

# Beyond the numbers:

Balancing Innovation,  
Ethics, and Impact

## INSIGHT SHEET 1 – FOR ALL ACTORS



### PROMOTE COLLECTIVE STRUCTURING, LEARNING AND CRITICAL THINKING



### NOTICEABLE CHANGES SINCE 2020

- A first level structuring of the professional branch.
- Greater awareness of programme data and its related stakes, in particular in relation to responsible data management.



### NEW AND REMAINING RECOMMENDATIONS



#### Move towards a more local approach to data

As the localisation agenda is progressing in the humanitarian sector, its data component should be seen as an enabler, not something to be left behind as “too complex”. This implies for international CSOs, UN agencies and donors to adapt to the reality of local CSOs and to create the conditions for an equitable partnership approach on data. More concretely, this means:

- Giving more space to local CSOs and listening to their data needs,
- Addressing such needs or, setting the conditions for such needs to be addressed, in an adequate fashion in terms of resources, learning, funding, etc.),
- Leaving local CSOs the initiative on defining data and reporting processes that they believe are the most relevant,
- Facilitating and/or funding spaces for local CSOs to exchange on common challenges and share good practices,

- Making data governance evolve to better represent them,
- Supporting local data ecosystems and investing in local leaders on such topics.

*See more details in CartONG's study "Changing the outlook: for a local approach to data" (op. cit.).*

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## **Continue structuring the professional branch**

Programme data management, as a professional branch in the humanitarian sector, has certainly gotten more structured in the last few years – yet much remains to be done. Boosting this professional branch implies:

- Further shaping a common frame of understanding for data management,
- Keeping on building common vocabulary that can be understood and therefore used by all,
- Making available relevant tools to all humanitarian actors.

By doing so, humanitarian actors will be better equipped to select relevant approaches and tools – thus limiting the technical and strategic errors that remain still too widespread, as exemplified by the research work done for this study.

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## **Commit to a collective learning approach to data topics**

No single humanitarian actor is equipped to tackle on its own the monitoring, analysis, selection, and production of technical and strategic guidance of all relevant data management methodologies and technologies for our sector – while also concentrating on its own strategy to instil the right level of knowledge and skills to their staff.

As such, humanitarian actors are required to work together to better understand and master the data topics, approaches and technologies of importance for humanitarian action. More concretely, this means:

- Having mutualised resources, training options and learning products,
- Making a conscious choice of sharing and disseminating as much as possible these materials to help smaller CSOs access what they need to build capacity on all relevant data topics.



## **Encourage more critical thinking around data creation and usage**

Data was for a long time associated to a purely quantitative vision of M&E in the humanitarian sector – as echoed by the widespread and often restrictive use of the term “data-driven”. It is essential that our sector continues to evolve towards a more relevant use and increased critical thinking around the topic of data.

As detailed in this study, many questions remain around data and new risks have also arisen in recent years, such as data not being used for the right purpose, having been manipulated, or being collected inadequately; or the absence of data in a remote setting or for a forgotten crisis which sends an incorrect signal regarding whether or not a humanitarian intervention is in fact needed.

There is therefore a collective responsibility in the sector to take a step back around data more frequently – including thinking out of the existing datasets – to build further expertise and avoid questionable situations in terms of data quality and ethics. This also means that donors, UN agencies and network heads should create – and when relevant fund – the spaces which make critical thinking possible.



## **Start with the problem to solve not the solution to develop**

Although many new innovative data technologies can truly be game changers, it is important to always build them based on a pre-identified problem – especially those expressed by local actors and communities – rather than looking for problems that will help build a use case for a solution already in development.

It is even more so important that the cost of deploying a shiny new technology is often underestimated in our sector – beyond the strict financial and human resource perspective. As such, a new technology that does not truly address a problem or answer a need can end up bringing more complexity to a territory, create barriers between local and international actors – be it in terms of capacities, working methods or of anchoring the tech in a long-term nexus approach. It can also end up masking more important underlying issues.

Each tool should remain an amplifier of what a process aims at achieving, rather than an end in itself – something to consider carefully especially as a higher proportion of “tech innovation-oriented” funding is being made available these days.

