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

BACKGROUND DOCUMENT

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BACKGROUND DOCUMENT

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

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Information and communications 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 in its “analogue” work. This resolution builds on existing good practice frameworks and networks across the Movement, including the Fundamental Principles and the do no harm principle, the community engagement and accountability (CEA) approach, the Vulnerability and Capacity Assessment (VCA), human-centred design, digital safeguarding, cybersecurity, data protection, and procurement. It proposes multidisciplinary collaboration, shared learning, and joint work on capacity-building and resources to support a holistic, clear vision for use of ICTs in humanitarian action that will encourage better humanitarian outcomes for Movement components and the communities we serve. This resolution is designed to be a step along the Movement’s collective path toward becoming more intentional in the use of ICTs, rather than an immediate normative framework.

1) INTRODUCTION

Recent decades have seen the rapid emergence and proliferation of ICTs, transforming everyday life across the world, including for 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 while 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 provide critical support and services that might otherwise be unavailable. It is urgent to embrace these opportunities, which have not yet been fully realized.

Yet new opportunities have 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, and cannot, access and leverage digital technologies to their advantage. They can expose vulnerable people to new risks in online and digital spaces, such as cybercrime, a degraded information environment, harm to mental health, and emerging technology that, without sufficient human oversight, impacts the neutrality and impartiality of decision-making.

ICTs are not necessarily designed with crises in mind and 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, humanitarian use of technologies can negatively affect neutrality, impartiality, and independence. The environmental implications of technology are vast, complex, and embedded across the supply chain: from the extraction of minerals, metals, and rare earth elements for building technology, to the energy consumption for operating it, to the negative impacts on the environment at the end of its life.

Bridging the digital divide

Across the Movement, there is wide variance in the level of digital maturity, connectivity and resourcing, 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. There is similar diversity 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; and deliberately designing low-technology and non-digital alternatives and fallbacks for communities and humanitarian actors alike, will be an essential component of reducing the negative impacts of this divide.

Much of the operation and financing of ICTs of National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (National Societies) 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 that investments of time, financial resources and effort would strengthen interoperability, reduce duplication, strengthen trust, and enhance collective impact.

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

Movement actions toward 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. Meanwhile, 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 in 2021 by the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) of the first [IFRC Digital Transformation Strategy](#) has set the membership on a journey of digital transformation, committing to accountability and integrity grounded in the Fundamental Principles. This seeks to ensure that use and innovation of ICTs are in line with our humanitarian mission and strengthen community trust. The framework and analysis done

by the IFRC on digital maturity provides a baseline to approach gaps and opportunities with shared leadership.

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) [Technology Strategy 2024–2027](#) underscored that all technology choices must be measured against neutrality, independence, and impartiality, while the ICRC's [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](#)¹ and [biometrics](#)², are grounded in the Fundamental Principles and intended to help staff to safely explore the humanitarian potential of those technologies.

Within 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 to put humanitarian principles at the forefront.

Previous resolutions relevant to this topic include: (i) Resolution 2 of the 2017 Council of Delegates, "[Movement-wide principles for resource mobilization](#)"; (ii) Resolution 1 of the 2019 Council of Delegates, "[Movement-wide Commitments for Community Engagement and Accountability](#)"; (iii) Resolution 12 of the 2022 Council of Delegates, "[Safeguarding humanitarian data](#)"; (iv) Resolution 4 of the 33rd International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent (International Conference), "[Restoring Family Links while respecting privacy, including as it relates to personal data protection](#)"; (v) Resolution 2 of the 34th International Conference, "[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, emphasizing the critical need to improve our approach to designing and implementing ICTs.

At the 34th International Conference in October 2024, a side event, "[Humanitarian Accountability of Technology: Applying the Fundamental Principles to new realities](#)" introduced issues now present in the resolution for discussion with the private sector, governments and academia.

