can result in real physical danger. Yet, simply stepping out of the digital spotlight comes with its own dangers and disempowerment. For the LGBTQIA, and other digitally invisible communities, "if we are not in the data we are not in the analysis."

Technology can reinforce existing power imbalances in less obvious ways. For example, Helani Galpaya, of Sri Lanka-based LIRNEasia, sees the policies of ownership and development of important technologies as a key concern when imagining a genuine participation revolution. She points out that even if the data used to create valuable AI algorithms are protected, the logic and models can often be extracted from the community that was instrumental in its creation, leaving the power and control of the AI in other's hands.

Solving two hard problems together

It is easy to become discouraged when faced with this tangle of challenges. It may be tempting to see the options as black and white choices, either embracing technology with all its dangers or rejecting new tech all together. Others might seek safety in small incremental changes, accepting limited rewards in exchange for the perception of small risks, while avoiding altogether the systemic issues of inequality and power that might demand deeper change.

Thankfully, the collected speakers made it clear that these are not the only choices. The need to reimagine the nature of aid's traditional allocation of power and control and the challenge of fairly and safely adopting new technologies can potentially work together to open a path forward.

Instead of seeing the challenge of safe and fair technology as being one that must be solved solely by international aid actors and Western thinkers, they propose that these complex problems are best put in the hands of those actually living with the challenges of crisis. In this new vision, tech can play a crucial role when rooted in a bottom-up process based on the creation of locally-grown and adapted solutions. Geoffrey Kateregga offered as an example Loop, "an open platform where the needs and perspectives of people receiving aid (humanitarian or development) can shape the type and quality of services which are funded."

Power can be seen in who gets to set the rules. In positive steps forward, local leadership is increasingly driving the creation of standards and guidelines that shape the design and use of technology. The Computer Professionals Union of the Philippines has developed their own policies advocating for digital literacy, open source approaches, locally-owned infrastructure, and civil society capacity. Petrarca Karetji highlighted how institutions such as the Pulse Lab in Jakarta are taking a hands-on approach to building more diverse analytic partnerships that consider alternative sources and applications of data.

The tumultuous disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic may accelerate this shift. In the absence of the ability to send teams into the field, governments and the international aid sector are increasingly relying on local communities with healthy technology and information ecosystems to support and guide community action. Meghann Rhynard-Geil of Internews described the increased sense of urgency around building locally-rooted communication systems that provide safe access to good information, supporting a community's ability to cut through excess information and make good assessments.

A future where we all belong

Clearly, deep systemic change, creating Sabelo Mhlambi's "future where we all belong",
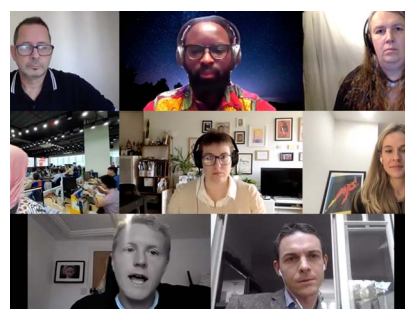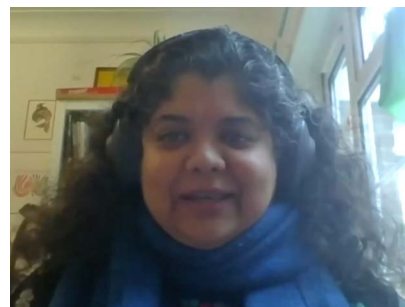
Top: Anasuya Sengupta; second from top: Sabelo Mhlambi; third from top, Helani Galpaya; fourth from top: plenary discussion participants from Session One: Algorithms and Accountability.

"There is a growing move to actively challenge to the very assumption that a response to crisis should be internationally-led"

demands disruptive thinking and a level of change that will require participants to "sit with their own discomfort". And yet, in Indonesia, which Adelina Kamal of the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on Disaster Management described as a 'supermarket of disasters', there is a growing move to actively challenge to the very assumption that a response to crisis should be internationally-led. Across the region, countries are building their own capacity for crisis response, one that is rooted in an intimate understanding of local needs and priorities.

Local, national, and regional capabilities are increasingly built on locally-developed resilience, not external reliance. With this foundational change, she sees good reason to believe that the "future of disaster response will be colorful." Technology will certainly have a role in this transformation. As Anasuya Sengupta says, the effort to "decolonise the robots" can be a critical part of a broader and more ambitious mission to "systematically dismantle historical structures of power."

CDAC
N E T W O R K
2020 ASSEMBLY REPORT