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## INSIGHT SHEET 2 – FOR CSOs



### CONTINUE TO PROACTIVELY INVEST THE PROGRAMME DATA BRANCH



### NOTICEABLE CHANGES SINCE 2020

- Better integration of programme data into programmatic strategies for a few CSOs.
- Ethical dimension of programme data made a priority by many organisations.
- A higher proportion of organisations with defined roles & responsibilities, and leadership roles covering the topic.
- More rationalisation in place in terms of data collection and infobesity.
- More specialised staff to take the topic forward both in HQs and in the field.



### NEW AND REMAINING RECOMMENDATIONS



#### **Make programme data a working topic with all CSO partners**

For local and national CSOs to achieve the necessary uptake on the topic of programme data management, international CSOs must commit to moving towards a more local approach to data and fostering the conditions for local and national CSOs to be in an equitable partnership with them.

Only then, will local and national CSOs achieve the necessary uptake on the topic of data management and will become truly autonomous and proactive regarding current data stakes – leading, in turn, to more equitable partnerships on the topic with international CSOs. A specific challenge for local CSOs at present is the

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relative lack of data experts among their teams. This reiterates the need for greater collective learning approaches on data topics.

*See more details on how this can be achieved in concrete terms by reading the Insight Sheet 1 – Recommendations for all actors.*

It also pleads for increasing data literacy efforts among non-tech staff (see following section).

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## **02. Keep building the data literacy level of all CSOs' non-tech staff**

Although data-specialised support staff in the field and in HQ are more and more common across CSOs, the level of data literacy of non-specialised staff is still far from being adequate.

This is an issue especially for field teams working in contact with affected populations who need to be sensitised based on the nature of the daily activities they implement and the constraints they operate with (Do No Harm principle, risks and opportunities related to affected populations but also the organisation itself, etc.).

This is also an issue for programme teams in HQ, and for all managerial roles, who are often not able to instil their expertise adequately in the data collection exercises that they should be the main users of and that should more explicitly feed their decision-making.

Internal tools and learning formats should be developed to support this capacity building of all non-tech staff and reduce the existing data literacy gap.

*See how this can be achieved, especially using a collective learning approach to data topics, in Insight Sheet 1 – Recommendations for all actors.*

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## **03. Keep integrating programme data into operational strategies**

Although programme data is more and more present in the project cycle, there remains many loopholes, in particular uphill of data collection exercises and at the end of a project:

- Prior to a collection phase: it means ensuring that the relevant data will be collected and that a proper analysis plan is in place – with programme teams having been involved in both aspects. What's more, to ensure the quality of the analysis, it is important that mixed data collection methods
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are considered and that, when possible, secondary data is also used. More globally speaking, it is important that humanitarian actors continue to question the purpose of data collection.

- At the end of the data cycle: it means ensuring that that data retention, archiving and deletion are properly managed.

Beyond the project cycle, many humanitarian organisations – especially francophone CSOs – still have to work on how data needs can be thought through programmatically not only to inform the implementation, monitoring and evaluation of projects, but also to inform the organisation's wider agenda.



#### **Keep building clear leadership and governance on programme data management**

A stronger involvement of CSOs' governance bodies is required to ensure that the implementation and nurturing of programme data skills, tools and practices within each CSO are being conducted with quality, efficiency and ethical concerns in mind. This would also help with ensuring that the internal set-up in terms of data management roles and responsibilities is being prioritised and financed at HQ and in the field.



#### **Explore new data topics and technologies proactively to assess their potential risks and benefits**

Too many CSOs still avoid getting involved in new data topics or using new technologies until their usage become relatively widespread in the field, and sometimes even problematic as the proper safeguards are not always put in place. While it might not be feasible for local and national CSOs, international CSOs have a role to play in investing these topics uphill to evaluate risks and opportunities rationally, take a stand if required, determine relevant use cases and set up mitigation measures for their usage if necessary.

Such efforts will be more easily achieved when done collectively, also with the support and contribution of networks heads and with the guidance of specialised CSOs and/or existing data fora.

