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Principled and Accountable Use of Information and Communication Technologies in Humanitarian Action

BACKGROUND DOCUMENT

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Principled and Accountable Use of Information and Communication Technologies in Humanitarian Action

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Information and communication technologies (ICTs) are now central to modern life and, accordingly, to humanitarian response. This brings both opportunities and risks to humanitarian action and to the communities served by the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement (Movement). This resolution seeks to help the Movement to apply the same rigour and principled and accountable practices and frameworks to its use of ICTs as it does to its "analogue" work. It builds on existing good practice frameworks and networks across the Movement, including the Fundamental Principles and the commitment to do no harm, community engagement and accountability (CEA), vulnerability and capacity assessment (VCA), human-centred design (HCD), digital safeguarding, cybersecurity, data protection and procurement. It proposes multidisciplinary collaboration, shared learning and joint work on capacity-building and resources to support a clear holistic vision for the principled and accountable use of ICTs in humanitarian action that will encourage better humanitarian outcomes for Movement components and the communities we serve.

1) INTRODUCTION

Recent decades have seen the rapid emergence and proliferation of ICTs, which have transformed everyday life across the world, including in the communities we serve. This shift has geopolitical and societal implications, as the power dynamics, financial flows, biases and assumptions built into ICTs influence the systems in which they are embedded.

Technology is essential to allow humanitarians to continue to deliver on their mission and mandate, especially as needs continue to grow and resources decline. After more than a decade of "digital transformation", the sector has demonstrated that certain technologies can indeed be used to improve a variety of fields, such as data analytics and decision-making, the utilization of satellite imagery to map disaster impact and response, connectivity for sharing life-saving information, the automation of back-office functions, the use of mobile money to support disaster-affected communities and technology-enabled farming to significantly improve food production. Broadly, these ICTs have shown that, properly employed, they can help reach populations that might otherwise be underserved, and they provide critical support and services that might otherwise be unavailable. It is urgent to embrace these opportunities, which have not yet been fully realized.

New opportunities have, however, also brought new risks to people's rights, dignity and agency, which must be mitigated, particularly in the contexts where humanitarian organizations work. Without robust safeguards, ICTs can compromise our principles and unintentionally harm the very communities we seek to protect and empower, potentially eroding their trust. Technologies can entrench or exacerbate existing inequities by imposing a new "digital divide" between those who can access and leverage digital technologies to their advantage and those who cannot. They can expose vulnerable people to new risks in online and digital spaces, such as cybercrime, a degraded information environment, harms to mental health and emerging technology that impacts the neutrality and impartiality of decision-making without sufficient human oversight.

ICTs – when not designed with crises in mind – can introduce new actors and tools into humanitarian action which are not bound by humanitarian principles or the "do no harm"

imperative. Public scrutiny around the potential negative impacts of ICTs on fundamental rights, conflict dynamics, the environment and security has increased, alongside calls for greater transparency, responsibility and accountability – especially for public and humanitarian entities. Certain technologies can also subject Movement data to new national legislation, creating legal risks that may undermine adherence to the Fundamental Principles. As supply chains and markets are dominated by a few States and private companies, the humanitarian use of technologies can negatively affect neutrality, impartiality and independence. The environmental implications of technology are vast and complex and embedded across the supply chain, from the extraction of minerals, metals and rare earth elements used in manufacturing processes, to energy consumption and other negative environmental impacts of the technology lifecycle through to end-of-life disposal.

Bridging the digital divide

The level of digital maturity, connectivity and resourcing varies widely across the Movement, and a significant proportion of last-mile branches operate with minimal or no reliable connectivity, limited hardware and constrained technical support. Yet they remain essential service providers within their communities. Similarly, there are variations in ICT-enabling environments, practices and digital literacy in the communities we work alongside. This digital divide is exacerbated by the fast-paced changes that technology brings to humanitarian response. Taking balanced decisions around ICTs to strengthen rather than strain capacity will be an essential factor in reducing the negative impacts of this divide.

