

# ADDRESSING THE IMPACT OF HARMFUL INFORMATION ON PEOPLE AFFECTED BY CONFLICT AND ON HUMANITARIAN ACTION

## OBJECTIVES OF THE WORKING SESSION

- Understand how harmful information spreads and the actors involved in the creation and distribution of harmful information.
- Understand the drivers of the spread of harmful information in the African regional context.
- Discussing consequences/risks arising from harmful information to humanitarian operations and people affected by armed conflict and other situations of violence.
- Understand how addressing harmful information intersects with various applicable legal frameworks including international humanitarian law (IHL) and international human rights law (IHRL).
- Discuss existing measures and recommendations for humanitarian organizations to address harmful information.

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Digital technologies have become increasingly important in coordinating humanitarian responses to alleviate the suffering of those affected by armed conflict and other violence. Despite their importance, technological advancements could exacerbate existing vulnerabilities or trigger new ones. Notably, digital risks such as the spread of harmful information (encompassing misinformation, disinformation, hate speech, malinformation, and narratives aiming at disrupting humanitarian operations)<sup>1</sup> have exacerbated the vulnerabilities of people affected by armed conflict and other situations of violence.

Harmful information has always spread during humanitarian crises. The digitalization of communication systems allows for its spread, online, at an unprecedented scale, speed and reach. Recent advances in AI and its democratization have also meant that the spread of dis/misinformation, and hate speech is becoming steadily more prevalent and potent on social media platforms and messaging applications. Today, it is cheaper and easier to create content; at the same time, the identification of AI-generated text, audio and visuals is more difficult to discern by both individuals and detection mechanisms alike. In conflict settings, in particular, harmful narratives can cause serious harm to people affected and can at times consist of a violation of IHL.

The rise in the spread of harmful information has direct and indirect consequences on humanitarian operations, aid workers, and other people affected by armed conflict and violence. For instance, online hate speech has instigated discrimination and targeting of minorities, leading to physical and psychological harm. In addition, dis/misinformation

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<sup>1</sup> International Committee of the Red Cross ICRC, Harmful Information – Misinformation, disinformation and hate speech in armed conflict and other situations of violence: ICRC initial findings and perspectives on adapting protection approaches, July 2021, available at: <https://shop.icrc.org/harmful-information-misinformation-disinformation-and-hate-speech-in-armed-conflict-and-other-situations-of-violence-icrc-initial-findings-and-perspectives-on-adapting-protection-approaches-pdf-en.html>

on the availability of emergency or lifesaving services can exacerbate the suffering of civilians affected by conflicts and compromise their safety and situational awareness. Disinformation campaigns targeting humanitarian organizations can impact their acceptance and security, disrupt humanitarian response and put their staff at risk of harassment and physical harm. In various contexts of armed conflict, humanitarian organizations have been the target of online disinformation and malinformation campaigns including accusations of collusion with warring parties and fuelling of conflict dynamics. These campaigns have resulted in calls for the expulsion of some humanitarian organizations despite the devastating impact of the war on millions of civilians.

## CONTEXT, ACTORS, AND HUMANITARIAN RESPONSES

The spread of harmful information poses several challenges for humanitarian organizations. These include understanding the **context** in which harmful information spreads, determining how to appropriately mitigate the associated risks, identifying the role of **actors** such as social media companies or digital influencers in enabling the spread of harmful information and exploring the intersection and complementarities between various applicable legal frameworks.

### CONTEXT

Harmful information does not arise in a vacuum. The common thread in harmful information campaigns is pre-existing social tension or a history of conflict, as well as other foundational factors linked to existing vulnerabilities in situations of armed conflict and other violence. For example, pre-existing ethnic and religious tensions coupled with conflict parties relying strongly on extensive disinformation campaigns to thicken the fog of war and create an even more unsafe and difficult environment for people affected and humanitarian actors alike.<sup>2</sup> In addition, limited access to information, and existing information vacuums can fuel the spread of disinformation. For instance, repeated internet shutdowns result in limited access to information for those affected by conflict, forcing them to rely on third parties and creating a breeding ground for harmful information.

In such contexts, humanitarian organizations face the challenge of how to develop and implement mechanisms to combat harmful information, a phenomenon that has existed long before their operations or the conflict. Humanitarian organizations grapple particularly with how to address harmful information in ways that does not exacerbate its spread, or trigger harm. Humanitarian response should not infringe on other rights by addressing the spread of harmful information, such as the right to freedom of expression and opinion. Additionally, humanitarian response should remain guided by humanitarian principles.<sup>3</sup>

