

# DATAFICATION OF THE HUMANITARIAN SECTOR: EFFICACY AND ETHICS

The role of data and analysis within humanitarian operations has changed and evolved considerably in the past 20 years with rapid datafication or 'digital humanitarianism' since 2010. While this has diversified and improved analysis and decision-making, it has also led to ethical issues and new operational risks around data management. Consequently, the ethical issues and risks of operational data management and the potential harm caused to affected populations has also changed at a similar pace, albeit with less outward attention in comparison to the push for "data enhanced decision-making".

The Data and Displacement [Research Team](#) conducted 34 interviews between April to July 2021, with a total of 42 humanitarians and actors from a range of UN Agencies, donors, and international non-governmental organisations. The aim was to understand the ways in which humanitarian data has evolved in the last two decades; the impact of data on use and decision-making; and the role of innovation and technology on the ethics and efficacy of humanitarian data.

Key challenges identified in the research are:

- ▶ Humanitarian data is an ever-evolving term with no set definition. While some actors recognise similar characteristics in the data used for humanitarian purposes, its scope has been broadened with the use of new data acquisition modalities.
- ▶ In this context, two contradictory narratives have emerged: one that suggests there are persistent data gaps in the humanitarian sector, and the other which posits there is too much data.
- ▶ Compounded by the upward movement of data, the humanitarian data landscape has become an increasingly competitive space with humanitarians who vie for funding, visibility or 'power'.
- ▶ A series of tensions have also arisen around the quality versus the quantity of data collected, which can detract from more fundamental questions about how far and in what ways data informs decision-making. Further still, it also underlines the impact of data in relation to quantity. For example, would a data minimisation approach to data collection result in more impactful data?
- ▶ While the pace at which technology has influenced humanitarian data systems is widely acknowledged, the imperatives for data responsibility and accountability must also be operationally matched to balance innovation with responsible, ethical and inclusive practices.

*"The numbers without the story behind them and without that richness really don't tell us much at all. So, you know, I feel like it's a bit of a rubber band that keeps bouncing back and forth between the quantitative and qualitative tension, and finding that balance is tricky." (UN Agency)*

*"The problem we have is that decision making is by and large a black box, nobody wants to talk about, nobody understands it, decisions are political in nature, it is the choice between different options, that's the definition of politics, it's deciding who gets what, you cannot remove politics from this but because we say we are needs based industry, we don't like that, and so it has to be you know, it's only the evidence that drives decision making, no, nonsense, it is the capacity of partners on the ground, it is the preferences of the donors, it's humanitarian access and of course it is the need of the people affected by crisis." (NGO)*

## What can be done?

*Design monitoring and evaluation processes with data responsibility in mind, across a project cycle.*

*Be aware of the humanitarian data ecosystem within which data collection and analysis projects are operating.*

*Ensure developments around data acquisition and analysis are subject to appropriate ethical review.*

*Undertaking a people-centred approach to any data collection activity.*

## How can we achieve these?

*Conduct a comprehensive Humanitarian Data Ecosystem mapping of the context prior to undertaking new initiatives.*

*Conduct data impact assessments, across data journeys with a focus on displaced populations and their needs.*