Much of the operation and financing of National Society ICTs is fragmented, ad hoc and project-based. With current shifts in funding, a strategic approach to ensure that technology provision is adequate for humanitarian response is difficult to resource. A strategic approach taking into account feasibility, affordability, sustainability, innovation and practicality would make it more likely for these investments of time, financial resources and effort to improve interoperability, reduce duplication, strengthen trust and enhance collective impact.

This ambition is informed by the lessons and approaches of our core humanitarian work. By adhering to our Fundamental Principles and applying the same rigour to our use of ICTs that we do to our analogue practices, we can encourage better humanitarian outcomes for Movement components and the communities we work with.

Movement actions towards a principled approach

The humanitarian sector has developed frameworks and standards that have gradually strengthened accountability to affected people and generated important learning that has improved practice over time. Yet these standards are not always effectively applied to technology initiatives. At the same time, the technology sector has evolved good practice and helpful standards which could strengthen humanitarian technology procurement, rollout and practice – but which are not universally understood.

The adoption of the first Digital Transformation Strategy of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) in 2021 has set its membership on a journey of digital transformation, with a commitment to accountability and integrity grounded in the Fundamental Principles. It seeks to ensure that ICT use and innovation are in line with our humanitarian mission and strengthen community trust. The IFRC's digital maturity framework and analysis provides a baseline to approach gaps and opportunities with shared leadership.

The 2025 Technology Strategy of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) underscores that all technology choices must be measured against neutrality, independence and impartiality, while the ICRC Data Protection Handbook on Data Protection in Humanitarian Action addresses technology issues such as artificial intelligence and data protection by design. The organization's policies on artificial intelligence (2024) and biometrics

(2019) are grounded in the Fundamental Principles and are intended to help staff to safely explore the humanitarian potential of these technologies.

Within National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (National Societies), there have also been efforts to address this issue. For example, the Kenya Red Cross Society launched a Data and Digital Transformation Strategy 2024–2028 which focuses on six strategic pillars for responsible and accountable use of ICTs. Similarly, Humanitech, an initiative of the Australian Red Cross, has developed a series of principles for designing technology that put humanitarian considerations at the forefront.

Previous resolutions relevant to this topic include (i) CD/17/R2 Movement-wide principles for resource mobilization, (ii) CD/19/R1 Movement-wide Commitments for Community Engagement and Accountability, (iii) CD/22/R12 Safeguarding humanitarian data, (iv) 33IC/19/R4 Restoring Family Links while respecting privacy, including as it relates to personal data protection and (v) 34IC/24/R2 Protecting civilians and other protected persons and objects against the potential human cost of ICT activities during armed conflict.

This resolution is intended to generate momentum for the Movement to be more intentional and strategic about the usage of ICTs. It affirms that humanitarian ICTs must be guided by principles and accountability by design.

2) BACKGROUND

In December 2023, representatives from National Societies and the IFRC were convened by the IFRC's Solferino Academy and the American Red Cross's Global Disaster Preparedness Center to discuss ethical and principled approaches to ICT development, with an emphasis on the critical need to improve our approach to designing and implementing ICTs.

At the October 2024 International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent, the side event "Humanitarian Accountability of Technology: Applying the Fundamental Principles to new realities" introduced issues now being addressed in the resolution for discussion with the private sector, governments and academia.

In 2025, a working group composed of the IFRC, the ICRC and many National Societies and facilitated by the American Red Cross, came together to collaboratively develop this resolution and background document, compile resources and expertise and provide discussion opportunities to support the conversation.

3) ANALYSIS

A) FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES AND DO NO HARM

The Movement is guided by the **Fundamental Principles** and united by a central purpose: to help without discrimination those who suffer and thus contribute to peace in the world. This section outlines a few examples of how the principles apply to ICTs:

- Even when the Movement's humanitarian work is enabled or mediated by ICTs, affected people must be treated with **humanity** and their dignity respected at all times and in all circumstances.
- The Movement can use ICTs to strengthen its ability to identify and respond efficiently to humanitarian needs in an **impartial** manner, without discrimination. This can include community consultation to ensure that the ICT solutions and tools the Movement uses are inclusive by design and in terms of impact and that they enable fair, transparent, non-discriminatory, equal and equitable delivery of assistance and services to all affected people and users, taking into account their varying degrees of needs and capacity.

