



**Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs**

**High-Level Panel on Technology and Innovation at the 2020 ECOSOC-Humanitarian  
Affairs Segment**

**“Improving humanitarian effectiveness through new technology and innovation:  
opportunities and challenges”**

**Assistant Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Deputy  
Emergency Relief Coordinator a.i Ramesh Rajasingham – Opening Remarks as Moderator**

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*As delivered*

Vice President Omar Hilale, Excellencies, colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen.

I would like to welcome all of you and thank you for the opportunity to moderate this high-level panel on how we can make new technology and innovation work to support people in humanitarian need – and help make the organizations that serve them more effective.

I will introduce our distinguished panel one by one as we come to their presentations but allow me first to make a few remarks of my own.

One of the terms which in recent months has most invasively penetrated public discourse, in any country, in any language, and among all age groups is how we “flatten the curve”.

I think you all know what I am talking about.

In fact, this simple, now commonly used shorthand, covers a long and complex process of data collection and verification, analysis, computer modelling, forecasting and – to get to the “curve” – data visualization.

Although the context, the COVID-19 pandemic, is profoundly tragic, it is encouraging that the language of data-driven decision-making in most countries is now driving public conversations about how the world should response to this enormous challenge.

Modelling and forecasting in various forms are of course not new to humanitarian planning and preparedness.

But when I began my career in humanitarian affairs, it was mostly a process of contingency planning involving a small group of disaster managers and aid workers meeting and gathering around a flipchart with a handful of coloured marker pens.

Today, humanitarians use Artificial Intelligence, machine learning, and predictive analytics to more quickly and efficiently analyse and make decisions about how to respond to crisis.

One recent example is from WFP's response to cyclones Idai and Kenneth in Mozambique last year where the use of Artificial Intelligence and machine learning automated the analysis and processing of high-resolution images for disaster mapping. That helped to significantly speed up the emergency response and help people faster.

The building blocks of this new technology and innovation is data compiled in large and complex humanitarian and development databases.

Many partnerships across the international community, private and public and with academia, have been formed using data analytics to forecast, prevent and mitigate the spread of disease, hunger, flood damage and other hazards.

My own office OCHA, through the Centre for Humanitarian Data in The Hague, is exploring predictive analytics that can drive anticipatory action to get ahead of crisis and advocate for the mobilization of resources early on to avert the worst consequences.

Our approach is to foster partnerships across the world and build capacity and community around predictive analytics.

There are many more initiatives going on around the world. Here are a few of them:

- biometrics and the provision of digital identities for people in need of aid;
- blockchain technology for supply chain tracking and for sending digital cash;
- the use of drones for disaster assessment and to deliver aid;
- 3D printing which can dramatically shorten delivery time and cost;
- and chatbots for communications with affected communities.

These are all promising innovations with great potential. More innovations will emerge in the future. Some might be game-changers and others will simply not work at a scale where they can make a difference.

Most will need to be scrutinized because with new innovations come new challenges and risks, some of which we know, and some we don't.

We already know we need to consider issues of data protection and protection against privacy breaches and the possibility of curtailment of personal liberties through the misuse of data.

In today's world, facing COVID-19, there's also the risk of what has been labelled the "infodemic": the spread of misinformation and disinformation, and the use of technology to stigmatize people or incite tensions.

It is important that when we embrace the use of new technology, we do not throw existing principles and values overboard. "Do No Harm" very much applies as does respect for other international principles and norms that have guided us so far.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen, I would now like to present our panel in the order they will take the floor:

1. Mr. Fabrizio Hochschild, Special Adviser to the Secretary-General on the Commemoration of the United Nations' 75th Anniversary
2. Ms. Valerie Guarnieri, Assistant Executive Director, United Nations World Food Programme
3. Mr. Balthasar Staehelin, Director of Digital Transformation and Data, International Committee of the Red Cross
4. Ms. Adelina Kamal, Executive Director, ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on Disaster Management
5. Dr. Patrick Meier, CEO, WeRobotics, The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy
6. Mr. Raj Kumar, Founding President & Editor-in-Chief of Devex
7. Ms. Sunita Grote, Innovation Fund Manager, UNICEF