### ACTORS

The digital transformation has introduced novel factors that can be leveraged in ways that enable the spread of harmful information online, such as social media platforms and messaging apps. In addition to state actors, actors of influence in that space include the social media companies whose policies affect information ecosystems, digital influencers, cyber actors, and other private actors (or companies) that play various roles in creating harmful content or spreading harmful narratives. There is a genuine risk that social media platforms, in the way their algorithms are designed, could be leveraged to amplify content that promotes discrimination or violence against certain communities or otherwise undermine respect to international protective legal frameworks. The responsibilities of social media companies to conduct human rights due diligence in identifying, preventing and mitigating human rights violations is encompassed in the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights and the OECD due diligence guidance for responsible business conduct. In the context of humanitarian action. Such

<sup>2</sup> How Disinformation Campaigns Endanger Lives in Sudan, 2024, available at: <https://smex.org/how-disinformation-campaigns-endanger-lives-in-sudan/>

<sup>3</sup> United States Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy, Public Diplomacy and the New “Old” War: Countering State-Sponsored Disinformation, 2020, available at <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Public-Diplomacy-and-the-New-Old-War-Countering-State-Sponsored-Disinformation.pdf>

frameworks can further facilitate engagement with social media platforms on their role and responsibilities when operating in conflict-affected contexts.

## HUMANITARIAN RESPONSES

Not all forms of harmful information are unlawful, a harmful information narrative can be lawful yet harmful. In armed conflict and other situations of violence, humanitarian responses aim at addressing harmful information in a way that accounts for conflict-specific considerations. A humanitarian response aiming at addressing harmful information should strive to achieve multiple objectives, including improving the protection of people affected by armed conflict and other situations of violence by engaging relevant actors to respect relevant legal frameworks, and uphold their obligations and responsibilities and rights, safety and dignity of individuals – both in the digital and the physical world. Such a response could also aim at strengthening the resilience of people by supporting conflict-affected persons and communities to discern the information space better and navigate the impacts of harmful information. This also includes activities aiming at addressing information vacuums and improving access to information. Finally, a humanitarian response to harmful information in conflict settings should aim at preserving the space for principled humanitarian action and protecting humanitarian operations and staff.

## GUIDING QUESTIONS

- In situations of armed conflict, harmful information is understood as “the spread of information that may lead to injury, displacement and suffering, or that might undermine the respect of international humanitarian law”<sup>4</sup>, how do harmful information campaigns arise and what factors enable harmful narratives and content to spread?
- What are the risks arising from harmful information campaigns for both people affected by armed conflict and other situations of violence, and humanitarian operations? What are the factors that enable harmful narratives or content to instigate harm to people affected by armed conflict and other situations of violence?
- What is the role of social media companies and messaging applications in addressing harmful information in situations of conflict and other situations of violence?
- What is the role of civil society actors in addressing harmful information in armed conflict situations and other violence?
- How can humanitarian organizations support people affected by the spread of harmful information?

## ADDITIONAL MATERIAL

- Access Now (2024), *Shrinking democracy, growing violence: internet shutdowns in 2023, #KeepItOn Report* [2023-KIO-Report.pdf \(accessnow.org\)](https://www.accessnow.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/2023-KIO-Report.pdf)
- International Commission of Human Rights Experts on Ethiopia, A/HRC/54/CRP.3 (13 October 2023) [a-hrc-54-crp-3.pdf \(ohchr.org\)](https://www.ohchr.org/en/hrbodies/hrc/interim-reports/interim-report-no-3)
- ICRC (2021), [Harmful Information – Misinformation, disinformation and hate speech in armed conflict and other situations of violence: ICRC initial findings and perspectives on adapting protection approaches | International Committee of the Red Cross](https://www.icrc.org/en/document/harmful-information-misinformation-disinformation-and-hate-speech-in-armed-conflict-and-other-situations-of-violence)
- Claire Wardle, PhD (June 2024) [Report – A Conceptual Analysis of the Overlaps and Differences between Hate Speech, Misinformation and Disinformation \(June 2024\)](https://www.wardle.com/reports/2024/06/24/report-a-conceptual-analysis-of-the-overlaps-and-differences-between-hate-speech-misinformation-and-disinformation-june-2024/)
- Amnesty International (October 2023) [Ethiopia: 'A death sentence for my father': Meta's contribution to human rights abuses in northern Ethiopia – Amnesty International, AFR 25/7292/2023](https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/AFR25/7292/2023/)
- Joelle Rizk, [Why is the ICRC concerned by 'harmful information' in war?](https://blogs.icrc.org/law-and-policy/wp-content/uploads/sites/102/2024/09/why-is-the-icrc-concerned-by-harmful-information-in-war-2.pdf), September 10, 2024, Humanitarian Law and Policy

<sup>4</sup> Joelle Rizk, Why is the ICRC concerned by 'harmful information' in war? September 10 2024, available at: <https://blogs.icrc.org/law-and-policy/wp-content/uploads/sites/102/2024/09/why-is-the-icrc-concerned-by-harmful-information-in-war-2.pdf>