- The Movement should take measures to ensure that its choices of ICT products, services and infrastructure do not challenge its **neutrality** or undermine trust, including any perceived association or alignment with private technology companies, groups or individuals that i) directly contribute to armed conflict or other situations of violence or are closely associated with parties to armed conflict or ii) favour particular political interests or promote activities or values that are contradictory to our Movement mandate and principles.
- The Movement may select and use the ICTs that best fit its needs and operational constraints, exercising its **independence** and supporting its operational autonomy. It can also explore alternatives such as open-source software that may facilitate greater control over its systems and the data it holds.
- Consistent with the principle of **voluntary service**, open-source approaches may improve the portability of solutions across the Movement, enable diverse partnership forms, enhance transparency and create new avenues for contributions, including from global communities not traditionally represented in large tech organizations.
- The Movement must also seek to **do no harm** – systematically assessing potential negative impacts of its use of ICTs for affected people and taking all feasible measures to avoid and mitigate them through its own action or through engagement with relevant stakeholders.

B) APPLICABLE FRAMEWORKS

Being accountable in the use of ICTs

There are multiple practices and frameworks that help to protect and engage communities in the humanitarian programme cycle. Monitoring and evaluation processes help set goals, track implementation and feedback and conduct evaluations to understand outcomes and impact. CEA integrates meaningful community participation, open and honest communication and mechanisms for listening to and acting on feedback into programmes and operations. VCA and HCD embed holistic, community-led processes for assessing needs, co-creating solutions, validating results and evaluating success. Digital safeguarding practices take a deliberate, risk-aware approach to understanding and mitigating potential harms to vulnerable people. Research shows that applying policies and tools that embed humanitarian accountability into digital transformation approaches allows for the development of digital solutions that are more trusted, relevant and sustainable and will better meet the needs of practitioners and the communities we serve.

Strengthening mutual understanding between humanitarian practitioners and technologists, building on frameworks for assessing and evaluating ICT tools, implementations and practices and establishing standard processes for sharing lessons learned are all actions that would help build a knowledge base and improve the way technology is used.

An understanding of humanitarian needs and vulnerabilities is often not effectively integrated into the design, development, selection, deployment and use of ICTs. This may be due, in part, to a lack of time and funding for design work prior to the award or approval of a project – changes in funding and planning processes may be required to support opportunities for effective HCD. The fundamental challenge of conducting effective co-design processes in emergency or crisis settings is more difficult to resolve.

Cybersecurity: Information sharing and collaboration on cyber risks can leverage collective knowledge to improve ICT security posture and build capacities among Movement components with different levels of available resources. Movement components could work together to share information on cyber risks, incidents and good practices and leverage emerging efforts to strengthen protection for protected actors in cyberspace. The digital emblem advances a pathway to protect humanitarian and medical digital infrastructure with growing industry support. Progress has been made towards the technical development of the

digital emblem as a means of identifying the data and digital infrastructure of organizations and entities entitled to display the distinctive emblems recognized under international humanitarian law as a sign of their legal protection where applicable. Further collaborative work is underway at international standardization bodies to incorporate the digital emblem within global information and communication systems.

Data protection: Personal data protection has emerged as one of the most widely used frameworks for assessing and evaluating risks to people's privacy, rights and dignity. International treaties and bodies and national law have sought to establish common minimum principles to facilitate accountability within and across jurisdictions, creating an essential tool for ensuring the accountability of entities processing such data. The humanitarian sector has adopted organizational regulatory frameworks or adhered to national legislation and adapted its working procedures accordingly. The ICRC and the IFRC have developed dedicated manuals and instructions and adopted common guidance on the interpretation of data protection requirements. Data protection has consistently been used as the key framework for holding humanitarian organizations accountable for their use of technology, for example, following data breaches. Meanwhile, domestic legislation can authorize national authorities to access humanitarian data handled by some technology providers, and it is important for the Movement to understand the legal implications of their technology choices and, by extension, the impacts for the data of the people the Movement seeks to protect and empower.

