Groupe URD is an independent think tank that specialises in analysing practices and developing policies for the humanitarian sector.

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KEY MESSAGES

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PARTICIPATION & DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES

To what extent do digital technologies contribute to the participation of people affected by crises?

INTRODUCTION

The widespread use of digital technologies in the humanitarian sector began around 10 years ago, at about the same time that the 'digital revolution' was taking place globally.[1] Their introduction into humanitarian operations has had a significant impact on practices. They have brought new possibilities in relation to the mobilisation of resources (financial, logistical and human) both among humanitarian actors and populations. The participation of people affected by crises appears to be one of the aspects of humanitarian aid that has been impacted by the use of digital technologies. But what impact have they really had on participation? And to what extent have they contributed to people's participation in humanitarian projects?

This study aims to shed light on the relationship between crisis-affected people's participation and the use of digital technologies in crisis contexts. It is principally based on a literature review and interviews with people who work in the aid sector, principally from international aid NGOs.

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[1] *See references in the full report.*

PARTICIPATION AND DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES – A MISSED OPPORTUNITY?

The use of digital technologies appears to contribute to the participation of people in crisis contexts, but only to a certain extent, or rather, only on certain levels. The main contribution of digital technologies towards participation appears to be in relation to information sharing – they can improve people's access to information and their ability to share this with humanitarian actors and they can provide humanitarian actors with more ways to consult people affected by a crisis. These different aspects would seem to contribute positively to the 'empowerment' of people by giving them a more 'active' and central role in humanitarian operations. However, there are very few examples of projects where digital technologies have been used to promote joint decision-making or the joint elaboration of projects.

The use of digital technologies in the humanitarian sector as a means of contributing to the participation of crisis-affected people appears to be a missed opportunity. Digital technologies would seem to have the potential to transform the relationship between humanitarian actors and the population by changing the power relations between them. However, they are designed in a top-down manner and require the intervention of foreign experts, with little to no involvement of local actors. In certain cases, the use of digital technologies by humanitarian actors would appear to be based on the extraction of resources, with little involvement of local people in the analysis and processing of data, and with little information and control over the way that the data is shared and used. The notion of consent is important but does not always seem to be respected. This was the case for the thousands of Rohingya refugees whose data were shared by the UNHCR with Myanmar, the country that they had fled, without their consent.

The contribution of digital technologies towards participation is also limited by a lack of understanding of the risks involved in using them, or the fact that these risks are not sufficiently taken into account. Using digital technologies brings significant risks in terms of data protection and the principle of 'do no digital harm' is not always respected. These risks are not specific to the issue of participation or the humanitarian sector, but it is all the more important to take them into account in these contexts because they can increase people's exposure and vulnerability. This is the case, for example, in Afghanistan, where the Taliban could easily gain access to the biometric and personal data of numerous Afghans via computer systems funded by foreign governments and international institutions which were left behind in August 2021 when the Taliban took over Kabul. As the title of one of the round tables at the GeONG 2022 suggested, we need to question whether the advantages associated with digital technologies outweigh the risks involved in their use. The efficiency and effectiveness that digital technologies are supposed to bring should not mask the negative impact that their use can have on people.

Over and above these risks, the use of digital technologies has a number of limits, such as the digital divide, which refers to the unequal access to digital technologies within populations and between different populations. This brings the risk that certain people will be left out, that those who do not have access to them will become invisible and that pre-existing inequalities will become worse. Another limit is the **lack of contextual adaptation** of digital technologies in the humanitarian sector. They do not systematically take into account the communication and information-sharing habits of local actors and the variety of profiles among them. It is also important to question the use of digital technologies, which use a lot of energy and raw materials, in the context of environmental crises and climate changes. The solution could be to turn towards a 'degraded mode' of assistance, that is to say, assistance where only the most efficient and adapted techniques and technologies are used, what some actors call 'low-tech' technologies.

