

Plenary Session IV: Thinking Safety and Acting Safely in the Digital Age

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Presentation of the ICRC 'Study on the use of digital communication in risk awareness and safer behavior in weapon contaminated environments'

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Introduction

Our world seems dominated by digital software, technology and means of communication. We map our way to work, book our holidays, read the news, keep in contact with our family, learn how to build an engine, and self-diagnose illnesses.

We acknowledge, and we believe, that digital communication and interaction platforms, whether twitter, WhatsApp, Facebook and all the others, promise an efficient, relevant, innovative, accessible and trusted platform of communication with our stakeholders – in this case people who are affected by landmines and other explosive hazards; people in conflict and post conflict settings.

In recent years, a relatively small number of initiatives that leveraged digital technology, particularly on the use of apps, web portals and SMS, were launched in the mine action sector. And with few exceptions many of these efforts have stagnated or disappeared altogether.

In 2018, ICRC undertook a study to better understand why the mine action sector is not using digital technology more profusely. The purpose of the study was to take stock and provide realistic observations to delegates in the ICRC on how to better integrate technology in risk awareness and safer behavior and community engagement activities.

The study focused on technology that promotes communication between organizations and the people affected by weapon contamination. It analysed a number of case studies of digital platforms used by different organizations. These included:

- Specialised Mine Action Apps, for online training and information sharing
- Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and other social media platforms, for community engagement, advocacy and communication.
- WhatsApp/Skype and other communication platforms, for information sharing, two-way communication, risk alerts, warnings, and remote programme management.

The study included interviews with mine action organizations, a desk study and survey of ICRC staff.

Findings

For most people it seems obvious that digital media can and does add significant value to WeC/EORE programme and feedback mechanisms. And, there is a general feeling that more can be done to expand the use of such media. In the ICRC, 77% of respondents feel this way.

Good practices for using digital platforms

Based on experiences shared by the ICRC and some mine action organizations, the following are the perceived opportunities and good practices for utilizing digital platforms in risk education and community liaison activities.

- **Remote programming:** Digital platforms can add great value in keeping contact with communities in conflict affected and very remote areas, where physical access is not possible or very difficult. Digital platforms can at times be the only channel to reach some affected communities, if connectivity remains accessible.

- **Digital as a supplement and multiplier:** Digital platforms can act as a valuable supplement and multiplier to existing risk education practices but are rarely a substitute for traditional means such as face-to-face interactions. Several interviewees added that digital platforms work best when relationships between the organization and the communities have already been established and trust has been gained. By adding a digital channel, organizations offer a complementary digital proximity that increases the opportunities for interaction between the organizations and the affected communities.
- **Youth and urban settings:** The use of such platforms appears to be particularly relevant in urban settings and among youth. Some experiences show that Facebook or other social media platforms, popular in the risk education target audience, can be a good way to get access to vulnerable groups as information is provided via outlets that they feel comfortable using.
- **Timely, relevant and adaptable messaging:** By using digital platforms for risk education, organizations are able to exercise great flexibility in the content. Relatively easy and cheap updates of materials can help ensure that messaging remains relevant and timely to the actual hazards in a given context.
- **Cost-effectiveness:** The initial investment might be high for setting up new platforms, but when it is up and running, it can be more cost-effective as in some contexts it can replace print materials, and digital updates can be done at a lower cost than circulating traditional risk education materials.
- **Joint evidence building, sharing:** Several interlocutors suggested there should be more cross-organizational collaboration to identify how and when digital platforms can add value to traditional programming. Many organizations pilot different platforms and scaling up can be challenging when done alone. Often one organization's efforts would be of benefit to another organization. By building more joint evidence, by acting closely, more sustainable and relevant digital initiatives can be developed, which will also improve collaboration across mine action organizations and affected countries.

