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Future of Vulnerability: Humanity in the Digital Age Report Overview

This document is a summary of Humanitech's *Future of Vulnerability: Humanity in the Digital Age* report. The report is available in full on our website.

Artificial intelligence and machine learning, digital platforms, distributed ledger technologies and data–driven systems are rapidly changing how the world works — how we create products and services, how we relate to each other, and how we connect with people, places and things.

These technologies present us with opportunities to tackle some of the hardest social and humanitarian challenges. They also heighten existing risks or introduce new harms by exposing people and communities to greater intrusion, insecurity, and inequality.

Humanitech, an initiative of Australian Red Cross, is a think+do tank working at the intersection of humanitarian action and technology. In collaboration with partners across sectors, we are developing insights into the social implications of frontier technologies, creating or amplifying solutions with the greatest potential for social impact, and influencing so that technology serves humanity by putting people at the centre and in control.

The 2020 *Future of Vulnerability: Humanity in the Digital Age* report is Humanitech's first flagship report on the social implications of frontier technologies. The report explores how data and technology are shaping the future of vulnerability, particularly through new forms of inequality, intrusion and insecurity. It calls for humanitarians, technologists and leaders across sectors and community to come together to develop and promote 'humanity first' approaches to frontier technologies.

By applying a humanitarian lens to these issues, the report seeks to better recognise the potential harms to people and communities, and especially those already on the margins. It also highlights examples of how data and technology can be used in trustworthy ways to improve people's dignity and safety.

Four key themes

The urgency to change the status quo

Examining how frontier technologies impact vulnerability, particularly through the lenses of inequality, intrusion and insecurity, the report details ways in which new tools are tested, and how they can be used to target and track people. It highlights the increasing digitalisation of many of the sectors that people in vulnerable contexts interact with, such as social services, healthcare, finance, and the criminal justice system, including some of the future risks and existing harms already occurring with this shift.

In humanitarian contexts, data and technology have the potential to provide people with better access to support when they need it. Yet these technologies can also slide into humanitarian experimentation without informed consent from the individuals involved. The complexity of the settings within which these technological interventions are implemented raise questions about the compatibility of the cultures of technology and humanitarianism. The report highlights that while organisations making new technological tools may intend no harm, and may have the best intentions, the humanitarian imperative is to do no harm.

A growing agenda for change across research, policy and practice

The report considers the current context within which these changes are occurring. Researchers, policymakers, and advocacy groups are growing louder in their analyses of the issues and opportunities as they learn more about and have greater contact with frontier technologies. The optimism of twenty or thirty years ago has grown into critiques of 'surveillance capitalism', the 'black box society', 'automating inequality', 'algorithms of oppression' and 'weapons of math destruction'. Vulnerability is a recurring theme in all these works. They also show that an alternative is possible.

There are active policy debates around the world about the role of new technologies in society, especially within the changing landscape brought forth by the pandemic. Many of these debates are concerned with addressing new and emerging harms, but there is also a focus on how to use new tools to tackle existing vulnerabilities and problems.

A growing number of groups working in this space are multistakeholder, multi-sector or multidisciplinary, reflecting the complexity of new technologies in how they work and the many contexts they are used in. These groups are shifting norms and expanding methods when it comes to analysing and producing these tools.

Examples of emerging good practice

The report highlights some of these emergent ways of working and cultures of open conversation that are beginning to flourish. Technologists are learning about vulnerability in different contexts and the constant questioning required. Humanitarians are learning about new tools and cutting through technocratic jargon. Communities are finding a voice at the centre of the conversation.

The report shares six case studies that illustrate some of the ways tools are being used to support dignity, safety and trust. Many of the examples showcase the importance and value of placing affected people at the centre of this work. The organisations included in these case studies also seek to focus on how a tool works in contexts of vulnerability, just as much as what the tool is and what it is designed to do.

Case studies include:

» **The Identity Project**, which seeks to make volunteering across contexts easier and gives users ownership and control of their data;

» **Sempo**, a community-based blockchain technology enabling cash transfers through smartphones and NFC in development contexts;

» **Ask Izzy**, a digital directory developed alongside people experiencing homelessness;

» **510.global**, who use machine-learning and community data to act and provide supports during natural disasters;

» **Trace the Face**, a humanitarian-led approach to testing and using new tools to reunite families; and

» **Justice Reivestment**, a community-led approach empowering Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to make data-driven local decisions for social change.

A call to action

The report concludes with a call to put humanity-first. To earn the trust of people and communities, and put civil society at the heart of the research, development, use and governance of frontier technologies.

It recommends that this engagement needs to go beyond human-centred design and co-design, which are too often commercial processes which in practice prioritise scalability over vulnerability. The core of this challenge, of how to include vulnerable groups in processes which seek to serve them, applies to humanitarianism as much as technology. While ideas of locally appropriate 'bottom up' humanitarian innovation and 'community as HQ' are emerging at the intersection of humanitarianism and technology, these concepts need real commitments to be put into practice within these spaces.

To enable this change, the report advocates for multi-stakeholder collaboration, beginning with an exploration of what these new ways of working might look like like. Civil society-led 'think+do' initiatives like Humanitech can play a central role in this exploration, as brokers and translators across sectors and disciplines and from communities to technologists, researchers, and regulators.

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Humanitech provides a space for different stakeholders to partner and co-create new methods and tools, putting 'humanity first' principles into practice.

Through our collective efforts, we will put the spotlight on how we use technology for good, and imagine and chase the possibilities for all. As technology changes our world, let's make sure everybody's along for the ride.

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