European Commission

DG ECHO policy framework for

humanitarian digitalisation

Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations

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Civil Protection & Humanitarian Aid

1. Foreword

DG ECHO set out in its Communication on Humanitarian Aid[1] (HAC) the ambition to support humanitarian digitalisation and "encourage further use of digital tools, including through joint work to build an enabling environment". Following the overall EU approach to build a Europe fit for the Digital Age[2] and the parallel work to establish digitalisation as a priority for international cooperation[3], DG ECHO aims to help coordinate work on integration of digital tools in humanitarian aid, promoting a human-centric approach to digitalisation, and advocating for the safe use of technologies and an ethical digital transformation.

[1] Communication on the "EU's humanitarian action: new challenges, same principles" COM(2021) 110

[2] Communication on "2030 Digital Compass: the European way for the Digital Decade" COM(2021) 118

[3] Commission Staff Working Document on "Digital4Development: mainstreaming digital technologies and services into EU Development Policy" SWD (2017) 157 final

Humanitarian aid for Syrian refugees in Jordan
At the EU-funded registration centre run by UNHCR, iris-scan biometrics technology is used for refugee registration, identity management and documentation renewal.
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2. What role for donors in supporting digitalisation?

The aim of a donor digitalisation policy is to support our partners to employ digital tools where these have efficiency and effectiveness benefits, in a manner consistent with the humanitarian principles, and whilst fully taking into account and mitigating risks.

The final objective is to see digital tools being responsibly integrated into proposals with risks fully thought through and mitigated, and with a clear cost/benefit analysis showing the added value of these tools in the projects. In order to achieve this, we see the need

Cover photo:
A chance for South Sudanese children to attend school again
'Can't Wait to Learn' is one component of the EU-funded project that tries to make learning fun.
It uses innovative technology tailored to children affected by conflict. It provides pupils with solar powered tablets, loaded with interactive games that help improve literacy and numeracy.
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to create the support structure and enabling environment that allows humanitarians to step up their use of digital tools where it makes sense and can be done responsibly, as well as to increase the confidence of our own staff and programme assessors in the ability of humanitarian partners to use digital technologies in a way that increases efficiency and effectiveness and which ensures that it does no digital harm.

Digitalisation is not a new subject, with several of the issues having been explored for some years already, whilst many of the key challenges are longstanding ones that are emphasised or exacerbated by digital tools. DG ECHO is not acting in a vacuum in aiming to support the use of digital tools. Many donors and humanitarian actors, including strategic partners of DG ECHO, have developed or are developing strategies for digitalisation, whilst several dedicated programmes and sectoral initiatives around digitalisation, data and innovation already exist. However, these activities are uncoordinated and the end result is often less than the sum of its parts. Previous efforts at stepping up coordination that launched after the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016 have withered and there is a need for a renewed attempt at sectoral coordination on digitalisation. Helping to create an enabling environment is where donors can provide an added value, building on, refining and helping to coordinate existing initiatives, whilst aiming to fill gaps and support the creation of new tools where needed. Whilst no single donor can set the policy direction in this sector, their convening power and ability to help coordinate and bring together coalitions of actors to address these topics in a coherent manner is also an area of added value.

3. Policy framework for creating the enabling environment

DG ECHO has identified two fundamental areas in which work is required to build an enabling environment for humanitarian digitalisation, based on

Upon arrival, refugees present their registration documents for verification of their eligibility for winterization assistance, through mobile phone technology. UNHCR's winterization programme prioritizes vulnerable refugees, living at high altitudes in Lebanon's coldest regions.

Photo credit: UNHCR/S.Hoibak

discussions with partners, strategic dialogues, and programming experience as well as dedicated events such as at the European Humanitarian Forum in 2022. These areas are: Building Trust in digital tools and helping invest in and scale innovation. Underpinning both areas and supported through the work on each, there is a need to expand the knowledge base amongst humanitarians regarding the assessment of the benefits, risks and mitigations of digital tools.

There are a number of factors which will condition our approach to developing this framework.