External barriers to using digital platforms

The main external barriers expressed by ICRC and some mine action organizations about why digital platforms are not more mainstreamed in WeC/EORE programmes:

- **Measuring impact:** Measuring the impact of risk education provided through digital platforms is seen to be challenging because it can be very difficult to evaluate changes in perception, attitudes and behaviour when messages are broadcast and not face to face.
- **Loss of knowledge and rotation of staff:** Designing, developing and testing new platforms and changing methodologies is very time-consuming and requires access to knowledge and experiences. But there are few mechanisms to accumulate and share lessons from testing platforms and share good experiences and combined with an often-high rotation rate of staff, the loss of knowledge and experience is high.
- **Stand-alone pilots:** It has proven difficult to develop and scale new technologies if the project is a stand-alone project and not part of a larger organisational or strategic effort.
- **Funding:** It is not easy to find funding opportunities that support innovation and experimentation with unproven methodologies and approaches. Designing, developing and testing new platforms usually requires a large initial investment, thus making it difficult to fund within most programme funding structures.
- **Internet and cellular access:** Even though more and more people have access to information digitally, a great part of the beneficiaries remain without, or with very limited, access to mobile devices, internet and cellular connectivity. This means older materials remain more relevant in many settings.

- **Digital literacy:** Low digital literacy rates, is an often-mentioned barrier to employing digital platforms.
- **Trust:** Trust in information and stakeholders is often fragile in conflict- and post-conflict contexts, which are often permeated by rumours and disinformation. One of the most important tasks for organizations is to build relationships and gain the trust of affected communities. This is most effective when it is done face-to-face, as digital communication comes across as impersonal.
- **Sensitivity of information:** As mine action always takes place in conflict or post-conflict contexts, there is extra caution on the nature of the information shared by organisations due to the sensitivities related to information concerning landmines and other ERW. At the same time, communities affected by conflict may not feel comfortable asking questions or discussing issues related to weapon contamination digitally due to uncertainties related to who might obtain the information and in fear of unknown consequences.
- **Challenging contexts in which to experiment:** Testing new technology in an active conflict context can be difficult and time-consuming. This is related to political, military and other sensitivities connected to the conflict. Relationship-building with authorities and populations is likewise challenging as they are time-consuming, and it can understandably be hard to convince stakeholders to take part in participatory design and development processes, when the outcome of them are not supported by evidence and when there are more urgent priorities.
- **Hardware and software restrictions:** In some contexts, there may be restrictions of certain digital devices (e.g. any device with a GPS) and in some settings access to applications is blocked or censored, making use of digital platforms very difficult, if not impossible.
- **Data protection:** Without the right experiences and expertise, there is a risk of unintentionally 'doing digital harm'. This could for example be when using popular social media platforms, where protection of data by the company or authority hosting the platforms is unreliable and might be release without permission.
- **Manageability of platforms:** Other concerns include how to deal with hacking, fake news and the 'loss of control' of communication when using digital platforms.
- **Targeting messages:** Targeting a large audience may result in messaging that is non-targeted and too simplified, or messages for a specific group may be used by another group without testing. When no direct follow-up or assessment is possible, there are concerns regarding whether information provided is misunderstood, misused or counterproductive.
- **Biased targeting and feedback:** If perceiving digital risk education as the silver bullet for wider dissemination of information, some fear that vulnerable groups without digital access to information may be left behind. Some interlocutors expressed concerns that organisations will receive a skewed impression of programme effectiveness if there is too much reliance on digital feedback mechanisms, as they will exclude vulnerable and 'disconnected' affected communities.
- **Consequences of 'getting it wrong':** In mine action, bad messages, bad approaches to risk reduction can put staff and affected communities at risk. If the approach is not already proven, such concerns can lead to hesitation about adopting digital tools.
- **'If it isn't broken, don't fix it':** In daily operations there is often the view 'if it isn't broken, don't fix it' and we continue to focus on more traditional ways of doing things. Without clear evidence of the benefits of the new technology, it can be challenging to convince the managers and the sector to test or adopt new approaches.

Closing

Digital platforms and systems are tools to help us achieve our goals – they are not solutions. When we think about them, when we develop the tools, it is important to consider that one size does not fit all, 'everyone' is not a target group and all forms of digital media are not always appropriate, especially

when thinking of people living in conflict situations compared with those in post conflict settings and working with the most vulnerable compared with the middle and working classes who have access to technology. Digital platforms do offer us the potential to reach a far greater number of people in remote areas with information that is important to them and in a format that is interactive and even potentially enjoyable to use.

Irrespective of the means of communication, we need to undertake assessments and understand our target groups; our messages and information need to be accurate, useful and timely; our materials need to be tested and adapted to our audience, monitored and evaluated; and most of all, we need to promote a two-way flow of information that encourages behaviour change; we need to be available, trusted and accountable to our audience.

Thank you