This reiterates the need for greater collective learning approaches on all data topics as well as enabling an environment more conducive to critical thinking on data. *See more details in Insight Sheet 1 - Recommendations for all actors.*

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## INSIGHT SHEET 3 – FOR NETWORK HEADS



### LEAD THE WAY FOR THEIR MEMBERS TO IMPROVE DATA PRACTICES



### NOTICEABLE CHANGES SINCE 2020

- Increased awareness of the importance of the topic.



### NEW AND REMAINING RECOMMENDATIONS



#### **Guide CSOs in the improvement of programme data practices**

With their pivotal role in the sector, all types of network heads – either geographically or thematically-oriented – have a leading role to play in guiding all CSOs in the adoption and/or improvement of programme data practices. In concrete terms, this could mean for them to:

- Communicate more regularly and raise awareness amongst CSOs on the importance of data and tech topics for the sector,
- Provide the vehicle for greater interaction on the said topics (see recommendation 2 for more detail),
- Support their members by making training and resources available addressing their needs,
- Act as a key interface with donors on these issues on behalf of their members so improving data literacy, and data and tech topics in general, get funded more (see recommendation 3 for more detail).

This is especially important for smaller CSOs, which experience more challenges and need specific support mechanisms. Yet in a context of budget restrictions for the humanitarian sector, the role of network heads should prove even more essential to all CSOs.

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This would require network heads to integrate data topics as a dedicated priority and to scale up their own internal capacities so they can suggest initiatives and/or services to their members on said issues – even if the latter are not directly requesting them. This would also most certainly mean working in closer contact with support CSOs and actors specialised on data and tech topics for the humanitarian sector.

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## **Establish mechanisms to foster dialogue between CSOs and with support actors**

There are currently limited discussion spaces for CSO staff that wish to exchange and build capacities on data topics. At present, most exist and are facilitated thanks to support CSOs (such as CartONG, Missing Maps and HOT) or by dedicated secretariat or mechanisms (i.e. MERL Tech, Data4SDGs, etc.).

To make data and technology a more accessible and therefore more mainstream topic, also means trying to connect such fora with more traditional spaces facilitated by network heads. This is true in the Global North, but even more so in the Global South – where such connection would greatly accelerate the capacity building of civil society actors.

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## **Advocate towards donors on data and tech topics on behalf of CSOs**

Network heads can play a pivotal role in informing donors about the evolving humanitarian landscape and providing feedback and input regarding existing practices and trends in the sector. Due to their unique position, they can also gather the needs of their members and can push proactively new ideas.

On data and tech-related topics, this means they could:

- Alert donors when data-related constraints are getting too significant and mostly driven by compliance aspects, instead of project needs or accountability to affected populations,
  - Encourage donors to support a more localised approach to data by adapting their requirements,
  - Recommend necessary evolutions of funding mechanism for CSOs, opening avenues for financing critical thinking research not just tech development or scale up, pooled capacity building efforts as well as
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encouraging CSOs to directly contribute to collective learning approaches on data and tech by asking them to systematically share their productions and resources.

It cannot be stressed enough how much network heads have a key role to play in supporting collective learning approaches, fostering critical thinking on data and tech, promoting a local approach to data and in helping CSOs acquire good reflexes – such as starting with problems and not solutions. *For more details on these four aspects, see Insight Sheet 1 – Recommendation for all actors.*

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## INSIGHT SHEET 4 – FOR DONORS AND UN AGENCIES



### ACTIVELY SUPPORT THE PROGRAMME DATA UPTAKE OF CSOs



### NOTICEABLE CHANGES SINCE 2020

- More reflection on the role of programme data to support accountability.
- Many UN agencies and donor HQs publishing strategies and requirements around data practices.



### NEW AND REMAINING RECOMMENDATIONS



#### Ensure the sustainability of mutualised and coordinated approaches to data resources and training

To ensure an adequate adoption of the topic by all CSO actors, donors need to think long-term and continue supporting mutualised approaches to data amongst CSOs. Specifically, training a wider variety of CSO staff – beyond data and tech specialists – will help “develop a data mindset” as one donor puts it, showing them what is truly possible; also clarifying in the process unspecific organisational and projects policies or objectives like being “data-driven”. In concrete terms, this would imply to:

- Keep funding mutualised training and learning materials – especially those that CSOs often find hard to finance (e-learning, resource platforms, studies, exploration of new topics and relevant tools, etc.).
- Ensure that such fundings also cover the adequate dissemination of the produced resources so they can be accessible to actors needing them the most – an acute challenge at present.

