OCHA contribution to the 2018 ECOSOC Integration Segment on the use of technology and innovation to strengthen resilience

As an example of leveraging technology to strengthen humanitarian action, OCHA works with mobile phone and satellite industries on preparedness/recovery/resilience [with reference to survey questions 6 and 7]. More than 5 billion people (66 per cent of the global population) own a mobile phone, and 3.7 billion people (50 per cent of the global population) have access to the internet. OCHA and other humanitarian organizations increasingly rely on internet and voice networks to get critical life-saving information to people in crisis and collect their feedback and input, giving affected people a voice and decision-making input into humanitarian response, in line with the Grand Bargain and other commitments. As more and more people use mobile devices to communicate and seek assistance, OCHA is working to ensure that quickly restoring connectivity during and after a crisis becomes a standard operating procedure. OCHA is engaged in this area primarily through low-cost, high-impact advocacy within the Emergency Telecommunications Cluster and with corporate partners in the satellite and mobile phone industries. OCHA helped to broker the Humanitarian Connectivity Charter (an agreement between more than 100 mobile network operators in 100 countries to support access to communication and information for those affected by conflict and disasters associated with natural hazards) and the Crisis Connectivity Charter (a similar agreement for the satellite industry). In both cases, OCHA is now providing further support to ensure that the two Charters are implemented in emergency situations.

Another example of using technology and innovative humanitarian approaches concerns the response to the large-scale drought emergency and the associated disease outbreaks experienced in Ethiopia in 2017. These include the UNOPS project funded by the OCHA-managed Ethiopian Humanitarian Fund (EHF) which facilitated the movement and living expenses of health workers surged to Somali region by the Federal Government in response to the expanded acute watery diarrhoea (AWD) outbreak. The project provided logistics assistance to the Ministry of Health (MoH), Regional Health Bureaus, as well as the Health and WASH Clusters, in their efforts to address the health crisis in the Somali Region. The project included two key components. Firstly, UNOPOS provided vehicles and other fleet management services, including through various service providers, for response teams and their visits to remote parts of the region to respond to AWD outbreaks. Secondly, the project disbursed per diem payments to the about 300 health workers assigned to the AWD response for a period of three months, in accordance with MoH per diem rates. Timely payments ensured health workers had the means to travel to areas in need and respond in a timely manner. AWD outbreaks require a swift, mobile response, so disbursement of per diem required an innovative approach, which cannot simply be handled through bank transfers or cash handouts. UNOPS worked with electronic/mobile payment company (hello cash) to ensure cost-effective and timely daily payments to health workers, regardless of the remoteness of their location. To manage this process, UNOPS will deploy an Operations Associate to the command post in Jigjiga, to oversee per diem payments, and assist health workers with any issues, changes and delays.

OCHA is engaging around one the major risks involved in leveraging technology in humanitarian/development operations [with reference to survey questions 1, 4 and 5], namely the collection of personal identifying information from beneficiaries. Humanitarian organizations are collecting and sharing more data than ever before. This trend will continue as more systems, sensors and people come online in crisis settings. The technological advances and the digital shift that took place years ago in the private sector have now arrived in the humanitarian sector, bringing opportunities and challenges alike. How the humanitarian community handles the data revolution to inform decisions and improve lives will be a key determinant of its future effectiveness.

The potential that data offers comes with a new set of risks. High-risk data is generally understood as data that includes attributes about individuals, also known as personally identifiable information. Data can also create risk when it identifies communities or demographics within a group and ties them to a place (i.e. women of a certain age group in a specific location). The risk comes when this type of data is collected and shared without proper authorization from the individual or the organization acting as the data steward; or when the data is being used for purposes other than what was initially stated during collection. Unless these risks are addressed and resolved, the potential of digitalization and the use of technology to improve humanitarian response and coordination will never be reached. A single high-profile data breach or improper use of personal identifying information may set back humanitarian innovation for many years to come.

OCHA is working through our Centre for Humanitarian Data to develop an infrastructure to enable the safe sharing of data about crisis-affected people through OCHA's Humanitarian Data Exchange (HDX) platform. The goal of HDX is to make humanitarian data easy to find and use for analysis. The growing collection of datasets (as of 28 February 2018, 6589 datasets, based on 1021 sources) has been accessed by users in over 200 countries and territories.

ECOSOC may wish to consider promoting integrated policies around the world on digital ID [with reference to survey question 8], benefiting from the work of relevant UN entities with expertise in this matter. More than 1 billion people lack an officially-recognized identity; 40 per cent are under 18 years of age and 78 per cent are in sub-Saharan Africa and Asia. Without a means of proving who they are, these individuals cannot open bank accounts, access critical services, or receive cash and other forms of assistance during humanitarian emergencies. Governments are also deprived of accurate population data, meaning that services may be misallocated.

Lack of access to identification is not limited to the developing world. Even in highly-developed countries, many people lack access to identification or might find themselves in a situation in which the paperwork that allows them to prove their identities is destroyed in an emergency. Immigrants and displaced persons are especially vulnerable, as the identification documents issued by their countries of origin (or by refugee/migration agencies) might not be recognized in their new home countries.

Digital identification (electronically captured and stored attributes and credentials that can uniquely identify a person) offers a way to leapfrog over old, paper-based systems. However, it needs to be done in the right away. We are already rapidly moving toward a world of patchwork systems that are not suited for lifelong and ongoing use by individuals, and certainly not for vulnerable populations like those affected by a humanitarian crisis. There is both market failure (the private sector alone cannot address this issue as governments decide what is acceptable) as well as a clear need for coordinated multilateral action (governments cannot do this on their own or they will build systems that are incompatible and therefore not that useful). Even within the UN family, major issues have been identified; for instance, a recent UNDP study found that nine distinct agencies had implemented nine distinct digital ID systems in a single country.

There is a strong global demand for the development of technical standards that would ensure interoperability across governments, businesses, NGOs, and the UN community. Coordination is absolutely critical – while also quite challenging in the context of current structures. A multi-sectoral, multi-stakeholder approach is necessary to align incentives and ensure that digital identity is rolled out in a manner that is scalable, secure, sustainable, and responsible.