Focus on enablers – Whilst it is recognised that supporting the digital transformation requires investment, fully funding our partners digital transformation or scaling up direct support to innovation and development of technology would not be within the means of DG ECHO's budget or funding modalities. Some funding through specific programmes such as the policy support of the Enhanced Response Capacity (ERC) or through cooperation with the EU's research and innovation funds is foreseen, however the focus of DG ECHO's digitalisation framework will be

on establishing the enabling environment – using the comparative advantages of donor organisations in convening and helping to set standards through policy and programming to create a climate which encourages digitalisation, addressing the underlying barriers, minimising and managing risks, and facilitating our partners' investment in digital tools and programmes according to their own expertise and specific mandates.

Work together with partners – DG ECHO cannot address digitalisation alone but does have a role to play in provoking increased coordination and cooperation, including with other donors. As set out in the Humanitarian Aid Communication, DG ECHO will *"encourage further use of digital tools…**through joint work with partners** to create the enabling environment"*. Many of the obstacles to be tackled in creating an enabling environment first require development of a common understanding on the way forward between humanitarian organisations. Supporting the work of our partner organisations in building the needed tools and standards to tackle these obstacles will be required. This will include supporting partners and helping to convene sectoral initiatives around developing standards, which could become part of DG ECHO's policy toolbox. DG ECHO will also engage with other donors working on this issue, to help coalesce donor initiatives on digitalisation and ensure different initiatives push in the same direction whilst also building on synergies where possible.

Philippines: Building back better after Typhoon Haiyan

Many communities were entirely cut off as a result of the 300 km/h winds' impact. ECHO supported Télécoms Sans Frontières in restoring communications, internet access and phone services. Thousands of free calls were made possible, so that survivors could let their relatives know they were alive.

Photo credit: Télécoms Sans Frontières

Tool not a target – digitalisation is a modality or tool rather than an end in itself. Our partners are encouraged to integrate the digital transformation into the current ways of working, rather than transforming these ways of working to support digital tools. The focus of humanitarian activities must remain to support urgent and basic needs, and digital tools are only useful in so far as they help to achieve that core goal whilst improving and increasing the efficiency of humanitarian interventions.

To support the creation of the digital enabling environment, DG ECHO will focus on *five key actions*, which will build the trust and scaling pillars of the enabling environment, whilst helping to expand the knowledge base. These actions represent DG ECHO's contribution to the wider humanitarian efforts to address digitalisation and should be seen as complementary to other initiatives taking place in this space. Where possible, DG ECHO will work with other donors and partners to align activities with ongoing work on digitalisation and ensure that they are mutually reinforcing.

EU/ECHO in Arua, Uganda

A mother with her children goes through the registration process at the Imvepi transit centre in Arua district, located in northwestern Uganda on August 28, 2017.

©EU/ECHO/Edward Echwalu

A. Mitigating risks and building trust

Building on ongoing initiatives in the sector and the existing guidance and best practice, DG ECHO will support activities on several building blocks which will help build the basis of a trust framework for digital tools – ensuring that digitalisation is based on respect for the humanitarian principles, and that a people-centred, needs based and context specific use of digitalisation is adhered to. Work in this area will include continuing to support the creation of common approaches to implementing data protection norms and embedding safe interoperability of data, as well as exploring the development of new approaches and tools which can help ensure the accountability of digital programmes and can assist in evaluating and countering misinformation and enhancing cybersecurity. The issues of access and connectivity will also be explored with a view to drawing lessons from both development cooperation and civil protection and developing tools which embed these considerations in digital humanitarian interventions. The broad programme of work will be supported through two key actions on mitigating risk and building trust.

1. **Endorsement of an ethical framework for humanitarian digitalisation –** To tackle the trust barrier that is acting as a brake on digital tools being incorporated and highlighted in programming, a measure of confidence is required amongst programme designers and assessors, who are not digital specialists, on how to measure cost and efficiency benefits when employing digital technologies, as well as assurance that risks have been fully assessed and appropriate mitigating measures taken. An ethical framework would bring together the wide range of resources available for assessing and tackling ethical issues around digitalisation and provide humanitarian organisations and their staff with a means to translate global or organisation-level policies on e.g. data responsibility people-centred approaches, digital access etc. into practical measures at the project level. DG ECHO will support our partner organisations in their efforts to develop an ethical framework for humanitarian digitalisation, will seek to connect other donors and stakeholders to the initiative, and examine the outcomes with a view to endorsing the framework at a high-level and embedding it into programming recommendations.

