



Humanitarian Data and Trust Initiative

How can humanitarian organizations, states, civil society, academia and the private sector join forces to maximize the benefits of technology and humanitarian data while minimizing the risks of doing harm?

Digital transformation is changing our behavior at a rapid pace, including in humanitarian crises and situations of armed conflict. Humanitarian actors must channel this transformation so that it first and foremost serves people affected by crises, thereby meeting the highest standards of data protection and data responsibility more broadly. New technologies and data can help increase the scale, reach and effectiveness of humanitarian action. For instance, digital technologies can improve the search for missing persons, provide faster and more accurate data to decision-makers, and get lifesaving information to affected people. Alongside these benefits, digital technologies also come with potential risks that must be carefully analyzed and mitigated.

This is a critical issue for the sector to address and the stakes are high. The safe, ethical and effective management of data can increase trust across the sector. To achieve this, for instance, data generated for humanitarian purposes should only be used for such purposes. This includes ensuring that data that has been collected for exclusively humanitarian purposes by humanitarian actors acting in a neutral, impartial, and independent manner, is not accessed and used by third parties for purposes incompatible with it – whether commercial or conflict related. In order to ‘do no harm’, humanitarians must be able to navigate the technical and ethical issues involved when working with technology and data. This is of particular concern when humanitarian actors handle sensitive data - data that is likely to lead to harm when exposed. Irresponsible data management in humanitarian contexts can place already vulnerable people and communities at greater risk, for example by exposing their location or identifying a key vulnerability. These risks are typically more severe in conflict settings.

Because the humanitarian data ecosystem is inherently interconnected, no individual organization can tackle all of these challenges alone. Inter-organizational leadership and collaboration is required to guide collective, sector-wide action. Solidarity among practitioners sharing best practices, lessons learned, and strategies for mitigating risk will also be essential to long-term success in this area.

The Humanitarian Data and Trust Initiative (HDTI) is a multi-stakeholder initiative launched by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the OCHA Centre for Humanitarian Data (“the Centre”), and Switzerland to advance the protection and responsible use of humanitarian data. Through its three pillars of «Policy & Dialogue», «Research & Development» and «Education & Outreach», it aims to connect technological expertise with policy research and catalyze collective action on data responsibility.

The HDTI serves to convene discussions on specific pertinent issues related to humanitarian data and trust with the following aims.

Aims

- To accelerate the **responsible deployment of data-related technologies in humanitarian action**. This will be achieved, *inter alia*, through practical guidance and joint implementation of actions for data responsibility.
- To **minimize potential risks and maximize benefits for affected people** arising from data-related technologies. To improve the understanding of and to build an evidence-base on the risks and benefits of data management for affected people and humanitarian actors.
- To **develop shared principles and guidelines** and **build consensus** among participating states and humanitarian organizations on how to support and practice responsible data management.
- To **build trust** between parties through dialogue and transparency.

HDTI's three pillars

- *Policy & Dialogue*: convene discussions on specific priority themes that help to catalyze collective action.
- *Research & Development*: advance research that will enable well-informed policy decisions/recommendations and practical action.
- *Education & Outreach*: disseminate the outcomes of thematic discussions and research results to the relevant audiences.

The initiative will begin with a strategic dialogue on the specific challenges and opportunities of humanitarian data organized in collaboration with Wilton Park. This dialogue will help identify ways to maximize benefits and minimize risks in the use of digital technologies for better humanitarian outcomes. It will also explore collaboration with other humanitarian organizations, states and academic institutions towards the responsible use of humanitarian data. Interested parties will be invited to join this and other relevant dialogues as the Initiative develops.

Previous work and complementary efforts

Over the past several years, the ICRC and the Centre have spearheaded the protection and responsible use of humanitarian data, *inter alia* with the publication of ICRC's "[Handbook on Data Protection in Humanitarian Action](#)", the working draft "[OCHA Data Responsibility Guidelines](#)" and a series of joint [Guidance Notes](#) on topics of common concern. These key sources of operational guidance have been complemented by a series of conversations, including the "Symposium on Digital Risks in Armed Conflicts and other Situations of Violence" in December 2018 and two events at Wilton Park in May and October 2019, focused on "[Data Responsibility in Humanitarian Action: From Principle to Practice](#)" and "[Digital Dignity in Armed Conflict: a Roadmap for Principled Humanitarian Action in the Age of Digital Transformation](#)", respectively. Finally, in January 2020, the Centre, IOM, and UNHCR initiated a Sub-Group on Data Responsibility under the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) to develop sector-wide operational guidance on data responsibility. The Sub-Group consists of 20 member organizations, including the ICRC, and is on-track to deliver the joint operational guidance for endorsement by the end of 2020.

The HDTI will build on the experience, insight, and momentum gained through these different efforts as it advances the protection and responsible use of humanitarian data. Across its three pillars, the HDTI's activities will also complement the individual and collective efforts of key stakeholders across the system to promote the safe, ethical, and effective management of data in humanitarian action at the global and country level.

Planned activities

- Announcement of HDTI, Road to Bern - April 23, 2020
- Panel launch, ICRC Handbook Release – September 1, 2020
- HDTI Wilton Park Dialogue, kick off – September 17/18, 2020
- UN World Data Forum, virtual forum - October 20, 2020
- HDTI Wilton Park Dialogue, expert retreat – April 2021
- UN World Data Forum, parallel session – October 2021
- *Additional activities are under development and will be announced in due course*

HDTI activities are described in the attached timeline.

Contact



ICRC



Schweizerische Eidgenossenschaft
Confédération suisse
Confederazione Svizzera
Confederaziun svizra

Federal Department of Foreign Affairs FDFA

International Committee of the Red Cross

19, avenue de la Paix
1202 Geneva, Switzerland
icrc.org

Centre for Humanitarian Data

UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
Fluwelen Burgwal 58
2511 CJ, The Hague, The Netherlands
centre.humdata.org

Federal Department of Foreign Affairs

Directorate of Political Affairs
Human Security Division
Bundesgasse 32
3003 Bern, Switzerland
fdfa.admin.ch