- Open discussions on the alignment of budget lines for these topics between donors – as suggested by a donor in the survey.

More generally speaking, industry leaders such as UN agencies should enhance the coordination architecture and leadership impacting CSOs. Concretely, this would imply to:

- Designate focal points for services when relevant,
- Better support coordination fora.



## **Support and finance the capacity building of local CSOs and national data ecosystems**

As put by Development Initiative, “we should spread data capacity locally to create a bedrock on which a country’s digital transformation can be built”. Donors and UN agencies have a key role to play in supporting the capacity building and infrastructure of local actors on data issues and tools. This implies for them to:

- Recognise the priority of their operational needs over the accountability needs of their international partners,
- Let them define their own data strategy,
- Finance – adequately – data capacity building and structuring.

This includes first and foremost supporting local and national CSOs, but it also means supporting national data ecosystems and encouraging the creation of tech communities as well the involvement of youth in government initiatives. Only then will these actors and ecosystems become less dependent on international agendas and be able to actively contribute to discussions regarding data and digital stakes. As an important bonus, this would also help avoid data gaps that can lead to underfinancing certain remote areas or crises.



## **Encourage greater accountability to affected populations by reassessing expectations regarding accountability to donors**

At present, many CSOs see their M&E systems as mostly dedicated to accountability to donors – be it in terms of tools, indicators, but also processes such as compliance and screening. In an environment where human and financial resources are limited and sometimes very limited, this gets in the way of accountability to affected populations.

Donors should be more open about this shared perception amongst CSOs and question what needs greater prioritisation. By working out solutions on how to keep the must-have accountability data and processes and yet, simplifying and lowering expectations regarding the rest, they would open a space for CSOs to reduce their workload on donor accountability and therefore dedicate proportionally more of their limited programme data resources to accountability to affected populations. This can be achieved by imposing less tools or building common tools that are relevant for all CSOs, standardising some indicators while accepting a more local and contextualised approach for others – including more qualitative research methods.

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#### **04. Encourage conversations around data governance**

As the role of data in current localisation debates is getting more and more obvious, it appears donors have a key role to play in encouraging conversations around data governance. In concrete terms, they could:

- Support discussions on such topics, highlighting the importance of data governance as well as systems that empower affected populations, seeking ways to better protect human rights in digital spaces.
- Build on local activism and community-based leadership for effective response, challenging data divides in which a small handful of actors control and benefit from enormous amounts of data, to reshape power structures.
- Strengthen collaboration with governments to streamline the links between national systems and humanitarian ones, respecting each parties' mandate and policies.

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#### **05. Build more balanced relations with Big Tech/private providers**

As the presence of private actors is becoming more prevalent in the humanitarian sector, donors and UN agencies have an important role to play in helping set up standards for partnering with the private sector. Rather than – sometimes relatively blindly – engaging with private companies and Big Tech that may have different long-term agendas, they should assess how these interactions and relationships may impact our sector in the long run. More concretely, this means that donors should:

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- Open discussions with them,
- Challenge them if needed to ensure the tech they offer is compatible with sector values in the long run,
- Figure out ways to assess the tech in question independently and not just rely on the literature private actors may provide – before making any long-term commitments that may end up impacting CSOs.

This is particularly the case for AI tools to ensure that new technologies improve the efficiency of the sector without compromising humanitarian principles considering the risk of disinformation and misinformation, as well as all risks associated with data breaches and biases built into AI and those linked to how AI technology will be used in HQ and the field.



### **Fund impact evaluations related to programme data to inform future funding & encourage the scale up of innovation funding**

Donors should experiment funding impact evaluations around data activities and capacity building. This will create the conditions for increased trust and transparency of innovation funding and, hopefully, a scale up that would allow the humanitarian industry to reach similar levels of innovation funding than international development, or even the lowest-spending industries in the private sector - such as paper or basic metal industry, which both invest more than the humanitarian sector on innovation<sup>1</sup>.