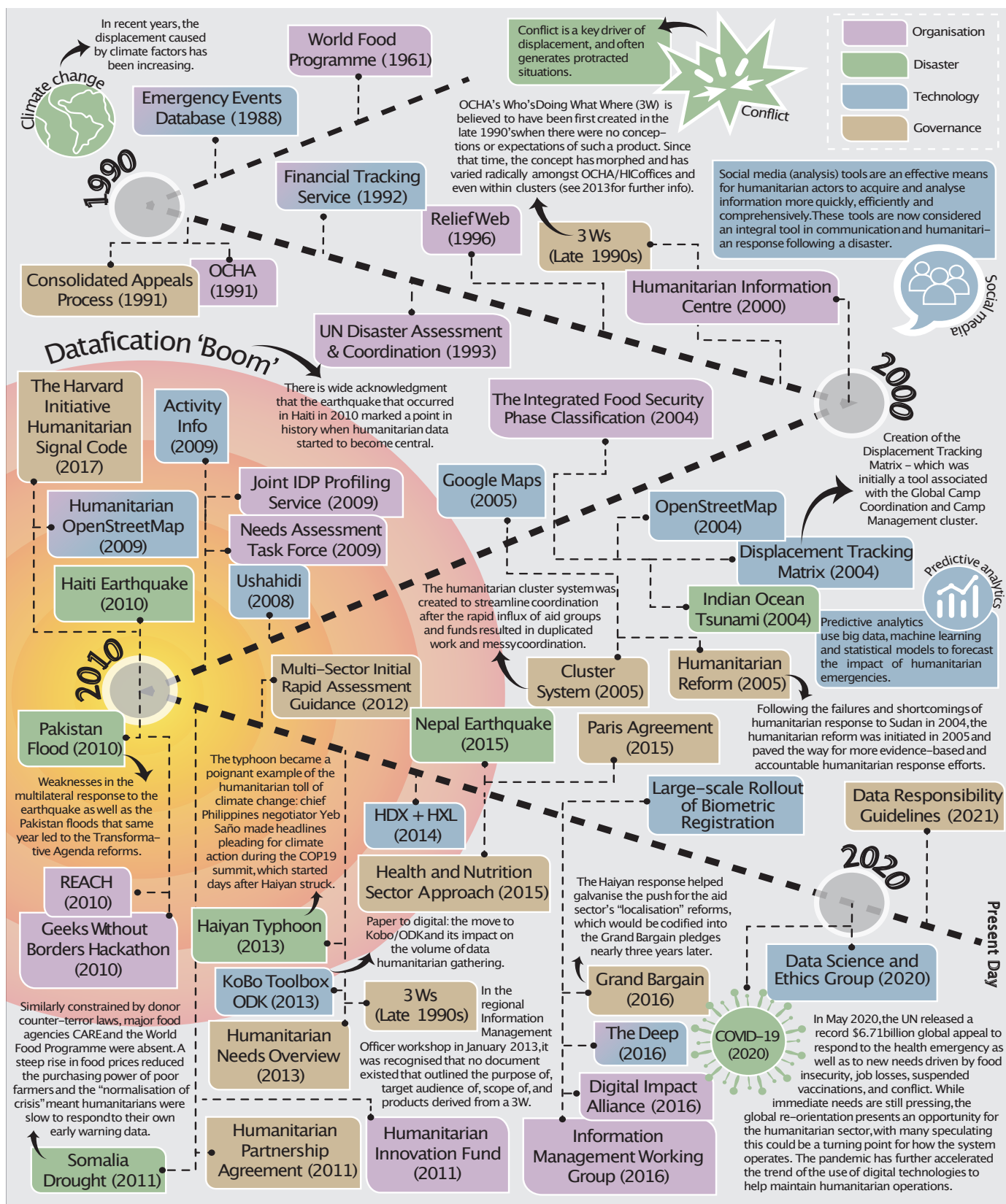
*Implement a data responsibility tool that can identify data that is collected but not used to facilitate a data minimisation approach.*

*Develop stronger data sensitisation programmes and practices for operational actors.*

*Develop and provide an ethical data responsibility training with a focus on use of data for enumerators/actors/partners that collect data.*

## Evolution of the Humanitarian Data Ecosystem

The visualisation below displays some historical events and changes that have shaped the evolution of the humanitarian data ecosystem (HDE). This includes key organisations, cataclysmic events such as pandemics or natural disasters, developments in technologies or innovation and improvements in governance and policy. It is not an exhaustive list of all events or factors that influenced the humanitarian data ecosystem. The visualisation draws on the findings from a project workshop held in Geneva in November 2021 and is informed by interviews carried out with humanitarian actors, donors and practitioners during April and July 2021. As illustrated below, the humanitarian data ecosystem is ever evolving. The discussions around protection, data responsibility and safeguarding need to continue to evolve at a similar pace to ensure rights of affected populations are prioritised.



For more information: [www.warwick.ac.uk/datadisplacement](http://www.warwick.ac.uk/datadisplacement)

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