

Digitalization of Community Engagement Practices and Research in Humanitarian Action

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Under a systematic desk study and insider interviews, the paper reviews how community engagement practices and research in humanitarian action has been digitalized during the recent past. It also identifies reasons for which communication with communities has become indispensable in humanitarian action.

Engaging with and being accountable to people affected by disaster and crisis is not a new proposition. It stems from the participatory methods that emerged in the 1980s. These methods were formalized as engagement and participation through system-wide initiatives and humanitarian research such as Sphere, the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership (HAP), People in Aid, the Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action (ALNAP) and, most recently, the Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS) on Quality and Accountability. The main finding of this ongoing research is that, beyond one-way information provision, meaningful engagement is achieved when humanitarian organizations ensure that public concerns are consistently understood, considered and addressed. This can be done through ongoing dialogue or two-way communication using the latest technological advances.

Most of the humanitarian actors have now turned into digital information gathering, curates and analyses volunteered geographic information (VGI) on urban communities. This transformation is based on a combination of collaborative satellite-imagery digitization and participatory mapping, which relies upon geospatial open-source technologies and the collaborative mapping platform OpenStreetMap, mobile phones usage for digital data collection using open data kit, online cash transfers, and social media to biometrics identification, geospatial mapping, drones, and big data. The desk study and the conducted insider interviews with humanitarian aid workers conclude that these new technological advancements address the twofold challenge of achieving equitable community engagement. In the meantime, they generate spatial data that adheres quality standards to produce rigorous and trusted evidence for policy and decision making.

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