It cannot be stressed enough how much donors and UN agencies have a key role to play in helping build and disseminate good data and tech practices and standards within the sector. Through their positioning and the funding they provide, donors also have significant leeway to support critical thinking around data creation and usage and in making sure all relevant actors have a seat at the table – especially local organisations and ecosystems. *For more details, please refer to Insight Sheet 1 – Recommendations for all actors.*

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<sup>1</sup> ["Humanitarian R&D Imperative - How other sectors overcame impediments to innovation"](#), Deloitte/World Humanitarian Summit, May 2015

## INSIGHT SHEET 5 – FOR SPECIALISED SUPPORT CSOs



### KEEP ADAPTATING SO THE SECTOR CAN ADEQUATELY NAVIGATE DATA STAKES



### NOTICEABLE CHANGES SINCE 2020

- The network of data and tech support CSOs and organisations continue to grow, in particular through the H2H Network, with more capacity to advise and influence the ecosystem.
- Support and services are more attuned to the needs of CSOs and they better help them navigate new stakes such as localisation, accountability to affected populations, issues surrounding cybersecurity, though some data-related topics – such as IT – still have gaps.



### NEW AND REMAINING RECOMMENDATIONS



#### **Be at the forefront of the reflection and guidance on data and tech stakes and the evolution of practices for the sector**

Beyond focusing on (just) addressing immediate needs through one-shot initiatives or by using innovative tech, support CSOs have a responsibility – and the social mandate – to bring about change on the data stakes of the day both through their work and their posture. More concretely, if support CSOs wish to remain fully relevant to the sector, they should aim to:

- Keep providing critical thinking on new stakes and technologies such as AI, data governance and accountability to affected populations,
  - Lead by example on the data angle of sectorial stakes such as sustainability and localisation,
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- Keep producing relevant resources and providing needs-based services to CSOs (see point 2 for a specific example),
- Manage to get funding for specific topics that benefit the sector at large (see point 3 for a specific example),
- Keep facilitating spaces and investing in their networks and collective advocacy.

This means for each support CSO collaborating further with other specialised CSOs and creating bridges between initiatives and existing channels whenever possible to avoid duplication. It also means working closer with network heads to reach as broad an audience as possible.



### **Increase the focus on supporting an improved quality and relevance of the data being collected**

The study has found that data quality and responsible data management both remain major stakes in the humanitarian sector. With their increased capacity on all component of data quality and responsible data practices, support CSOs must be a driving force on the topics. This implies for instance:

- Engaging with partners on the topics and helping them consider the level of quality that is required compared to the associated investment – to keep them proportionate to the needs,
- Questioning and proactively highlighting data gaps in the sector that they might be aware of.



### **Explore how the assessment of the impact of programme data and new tech can be better made – to help increase direct funding**

Many donors find it hard to justify the direct funding of programme data activities as part of project implementation due to it being a “black box”. Similarly, they might not always be prone to funding critical thinking research and impact assessment for new technologies and data stakes.

Support CSOs are well placed to assess what is actually possible to evaluate regarding the impact of programme data activities by bringing more tangible elements to the discussion; and to work with network heads to ensure these get more funded by donors. This need to better demonstrate the impact of programme

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data activities is critical for all humanitarian actors – it is particularly critical for local specialised/H2H organisations, which cannot otherwise have enough visibility and recognition in the sector and, as a result, access funding<sup>2</sup>.

Specialised support CSOs are also in a unique position to analyse the landscape around new data stakes, the benefits and constraints of new requirements or practices, the opportunities offered by new innovative technologies and their potential pitfalls, as well as produce guidelines on how to best use them or why they should sometimes be disregarded to keep respecting humanitarian principles. This should also include – when possible – connecting with research, including on humanitarian practices.

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<sup>2</sup> See recommendations in "[Local Service Providers in Humanitarian Response: Pathways for Engagement with the H2H Network](#)", op. cit.



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