

International Committee of the Red Cross – Information and Communication Technology

Report: Tientso Ning

The International Committee of the Red Cross's mission statement is a humanitarian approach to protect lives and dignity of victims of armed conflict and other situations of violence, to provide these people with assistance. Information and Communication Technology is the large-scale computer and communications projects in the countries that the ICRC operates in. It is first and foremost important to indicate that the systemic problems that the ICRC wishes to resolve are tough challenges that span the domains of international politics, border conflicts, terrorism, poverty, corruption, and human rights abuses. In the globalized context, technology certainly has the ability to provide invaluable support, but it alone cannot resolve these issues. However, it is worth noting that with the right structural support, organizations such as the ICRC are able to create massive change from just leveraging the correct technologies.

There are a couple of areas where Information and Communications technologies become big problem solvers: real-time field communication (radio and internet), accessible education, real-time intel (data). Just these three categories alone improve the ability for an organization to make substantial impact in countries dealing with armed conflict and violence. Real-time field communication requires infrastructure to be complete and maintained, and allows for better strategic coordination as well as accurate representation of the situation on the ground as a result. In the process of aiding victims of armed conflict, communication is often key. Precise deployment of resources, information regarding safety, as well as coordinating response teams all rely on real-time communication and intel. Additionally, one of the perhaps less intuitive impacts of ICT is education. Areas affected by armed conflict and violence tends to have a higher correlation to poverty as well as lower priority on education (due to insufficient infrastructure). ICT can make the difference in educating the communities that are affected by violence and would otherwise not have an opportunity to access the wealth of information available today. Physical devices and networks can provide children with a virtual library for instance, where they would otherwise never have access to such materials. It transforms the context of the communities, where these provided technologies could allow an impoverished community to still be able to create a classroom and learning environment.

There are risks/drawbacks however to ICT as well. On an economic level, introducing and maintaining technological networks is a difficult and expensive task. Poor quality in this context could be just as bad as no quality: real-time communications are powerful because they are real-time. Latency or delay could undercut the usefulness of these networks as well as the safety of the teams responsible for aid. Additionally, groups such as the ICRC do not have the large monetary incentives that big corporations do, and as such, attract less candidates who are highly-qualified which hurts the effectiveness of deployment as well. Lastly, as with any introduction of technology and data, notions of privacy as well as human rights in the context of technology is still in its infancy. Law and International Law already have difficulties, and the new age of law in the context of technology simply has not been explored. There poses a potential risk of subjecting the victims to a double injury via introduction of new elements that communities and organizations are not ready to tackle yet.