Data Justice: The Overlooked Humanitarian Challenge

This This year marks the 75th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, a milestone document in the history of human rights, and the seminal document that created the basis for international human rights law. While in many ways this document stands the test of the time, there is nothing about data or technology in the UDHR. In fact, this wasn't even conceptually on the radar when this document was written. Yet, in the last thirty years, and at an ever-increasing rate, data and technology have become intertwined and fundamental to humanitarian aid programs. It is well acknowledged that through data and technology, we can better understand human rights abuses and violations, and also what is working (or not working) in humanitarian settings. However, the appropriate international human rights legal framework under which we need to operate to safely utilize data, while also defending client rights to privacy, dignity, safety and freedom do not exist. This can and has led to oversharing of data and sharing personal data with people who don't "need to know." In a world where protection violations like GBV are stigmatized and where pursuing protection services after violations can put survivors at risk, oversharing of data can be dangerous – even deadly.

In In January of this year, International Rescue Committee, International Medical Corps, Terres des Hommes, Oxfam, and the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, hosted a technical panel to discuss the datafication of humanitarian work and how we can center data justice in future efforts. Data justice explores the relationship between datafication and social justice. It looks at the impacts of data-driven processes on different populations.

A data justice lens in humanitarian settings, then looks at how humanitarian data initiatives typically affect local risk and resilience as well as oppression, equity, and shifts in power.."

Several themes came out of the panel attended by institutional donors and other practitioners, including:
- the need to involve people at risk in humanitarian settings in the process of analysis, interpretation and resulting problem definition and solution identification;
- the need for humanitarian actors to use collected data to address power imbalances;
- the need to address barriers to meaningful involvement of people at risk (digital and data literacy) and ongoing challenges in the promotion of extractive information sharing that mirror colonial structures.

Further, there was a recognition of the lack of a unified voice throughout the humanitarian sector on safeguarding data (in collection, sharing and use) and the need for a collective understanding of the real risks of over-sharing information or sharing information without the appropriate context. Among the panelists, there was a shared understanding that decisions in humanitarian settings are not purely scientific, objective, nor made in a vacuum. Any advancement toward data justice, needs to confront the reality of demands for data and the lagging involvement of communities most impacted by its use.

While this was a first dedicated discussion on this topic that brought together like-minded partners, IRC is keen to build on this and hold further discussions focused on data justice in humanitarian settings. A proposed next step on this journey would be to discuss, "How do we hold ourselves accountable to data justice?" with a view to helping IRC develop and inform a strategy for data justice in humanitarian settings. We look forward to continuing to engage with the humanitarian community to advance the data justice movement in humanitarian settings.

For more information or to get involved, please reach out to Kristy Crabtree at the IRC on VPRUmailbox@rescue.org / kristy.crabtree@rescue.org