These different aspects show that the answer to whether digital technologies contribute to the participation of populations is 'yes, but', where the qualifying factors are sometimes more important than the 'yes'. This shows the need to go beyond a vision of participation that focuses on 'making people participate'. This is a relatively vertical approach to the relationship between humanitarian actors and populations, with humanitarian actors choosing when and how people take part in their projects. Participation is "first and foremost, and above all, a state of mind which considers people affected by a crisis as social agents who have skills, energy, ideas and a particular understanding of their situation. The humanitarian response should be carried out 'with rather than for' the population". This view of participation should therefore be reflected more in the practices of humanitarian actors and their use of digital technologies.

RED FLAGS

The literature review and interviews highlighted a certain number of red flags to do with the participation of people affected by crisis and digital technologies. Several of them do not only concern the link between participation and digital technologies – they concern the use of digital technologies by the humanitarian sector more broadly.

➢ **Digital technologies are only a tool to which meaning needs to be added:**
- Even though digital technologies allow us to gather information, we need to continue inserting human intelligence into them – the understanding of a context and/or of a population can not be based solely on quantitative data collected with these tools;
- Given the tendency of the sector to over-collect data, it seems important to question the relevance of certain collection exercises – the aim should be to rationalise these and to give priority to the use of data that is already available whenever possible;
- The idea that digital technologies can help to identify needs can also be questioned: as underlined by J.-P. Olivier de Sardan, the notion of needs is extremely vague, uncertain and imprecise. He also highlights the fact that the needs that people express are determined by the services that they think they can get from organisations, which calls into question the notion of 'objective needs'.

➢ **The decision to use a digital technology should be made based on a number of factors, and not only because it is innovative** – these are:
- **The operational context** – notably, local capacities and the facilities available;
- **The population concerned** – their habits and preferences in terms of communication, their level of digital literacy, their social and cultural practices, taking into consideration the different profiles within the population;
- **The objectives** – digital technologies should not be used just because they are innovative or to increase efficiency and effectiveness: increasing the accountability of the organisation and the participation of communities should be of central concern, as they should in every humanitarian project;
- **Environmental issues** – the decision of whether or not to use a digital technology should also take into account the energy and raw materials that it requires : priority should be given to using technologies in 'degraded mode' and 'low-tech' solutions.

➢ **Digital technologies should not be the only means of communication – humanitarian actors should adopt a 'multi-format' approach:**
- It is important to understand the population's communication preferences and to take these into consideration in humanitarian practices;
- It is important to use different means to communicate with the population and share information with them in order to adapt to their preferences and the different profiles that exist;
- It is also possible to use different means of communication depending on the information to be shared – for example, for complaints and feedback mechanisms, certain types of complaint can be shared via social networks, whereas others, which are generally more serious/sensitive, will use other channels.

➢ The use and development of digital technologies should not be based on resource extraction:
- The people affected by the crisis should have a certain level of control over the way their data is shared and used, and should at least have access to information about this.

➢ It is important to question the figure of the foreign expert, and to give priority to digital solutions developed locally or by/with local actors:
- Foreign experts should not be systematically sent – the capacity of local actors should be reinforced in the long term with regard to developing and using digital technologies;
- It also seems important to support the development of digital technologies at the local level whenever this is possible, or at least, to develop these with local experts;
- Local knowledge should be promoted in terms of technical expertise, both for the development and the use of digital technologies.

➢ One of the main principles when using digital technologies in the humanitarian sector should be to 'do no digital harm':
- It is important that each actor ensures that the use of digital technologies during an operation does not reinforce existing inequalities or expose people or increase their vulnerability;
- A digital technology should not be used without having clearly identified the associated risks for the population concerned, and having established mitigation measures;
- People whose data is collected/used should be clearly told about the risks that this involves so that they are able to give their genuinely informed consent;
- It is important to ensure that there are clear data protection procedures within the organisation and that these are known and respected by its employees.

➢ Humanitarian actors need to go beyond 'making people participate' and use digital technologies as a way to make power relations between humanitarian actors and the people affected by the crisis more balanced:
- Digital technologies should be used for the joint elaboration of projects and joint decision-making, and not only to share information;
- Digital technologies should also be seen as an opportunity to place people at the centre of the crisis response and to consider them as 'active' stakeholders – this should have an impact on practices and on how these technologies are used.

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