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

¹ ICRC, *Building a Responsible Humanitarian Approach: The ICRC's Policy on Artificial Intelligence*, ICRC, Geneva, 2024.

² ICRC, *Policy on the Processing of Biometric Data by the ICRC*, adopted on 28 August 2019.

3) ANALYSIS/PROGRESS

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 components can use ICTs to strengthen their 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 through 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 components should consider their choices of ICT products, so that services and infrastructure do not challenge their **neutrality** or undermine trust, including 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 components may select and use ICTs that best fit their needs and operational constraints, exercising their **independence** and supporting their operational autonomy. The Movement can also explore alternatives such as open source software that may facilitate greater control over its systems and the data it controls.
- 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 components must also seek to “**do no harm**” – systematically assessing potential negative impacts of their use of ICTs on affected people and taking all feasible measures to avoid and mitigate such impacts through their own action or engagement with relevant stakeholders.

B) APPLICABLE FRAMEWORKS

Being accountable in the use of ICTs

Multiple practices and frameworks 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. The [community engagement and accountability \(CEA\)](#) approach integrates meaningful community participation, open and honest communication, and mechanisms to listen to and act on feedback within programmes and operations, and the [Vulnerability and Capacity Assessment \(VCA\)](#) and human-centred design embed holistic, community-led processes for assessing needs, co-creating solutions, validating, 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 practice; and normalizing sharing of lessons learned would all help build a knowledge base and improve the way technology is used.

Humanitarian needs and an understanding of vulnerabilities are often not effectively integrated into the design, development, selection, deployment, and use of ICTs. In part this may be due to 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 the opportunity for effective human-centred design. 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 protections 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 widespread frameworks to assess and evaluate the risks to people's privacy, rights, and dignity. International treaties and bodies, as well as national law, have worked to establish common, minimum principles to facilitate accountability within and across jurisdictions – an essential tool to ensure accountability of the entity processing such data. The humanitarian sector has adopted organizational regulatory frameworks or adhered to national legislation and adapted its working methods accordingly. The [ICRC](#) and [IFRC](#) have developed dedicated manuals and instructions and adopted common guidance on the interpretation of data protection requirements. Data protection has repeatedly been used as the key framework to hold humanitarian organizations accountable regarding their use of technology, for example, following data breaches. Meanwhile, national legislation can authorize access by national authorities to 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 on the data of 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, exploring available open source ICT solutions, and diversifying suppliers could be more aligned with the Fundamental Principles of neutrality and independence. However, the cost of adopting such solutions, the need for appropriate control and security of the supply chain, and the complexity of the applicable licensing framework should not be underestimated. Digital solutions should be used only where is necessary and proportionate to the humanitarian objective, and where the benefits outweigh the risks to the rights, dignity, and safety of the individual. Procurement approaches must grapple with these tensions, considering safety and security requirements, sustainability, and 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, policies, and practices in the ESG (environmental, sustainability and governance) domains, their public posture, and level of involvement in political or conflict-related controversies and debates.

Artificial intelligence (AI) and emerging technologies: The Movement is prioritizing foundational digital investments in technology and data systems while also exploring the potential of AI and other emerging technologies. Many current AI systems are developed for commercial purposes and may not align with humanitarian principles or operational realities. Recent research has highlighted that even advanced AI reasoning models can produce highly confident responses while failing to reason reliably in complex or unfamiliar situations. This raises concerns around transparency, explainability, bias, accountability, and the responsible use of sensitive humanitarian data. Having spaces to research and explore the opportunities and risks of technologies affords time for analysis and implementation of the appropriate policies, governance, training, and oversight mechanisms. Industry metrics such as relevance, faithfulness, and toxicity assess technical quality or obvious misconduct, including hate speech, insults, and threats, but do not adequately measure humanitarian concerns such as humanity, neutrality, impartiality, equity, or culturally appropriate communication. Movement components can set the ethical principles and controls governing the use of these technologies, such as human oversight, review of automated decisions, and regular assessment of algorithms and other technologies for discrimination, errors, lack of transparency, and other risks. The development, adoption, and eventual scaling of technologies, including the various types of AI, should be grounded in verified evidence regarding their utility, effectiveness, and impact. This type of approval process is needed to demonstrate that these solutions deliver tangible benefits to our humanitarian response, while protecting affected communities.

4) RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

The resolution suggests that the Principled and Accountable Use of ICTs in Humanitarian Action Working Group, which came together to draft the resolution, evolve into a catalyst for knowledge exchange and technical cooperation. This would support the Movement to build a progressive, inclusive, and sustainable digital transformation roadmap that strengthens interoperability and encourages voluntary service. The working group would be open to all, with new members continuously able to join, and strive for balanced geographical representation and the participation of National Societies with different levels of digital maturity, operational contexts, and institutional capacities. It would facilitate an iterative, flexible, and open process, responding to new and emerging needs and realities. Illustrative terms of reference are being drafted.

5) IMPLEMENTATION AND MONITORING

The working group would carry out the activities set out in the resolution, drive ongoing discussion, guide research, collate advice and insights, and help address challenges. This structure is intended to bring together multidisciplinary expertise, insights, and lessons learned, be representative of the entire Movement, and include experts on technology, cybersecurity, data protection, law, policy, community engagement, operations, communications and other areas. Such a body can actively address the issue following adoption of the resolution, provide reports, and run informative events at the 2028 Council of Delegates.

Suggested activities for the first year (2027) could include:

- mapping existing networks, frameworks, guidance, and good practices and further developing resources for existing frameworks (including humanitarian accountability, cybersecurity, data protection, legal risks, and procurement) that have links with ICTs

- consolidating resources as much 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.

Suggested activities for the second year (2028) could include:

- proposing action steps to strengthen implementation of those frameworks and better understand the breadth of their adoption across the Movement, including guiding research and further developing and promoting common ICT standards to support priority areas
- developing a playbook of patterns and methods of work (which could contain a menu of options for decisions, trade-offs, good practices and ways to make choices that mitigate risk and are aligned with principles) that can support each individual National Society to make their own decisions
- preparing a progress report for the 2028 Council of Delegates.

The working group may consider adding additional workstreams if the need for them becomes apparent, if they do not duplicate or deflect support from existing initiatives, and if human and financial resources to support them can be generated. These might include:

- supporting the research and evidence base alongside the [Red Cross Red Crescent Research Consortium](#) (RC3) and universities and exploring an action research agenda 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 use of ICTs in humanitarian action
- exploring further opportunities to effectively and safely leverage existing technical knowledge, for example to support replication and scaling of good practices and tools across the Movement
- conducting horizon scanning, where appropriate alongside foresight partners
- exploring outcomes we should collectively seek to achieve with regard to emerging technologies such as AI.

6) CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As the 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, with the agency and interests of communities at the forefront.

The resolution provides the Movement components with a catalyst to move from fragmented digital initiatives towards a more coherent, principled and collaborative digital ecosystem. It enables us to collectively strengthen trust, accountability, interoperability, and local ownership, while ensuring that digital innovation ultimately serves its only legitimate purpose: helping people affected by crises receive more timely, relevant, dignified, and accountable humanitarian support.

The resolution:

- consolidates the perspectives of the Movement components to advance principled and accountable use of ICTs in humanitarian action in the digital era
- guides the Movement components in navigating this complex landscape, ensuring that technology is adopted as thoughtfully as the Movement pursues its humanitarian goals

- calls for Movement components to take a principled, balanced approach, and to influence partners and the humanitarian ecosystem to do the same, ensuring ICTs are successfully leveraged by the Movement and the communities we serve.

For additional exploration of the topic of this resolution, the working group has created a [webpage](#), which will continue to be updated leading up to the Council of Delegates.