



Workshop on Digital Humanitarianism

Geneva Graduate Institute

February 9, 2026

Summary

Technological innovation has become a dominant cultural value of the 20th century significantly shaping contemporary solutions to complex socioeconomic problems. Humanitarian organizations have not been immune to this development, even though it is only since the 2000s, with escalating crises and diminishing resources, that “innovation” has become a central policy concern of the aid sector. The term “innovation” captures a diversity of technological creations meant to improve the efficiency of humanitarian responses. From digital wallets created by the UNHCR to facilitate cash transfers to refugees, telemedicine connecting remote medical teams to experts when confronted with cases that go beyond their immediate capacity, or the Humanitarian OpenStreetMap conceived to enable disaster mapping through crowd-sourced data, humanitarian organizations have enthusiastically embraced the technological revolution as a solution – and even a cure – to previous systematic failures. This increasing reliance on digital technologies in humanitarian practice invites critical scholarly attention.

This workshop marks the beginning of the SNSF research project, [*Digital Humanitarianism: Governing Vulnerable Populations in an Age of Technological Innovation*](#). Bringing together scholars working on issues of humanitarianism & technology to share and discuss key insights from their work, we seek to understand what digital technologies *do to* humanitarianism. Less concerned with the potentials of technical innovations for improving humanitarian governance, we ask critical questions about their ethical and political implications and the regimes of living they foster.

The workshop is organized around four themes (further elucidated in Annex I):

1. **Accountability & Transparency;**
2. **Extractivism & Colonialism;**
3. **Care & Surveillance;**
4. **Humanitarian Goods & Public-Private Partnerships for Innovation.**

The themes represent different, yet overlapping, areas of exploration that serve as entry points into understanding the complex processes through which they together (re)shape humanitarian politics and practice. We invite experts to share their insights during a series of four roundtable discussions on these themes, as a point of departure for participants' in-depth discussion on the technological transformation of humanitarianism.

Across all four themes, we ask experts to reflect on the role of digital technologies in (re)making relations, subjectivities, knowledge, and power. We ask:

- *What visions of humanity are offered at the intersection of philanthro-capitalism and digital humanitarianism?*
- *How do such visions materialize in contexts where humanitarian agencies operate?*
- *What forms of knowledge and practices does humanitarian technology (re)produce?*
- *How do digital humanitarian technologies (re)shape the relationship between humanitarian organizations, host states, donors, and vulnerable communities?*
- *In what ways do digital technologies shape the subjectivities of aid beneficiaries and "providers," and how do they navigate digital processes of subjectification?*

Workshop Program

9 February 2026	
9.00 - 9.30	Opening by Prof. Julie Billaud & presentation of collaboration partners Prof. Herbert Muyinda and Dr. Grace Oroma
9.30 - 11.00	Roundtable discussion: Accountability & Transparency Matthew Canfield, Charles Heller, Alessandro Monsutti Moderator: Hanna Berg Discussant: Julie Billaud
11.00 - 11.30	Coffee break
11.30 - 13.00	Roundtable discussion: Extractivism & Colonialism Kristin Sandvik, Mirca Madianou, Caroline Wamala, Filipe Calvao Moderator: Carolina Earle Discussant: Grace Oroma
13.00 - 14.00	Lunch
14.00 - 15.30	Roundtable discussion: Care & Surveillance Hayal Akarsu, David Bozzini, Melissa Gatter Moderator: Herbert Muyinda Discussant: Hanna Berg
15.30 - 15.45	Coffee break
15.45 - 17.15	Roundtable discussion: Humanitarian Goods and Public-Private Partnerships for Innovation Margie Cheesman, Grégoire Mallard, Anna Leander, Emrys Shoemaker Moderator: Julis Koch Discussant: Carolina Earle
18.30 -	Dinner