Supporting refugees from South Sudan in Ethiopia

A seller uses an app as a customer looks on at a fresh food market in Tierkidi refugee camp, Gambella, Ethiopia.

Electronic cash transfers, funded by EU humanitarian aid, give refugees more choice in getting the produce they need, and support the local economy.

© European Union, 2022 (photographer: Eduardo Soteras Jalil)

Supporting survivors of sexual and gender-based violence to heal and work again

Rita is a member of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community which is persecuted in Uganda. She ran away from her country for fear that her life was in danger. She hopes attitudes will change and she will be able to return home. While in Kakuma, she is taking online courses in psychology and hopes to one day help others who may find themselves in her situation.

© 2018 European Union (Photographer: Barbara Minishi)

2. **Principles for interoperability –** DG ECHO has worked with the Donor Cash Forum (DCF) group of cash-donors, to create principles for the safe and secure interoperability of data between humanitarian organisations and, where relevant and possible, social protection actors. Following the endorsement of these principles by the DCF

donors in 2022, DG ECHO will work on the practical implementation of interoperability in line with the principles. This work stream will be supported through dedicated ERC projects with the International Federation of the Red Cross and World Vision/the Collaborative Cash Delivery Network (CCD) which will aim at creating technical standards as well as legal and policy best practice for people-centred interoperability of data and systems as a public good within the humanitarian community, and under which a roadmap for humanitarian interoperability will be produced in 2024.

B. Supporting investment and scale

Whilst dedicated funding for scaling innovations is limited within DG ECHO's funding structure and mandate, efforts have been made to work on the **investment and scale** of digital technology, including through direct interventions to support innovators such as the European Innovation Council Horizon Prize for Affordable High-Tech for Humanitarian aid (together with DG RTD) and policy funding aimed at supporting small innovators to reach scale. Partner organisations have highlighted that there is a need to continue and where possible increase the direct support to innovation, whilst also improving coordination and exchange of information between humanitarian

EU response to cyclone Idai in Mozambique

Drones are used in the Sofala province to map the extent of the damage after cyclone Idai, to see where humanitarian aid trucks can go and which areas displaced people can return to. EU humanitarian aid has supported drone equipment and trainings given by the World Food Programme to Mozambican national disaster management staff.

© European Union 2019 (photographer: Anouk Delafortrie)

Guatemala Volcán de Fuego eruptions: Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection deployment

EU volcanology's expertsists installed monitoring sensors around the Fuego vVolcano, to enable Guatemala's to monitor its activity and thus the INSIVUMEH to gather can count with more accurate data on pyroclastic flows and to provide the dimensions and characteristics of the lahars, functioning as an Early Warning System. In the image, an INSIVUMEH staff checking data.
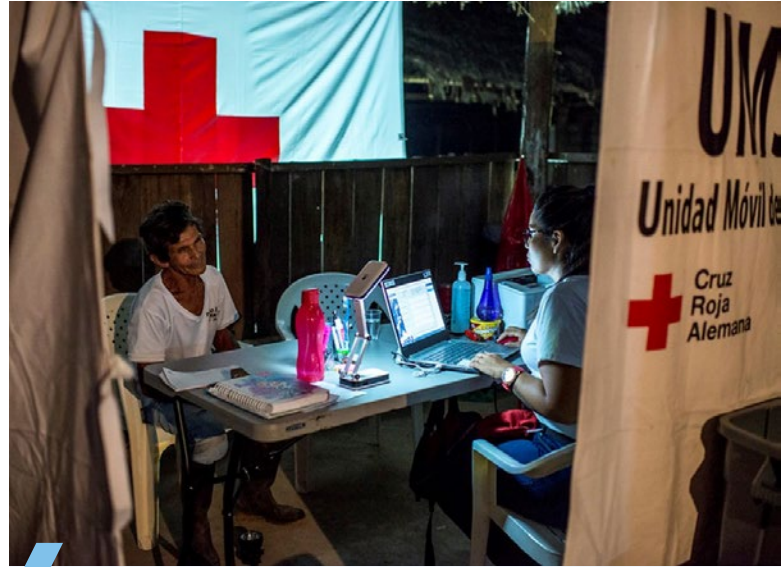
© 2018 European Union (photo by S. Billy)

agencies and donors on digital and exploring new mechanisms to help support and scale innovations throughout the sector.

