**Draft Concept Note**
**2021 ECOSOC Humanitarian Affairs Segment**
**High-Level Panel**
**"Innovation as a driver of change: the use of new and emerging technologies and humanitarian data"**
**Thursday 24 June, 14:00 -16:00 (Geneva Time) /10:00am – 12:00pm (New York time),**
**Hybrid  (in-person in Room XX in Palais des Nations, Geneva, and virtual)**

## <u>Objectives</u>

The COVID-19 crisis forced humanitarians to adjust rapidly to meet evolving and growing needs in a fast-changing landscape. The use of new technologies and innovative techniques are key part of the adaptation in making humanitarian action faster, more accessible and more effective.

The high-level panel will examine the use of data to better predict and identify needs, new technologies to provide assistance safely and effectively, and new techniques that enable health and humanitarian workers to stay and deliver and to be more effective and efficient, in line with the Secretary-General's initiatives on Digital Cooperation. At the same time, the panel will explore the risks associated with new tools and techniques and discuss ways to combat phenomena like misinformation and disinformation. The panel will also draw on experience of how technologies can be used to foster gender-responsive action, while supporting local partners and building partnerships.

## <u>Background</u>

As the COVID-19 pandemic has shown, humanitarian crises have become increasingly complex and protracted, the number of people in need of humanitarian assistance has soared to unprecedented levels. In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic compounded existing challenges including conflict, climate change, fragility and inequality. To meet ever-increasing need required humanitarian actors to adapt their methods to reach a growing number of people even as the difficulty in reaching them increased with understandable travel restrictions. Fully capitalizing on the dynamism of the humanitarian system requires a seismic shift from one that not only reacts, to one that anticipates obstacles and prepares to overcome them.

As highlighted in the Secretary-General's Digital Roadmap, many of the new and emerging technologies and innovations changing the world today hold enormous potential for improving humanitarian work to address human suffering at an unprecedented scale. As demonstrated in the COVID-19 response, technology can drive a shift towards earlier, faster and potentially more effective humanitarian action. Artificial intelligence can interpret vast humanitarian datasets. Mobile applications, chatbots and social media can create immediate feedback loops. Drones can speed up needs assessment, digital cash transfers can provide rapid relief and biometrics can prove digital identity. And, as showcased by the COVID-19 pandemic, businesses, education and health services can be shifted to virtual environments seemingly overnight.

But these new tools and techniques are accompanied by equally complex challenges.  For example, inadequate data protection and privacy can cause harm and intensify insecurities of already

vulnerable populations. Lacking connectivity, access to technology or digital literacy can exacerbate inequality. Conflicting interests of non-humanitarian partners can compromise the principled delivery of humanitarian assistance. Technologies can malfunction, break down, and sow mistrust. Connectivity or digital literacy gaps can widen the digital and gender divides. And technology's potential is only as strong as its underlying dataset, decision-making process, user distribution, and political buy-in.

Panelists will share their ideas and experiences for delivering improved humanitarian results by applying new and emerging technologies and techniques, as the global landscape changes during the COVID-19 pandemic. They will explore ways to ensure local front-line leadership and equitable access to the internet, technology and digital literacy. I that same vein, they will discuss bottom-up approaches that put people at the centre. Panelists will also discuss how international norms should be applied to ensure the protection of beneficiaries' safety and rights in the rapidly evolving fields of technology and innovation in accordance with the humanitarian principles and the "Do No Harm" imperative.

## **Guiding Questions:**

- Provide examples of adaptations and emerging best practices from the COVID-19 pandemic? How can these new approaches be institutionalized to improve going forward?

    How might data and analytics be used to greater effect in early action to limit the impact of disease outbreaks? How can data be used to better target the needs of the most vulnerable?

- How can humanitarian organizations ensure local frontline leadership and bridge the digital divide?

- How can these innovations be brought to scale and shared with local and national actors and authorities; and regional partners to build capacity and become part of national responses?

- How can humanitarian organizations, states, civil society, academia and the private sector join forces to maximize the benefits of technology and humanitarian data while minimizing the risks of doing harm?

- What is the current state of sector-wide commitment and engagement on data responsibility -- the safe, ethical, and effective management of data? How does apply considering the increased adoption and deployment of technology in humanitarian action?

- At an operational level, how are these activities aligned with a whole of system approach, including the SG's Roadmap and the related work now underway to develop a UN Data Protection and Privacy Policy?

## **Panel:**

Chair:

H.E. Ambassador Pascale Baeriswyl, Permanent Representative of Switzerland to the United Nations and Vice-President of ECOSOC

Moderator:

OCHA

Speakers

- Mr. António Vitorino, Director-General, IOM
- Ms. Anna Ekeledo, Executive Director, AfriLabs
- Ms. Veronica Gabaldon, Executive Director, Philippine Disaster Resilience Foundation
- Mr. Lars Peter Nissen, Director, ACAPS
- Ms. Alexandra Bilak, Director of the International Displacement Monitoring Centre