New technologies – always an improvement?

Lisbeth Pilegaard

The person affected by a humanitarian crisis is, if they are 'lucky', subjected to a stream of processes such as various sectoral needs assessments, registration, distribution, assistance tracking and so on. What if all this could be brought rapidly together into validated, corruption-proof lists of beneficiaries with records of their entitlements across programmes as well as their consumption and participation levels? Just imagine a single data card with biometric data, information about other members of the household and their entitlements for shelter, water, food, health, education... And just imagine if that card also carried data of how many distributions or cash transfers had already been received, whether children were malnourished or not and whether they had been vaccinated or attend school or not. This would allow aid to be tailored to the household, allow beneficiaries control of their overall entitlements and choice in their utilisation, and offer increased efficiency of assistance and, not least, fewer assessments.

Technology is supposed to enhance our collective ability to recognise, describe, coordinate, resource and respond to crisi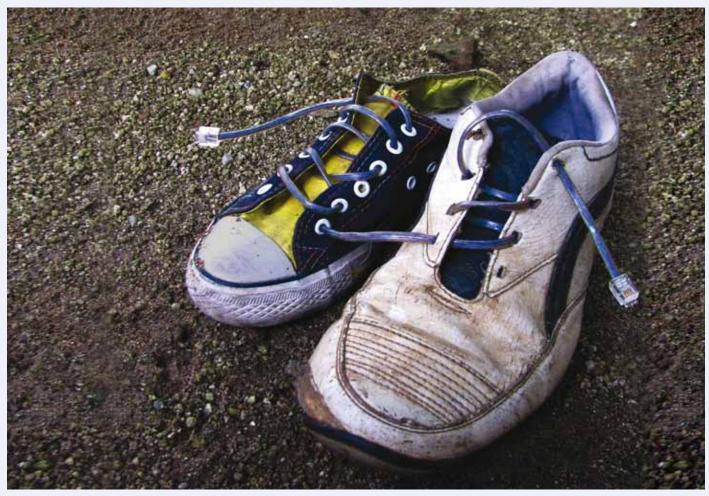s-affected people. But the support environment is critical. Technology has to be more than good, simple to use and robust – it has to be widely adopted to be useful in creating new, shared capabilities. If everyone is using different technologies the results can be worse than no technological development at all. Various systems for rapid digitised registration and use of biometrics, for example, have been piloted (including by the Norwegian Refugee Council). Many evaluations of such technology have been positive but where are these technologies today? No agency has the power to say, "We will now adopt this technology and not the other one – and we will all use it." There is an absence of the necessary critical mass of decision-making power in the humanitarian world to invoke shared technology standards.

The UN seems to be the obvious choice for the development of standard technologies (as it has the convening power). But a UN agency must take on this role explicitly and ensure competence and develop legitimacy through an open and participatory process that can be move through testing to adoption and dissemination.

Let us not stop inventing and innovating. Let us work on appropriate technology – technology that can be supported and maintained where we work and that adds value and new opportunities, technology that is designed to do real jobs that are really needed in our field of operations. And let us get real aid workers and beneficiaries involved in product specification and design.

We must not let technology become a barrier to engaging and communicating with the people who need protection and assistance. The risks are there that it further separates us from people we wish to work with and for. The greatest technological achievements – remote monitoring, for example? – may undermine our purpose by enabling us to be physically absent. Humanitarian action is also about proximity, compassion and solidarity, whilst witnessing and documenting the violation of rights.

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