Procurement and sourcing: Movement components seek to research, procure and develop functional, impactful and effective tools and systems aligned with operational needs – but approaches can be ad hoc and fragmented. Often, large providers are preferred in order to improve the performance, availability, security and interoperability of ICT systems. Yet diversifying the ICT stack by leveraging resources from local ICT systems or exploring available free and/or open-source ICT solutions may help reduce dependency on a small number of providers and be more aligned with the Fundamental Principles of neutrality and independence. However, the cost of adopting such solutions, the need for appropriate supply chain control and security and the complexity of the applicable licensing framework should not be underestimated. Procurement approaches must grapple with these tensions, considering safety and security requirements, sustainability, interoperability, cost-effectiveness and practical added value for affected people, end users and Movement staff. Movement components may also evaluate the reliability and reputation of technology providers, with a focus on their corporate record, their ESG (environmental, sustainability and governance) policies and practices, their public posture and their level of involvement in political or conflict-related controversies and debates.

4) RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

The resolution proposes a working group, which could be administered and centrally organized by Movement components and existing Movement practice networks working together. Meetings and workshops would be held virtually using existing infrastructure. Recognizing that resourcing varies across the Movement, components might appoint a representative, perhaps shared among several National Societies, to act as a focal point for this work both within the working group and internally, convening their colleagues within their organization to pool insights and experiences.

5) IMPLEMENTATION AND MONITORING

The resolution proposes the creation of a working group which could drive ongoing discussion and guide research, collate advice and insights and help address challenges. Its purpose would be to bring together multidisciplinary expertise, insights and lessons learned, representative of the entire Movement, including data protection, legal, community engagement, operational, communications and other experts. Such a body could actively

address the issue following the adoption of the resolution and provide reports and run informative events at the 2028 Council of Delegates.

Suggested activities could include:

- mapping existing networks, frameworks, guidance and good practices and further developing resources on existing frameworks (including humanitarian accountability, cybersecurity, data protection, legal risks and procurement) with links to ICTs
- proposing action steps to strengthen implementation of such frameworks and better understand the breadth of their adoption across the Movement, including further development and promotion of common ICT standards to support priority areas
- consolidating resources as far as possible into a Movement repository of products, services, guidance, standards and good practices that can positively impact principled and accountable use of ICTs by the Movement and foster technology transfer
- supporting the research and evidence base alongside the Red Cross and Red Crescent Research Consortium (RC3) and universities and exploring action research to better prepare for emerging opportunities, needs and risks
- exploring options for creating specific mechanisms such as cybersecurity information-sharing networks and Movement expert networks for mentorship and support
- reviewing existing and emerging applicable legal frameworks and laws addressing the use of ICTs in humanitarian action
- exploring opportunities to effectively and safely leverage existing data, for example, to help with scenario planning based on past experiences
- conducting horizon scanning, where appropriate, alongside foresight partners.

6) CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As issues with technology are pervasive and systemic and unlikely to correct themselves, the Movement must take responsibility for its own principled and accountable use of technology and continue to work with States, standards bodies and others, keeping the agency and interests of communities at the forefront.

This resolution:

- consolidates the perspectives of the Movement to advance the principled and accountable use of ICTs in humanitarian action in the digital era
- guides the Movement in navigating this complex landscape, ensuring that technology is adopted as thoughtfully as the Movement pursues its humanitarian goals
- calls on the Movement, partners and the humanitarian ecosystem to engage in an iterative and principled approach to ensuring ICTs are successfully leveraged by the Movement and the communities we serve.

For additional consideration and exploration of the topic of this resolution, the working group has created a webpage, which will continue to be updated in the months leading up to the Council of Delegates.