DIGITAL RISKS IN SITUATIONS OF ARMED CONFLICT
RESPONDING TO NEW VECTORS OF VULNERABILITY IN A CHANGING HUMANITARIAN LANDSCAPE

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Background

The so-called Digital Revolution has transformed the humanitarian sector. It has introduced innovative ways of capturing and exploiting digitalized information[1] alongside new forms of digital humanitarian assistance[2]. While digital technologies can offer many opportunities to improve the lives of populations affected by armed conflict, there is also growing concern around their possible negative implications. This includes the (often unintended) side-effects of digital data experimentation, violations of privacy, and mishandling of sensitive information that goes along with the humanitarian sector's efforts to deploy emerging technologies in already fragile contexts.

Digital technologies are also transforming dynamics of conflicts and the way States, non-State actors and other stakeholders are conducting warfare. As conventional ways of conducting armed conflict are being enhanced, transformed, or replaced by digitally-derived forms of violence, persecution and exploitation, affected populations are being exposed to new vulnerabilities. People will have to contend with cyber-attacks that target life-saving critical infrastructure and communications systems. They will also have to navigate emergent and subtle forms of digital surveillance, electronic exploitation, and the "weaponization" of information.

The Need

Increasingly sophisticated actors of violence, new tools and forms of conflict leading to new risks for vulnerable populations compel us to reconsider matters of humanitarian protection in the digital age. As new types of human vulnerabilities arise from the use of digital technologies, humanitarian practice must develop the ability to identify and mitigate those emerging risks. As yet, there is little shared clarity on the full scope and nature of those digital threats, their associated humanitarian consequences for conflict-affected populations, and the implications for those humanitarian organizations who try to protect and assist them.

Humanitarian actors across the sector and beyond face a common set of needs in tackling this challenge: (a) to improve practitioners' understanding of the rapidly shifting digital threat landscape; (b) to examine the implications this has for conflict-affected populations and protection-related work; and (c) to raise awareness across other sectors (private, military, government sectors); and (d) to engage in an honest debate around the promise and risks associated with our own technologically-driven and digitally-enhanced efforts.

Our Goal

We are convening stakeholders from humanitarian agencies, governments, the private sector, academia, and civil society in an effort to explore these needs and more specifically to *develop a deeper understanding* about the *relationship between digital risk and the protection of individuals and communities affected by situations of armed conflict, and* **to identify areas for cooperative action** *to enable humanitarian actors and their partners to* **respond more effectively** *and appropriately to protection needs*.

With a focus on improving practice, the Symposium turns a spotlight on the special challenges that emerge at the intersection of digital risks and humanitarian protection. It invites exploration around the principles, ethics, and standards that guide our profession; the normative and legal frameworks designed to protect civilian populations; and the humanitarian practices and capabilities in place to meet the needs of vulnerable populations in the digital age.

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[1] Examples: (1) Employing remote sensing tools for augmenting conflict early warning capacities and documenting human rights abuse; (2) Leveraging mobile data solutions for tracking the conditions, profiles, and routes of transit of affected populations on the move; (3) Exploiting meta data from call records to predict the spread of infectious diseases; (4) Harvesting social media for sentiment analysis and rumor tracking in fragile contexts; etc.

[2] Information is increasingly viewed a life-saving commodity in and of itself and, some would argue, a human right for populations affected.

Symposium Framework

The Symposium will run over **one day and a half** and will be organized around plenary keynotes, workshops, interactive experiences, side events, and panel discussions around the following core themes and objectives.

Day One: New Vectors of Vulnerability

Purpose: *To provide participants with a better view of the digital vulnerability landscape faced by conflict-affected populations and those who serve them.*

The first day of the conference will see a diverse group of presenters/facilitators foster new insights and create a more holistic view for participants of the nature and range of the challenges and risks presented by the digitalization of both conflict and humanitarian action.

(1) Take stock of a rapidly shifting digital threat landscape.
This first part will aim to expose participants to the evolving nature of digitally-born threats, their associated vulnerabilities, and how they play out in terms of humanitarian consequences for conflict-affected populations. It will touch upon a range of sub-topics including: (a) digital surveillance, monitoring, and intrusion; (b) the weaponization of information systems and digital technologies; and (c) kinetic cyber operations.

(2) Explore the implications of this threat landscape for matters of humanitarian protection.
With a deeper understanding of the above in view, we invite an honest exploration of approaches that characterize contemporary humanitarian protection (such as operational practices, programmatic approaches, policy frameworks, and coordination efforts) in order to consider their fitness in the face of newly defined digital challenges. We will interrogate the ways in which traditional notions of dignity, vulnerability, and protection are challenged by newly emerging digital threats, and explore the ways in which conventional humanitarian approaches and coordination mechanisms are fit for purpose in this rapidly shifting and unfamiliar digital terrain.

(3) Examine emerging strategies for improving protection outcomes
In this session we aim to debate the nature of the emerging agendas around digital transformation and innovation when it comes to matters of humanitarian protection. The session engages discussion about whether or not, and how the agendas around digital transformation and digital innovation are informed by digital risks in situations of armed conflict. What are the promises and challenges such efforts—as currently framed and carried out— carry for affected populations? What are the measures needed to mitigate against the introduction of new forms of digitally-derived risk for conflict-affected populations and the organizations and agencies that serve them?

Day Two: Toward a Shared Agenda

Purpose: *To help participants apply the learning from day one to identify where they can make a difference, and begin to create a shared agenda for action for improving protection outcomes.*

Based on the insights gained during the first day, we will focus the discussion on contributing to improved protection outcomes in the context of this rapidly changing digital terrain.

(4) Identify opportunities for complementary action.
This last part will aim to identify what issues warrant immediate attention, including roles and responsibilities, and how participants might work together towards addressing them. What are the gaps in knowledge, practice, and policy that pertain to the digital vulnerabilities of crisis-affected populations, and criteria for prioritizing those urgent to address? What strengths and capacities can the different organizations, communities of practice, industries, and sectors represented by participants contribute to addressing these gaps? Where are there emerging opportunities for collaboration and collective action, and potential resources and platforms for continued engagement and coordination?