

Remarks by the Acting Director of the Coordination Division, Wafaa Saeed, at the ECOSOC-HAS High-Level Panel on innovation as a driver of change: the use of new and emerging technologies and humanitarian data

**Thursday, 24 June 2021
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As Delivered

Thank you so much Ambassador, and welcome to you all, and thank you for the opportunity to moderate this high-level panel on how we can make new technology and innovation work to support people in humanitarian need.

New and emerging technologies can help shift humanitarian action from reaction to anticipation by enabling earlier, faster, and more effective operations.

Technologies and innovation have helped the humanitarian sector adapt and respond to the COVID-19 pandemic reality.

Digital cash transfers have enabled the provision of rapid and flexible assistance.

UNICEF, the World Health Organization, and others have used social media to counter misinformation and stigma, as well as to monitor programmes. And the Emergency Telecommunications Cluster led by the World Food Programme has used helpline chatbots to provide crucial health and safety information in the Central African Republic, Iraq, Libya and elsewhere.

For OCHA, our expertise in predictive analysis is being led by our Centre for Humanitarian Data in The Hague.

Last July, the Centre worked with partners in Bangladesh ahead of the monsoon season to design a trigger mechanism for the automatic activation of the Central Emergency Response Fund.

When the threshold was reached to indicate severe flooding would occur, the Central Emergency Response Fund released US\$5.2 million to WFP, FAO and UNFPA to help 200,000 people prepare for the coming flood. They received cash, livestock feed, storage drums, and hygiene, dignity, and health kits.

This was the fastest CERF allocation since its establishment in 2005, and the first one to take place BEFORE peak flooding, based on the available forecasts.

Independent evaluation concluded that this approach reduced suffering of the people and gave more value-for-money than a large-scale disaster response would have.

We have also used this anticipatory approach in Ethiopia.

Late last year, the Centre's predictive analytics team developed a trigger to respond to projected drought-related food insecurity. They undertook a historical analysis of food insecurity in the country, analysed weather forecasts, and defined thresholds that would predict a severe crisis.

This triggered the release of \$20 million by the Central Emergency Response Fund to aid agencies in Ethiopia. The funds were used to provide cash and farming inputs, rehabilitate water schemes, and get water in schools in five regions.

OCHA is currently piloting anticipatory action frameworks in more than 10 countries and I hope to see this scaled up in all locations that we work.

But with all these new tools come complex challenges and risks.

Here, I will discuss three of them: the digital divide; the use of technology to spread misinformation and sow division; and privacy breaches and the lack of regulation.

First, there is a widening digital divide due to a lack of connectivity, data illiteracy, and uneven access to basic technology. This threatens to reinforce deep-seated social and economic disadvantages suffered particularly by women, girls, the elderly, and people with disabilities and minorities.

So, the importance of connectivity for the communities we serve cannot be overstated.

So, as part of the Secretary-General's Roadmap for Digital Cooperation, the UN has accelerated discussions on connectivity as it relates to emergency preparedness, response, and assistance, so that everyone can have safe and affordable access to the Internet by 2030.

Second, the accelerating spread of misinformation and disinformation – known as the “infodemic” – as well as the use of technology to stigmatize people or incite tensions are fomenting divisions and instability worldwide.

A third challenge – which is linked to the above – relates to the fact that the technical tools for managing data have evolved faster than the policy instruments that govern their use.

In recent years, we have seen the development of principles, policies, and strategies for the responsible management of data in humanitarian action, but gaps remain between the global frameworks and their practical application in field operations.

Strong data responsibility, including data protection, must ensure that technology respects rights and dignity and remains people-centric, accountable, and trusted. Regulation and governance must catch up with technology to enable its deployment while protecting people's rights.

The UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights give useful guidance on what technology leaders can do to protect the right to privacy and other human rights online.

So, investment in technology must be matched by efforts to make it responsible, sustainable, and inclusive.

In the humanitarian sector, affected communities and local partners must be centrally involved in these efforts.

In humanitarian settings, the promise of the digital revolution will likely not depend on the technology itself, but on who gets to define the problems, as well as build the solutions to them and deploy the technology to implement these solutions.

The Secretary-General's High-level Panel on Digital Cooperation identified a need to strengthen cooperation among Governments, technology companies, civil society, and others to address the challenges brought by digital technology.

Humanitarians too will play a role, by sharing our insights on operational realities, and by facilitating principled partnerships and build trust and ensure the safe, ethical, and effective use of data and technology in humanitarian action.

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