Whilst recognising that the design, procurement and scaling of technology is a humanitarian-led and partner specific process, DG ECHO will explore several routes to providing support to our partners in investing and scaling in innovation:

3. **Humanitarian Innovation Prize** – together with DG RTD and the European Innovation Council and SMEs Executive Agency (EISMEA), DG ECHO has launched a pilot prize to support humanitarian innovators, with a particular emphasis on recognising private sector suppliers of technology.

4. **Research on supporting innovation in the humanitarian value chain –** DG ECHO has commissioned research through the INSPIRE consortium to provide recommendations on how best to support innovation through the value chain, from design or procurement to scaling of pilots within and between organisations.

5. **Explore the recognition of a single humanitarian digital community –** Recognising the multiplicity of communities and initiatives on

different aspects of digitalisation, DG ECHO will explore with its partners and other donors the possibility to support the recognition of an existing grouping of humanitarian actors as the major international fora to engage on questions relating to humanitarian digitalisation, to provide a platform for the discussion and adoption of standards and guidance and as a knowledge hub for the sharing of best practice.

DG ECHO will take stock of the impact of these initiatives after their initial or pilot phase and will continue to explore, together with other donors and partner organisations, how best to support their development and procurement of innovation and technology, as well as routes to scaling promising innovations within the humanitarian community.

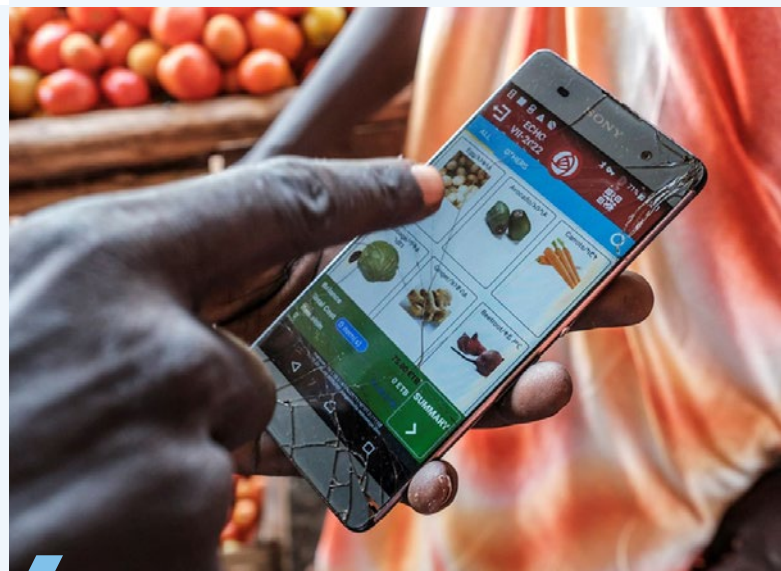**Delivering healthcare to Colombia's Amazon villages**
© 2019 European Union (Photographer N. Mazars)

IPA-CRO FLOODS
A rapid deployment kit was setup by a team from Luxembourg to provide Internet connectivity and coordination services, consisting of NoSaCo® Rapid, Nomadic Satellite Communication system and inflatable 2.4m satellite antenna.
Story: Marieta Koleva / © European Union/ECHO

Supporting refugees from South Sudan in Ethiopia
A seller uses an app to finalise a transaction at a fresh food market in Tierkidi refugee camp, Gambella, Ethiopia.
© European Union, 2022 (photographer: Eduardo Soteras Jalil)

4. Way forward

Creating the enabling environment for responsible and people centred humanitarian digitalisation can only be achieved by working together. DG ECHO welcomes input and support from its partners in the delivery of this agenda. We will work with other donors, humanitarians and the wider community on the key actions set out here and will leverage sectoral gatherings such as the European Humanitarian Forum, as well as bilateral and multilateral dialogues to discuss and promote the activities under development.