Annex I: Workshop Abstracts

1. Accountability & Transparency

The idea that numbers alone can maintain agencies' "impartiality" has made quantification a common practice in contemporary humanitarian work. There is a strong belief that interactive technologies will increase the participation of vulnerable communities and simultaneously hold agencies accountable for their work. Feedback data has, in this regard, become central to the demand for humanitarian accountability. Digital platforms that allow affected communities' participation through feedback mechanisms are assumed not only to increase the transparency of humanitarian agencies but also to correct the power asymmetries in which they operate. Yet, scholarship has highlighted how digitally collected feedback, far from serving the interests of beneficiaries, is often used for agencies' audit objectives. That is, to demonstrate the success of agencies' various projects to different funding partners in a highly marketized humanitarian context. Donors' demand for evidence of success creates a context in which agencies are continually required to justify their work and measure their impact. Hence, they become heavily reliant on data, often drawn from beneficiaries' feedback. As such, agencies' audit culture generates layers of dependency that risk reproducing, rather than challenging, existing power asymmetries.

Questions:

- *What do numbers reveal and what do they conceal? What assumptions inform the production of indicators?*
- *To whom are humanitarian organisations accountable and for what?*
- *How does the quest for quantitative data affect actors' notions of transparency and impartiality and transform humanitarian work?*

2. Extractivism & Colonialism

Digital technologies are often perceived as a means to achieve structural change in the humanitarian sector, a move away from older state-centered systems and an opportunity to redistribute power. While digital infrastructures indeed generate new power relations in which new actors participate in the reshaping of humanitarian practice, they also reproduce processes of exploitation where the social lives of humanitarian subjects become resources for data extraction. From digital identities to feedback apps and the testing of humanitarian innovations through technological pilots carried out in vulnerable contexts, practices of data extraction not only reproduce earlier colonial patterns but

also generate new asymmetric relations of dependency between humanitarian agencies and their beneficiaries. The extraction of value from vulnerable communities raises questions of ownership, access, privacy, and knowledge production.

Questions:

- *What new regimes of knowledge are produced through digital technologies?*
- *In what ways do digital innovations reinforce existing power asymmetries and reshape colonial structures of dependency?*
- *How is race reproduced through the use of ‘techs for good’?*

3. Care & Surveillance

Humanitarian agencies rely on digital technologies to identify needs, map or anticipate disasters, or monitor the distribution of relief. Biometrics, drones, remote sensing and programming, and satellite imagery are only some examples of infrastructures used in humanitarian work. While these technologies are generally promoted as tools for humanitarian efficiency, they rest on asymmetric relations that often condition humanitarian subjects’ access to aid on their digital visibility. In exchange for care, people are categorized into accessible and knowable data subjects. This binary condition raises questions around how humanitarian technology generates new confluences of care and surveillance, ultimately adding new dimensions to the longstanding humanitarian care-control paradox.

Questions:

- *How do conditions of digital (in)visibility contribute to the (re)making of social and legal categories?*
- *What new entanglements of care and control emerge through the use of digital technologies?*

4. Humanitarian Goods & Public-Private Partnerships for Innovation

Humanitarian goods are frequently portrayed as a pragmatic response to states’ failure to realize the common good and embody a line of ethical engagement characterized by an optimistic faith in technology combined with a commitment to market expansion. Indeed, many large private companies (Google, Airbnb, Facebook, Microsoft) are involved in the design of humanitarian digital solutions. Such private-public relationships not only allow companies to reframe political problems in line with their own business objectives but also provide an opportunity for humanitarian agencies to stay

relevant to the market. In both ways, these relationships serve to depoliticize the problems they claim to solve. In this sense, digital solutions turn vulnerable populations into clients of a humanitarian industry that seeks to respond to 'basic human needs' necessary to maintain bodily functioning. Such a minimalist version of humanity, where rights materialize as provisions, is not geared toward reducing social suffering but toward making it a liveable condition.

Questions:

- *In what ways do public-private partnerships for innovation reshape the relationship between humanitarian organizations, host states, donors, technological innovators, and displaced communities?*
- *What forms of harm can emerge through making "social good" profitable? In what ways are humanitarian innovations (re)fashioning visions and definitions of "good"?*