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Held at Headquarters, New York, on Wednesday, 26 June 2024, at 3 p.m.

President: Mr. Šimonović (Vice-President) . . . . . (Croatia)

Contents

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In the absence of Ms. Narváez Ojeda (Chile), Mr. Šimonović (Croatia), Vice-President, took the Chair.

The meeting was called to order at 3.05 p.m.

Agenda item 9: Special economic, humanitarian and disaster relief assistance (*continued*) (A/79/78-E/2024/53)

High-level panel discussion: "Embracing innovation and adapting new technology in humanitarian assistance"

1. **The President** said that humanitarian actors, increasingly at the intersection of technology and humanitarian assistance, were left to consider the intricate balance between the risks and benefits of integrating innovative technology into humanitarian efforts. That included the use and application of artificial intelligence. Humanitarians had been using artificial intelligence for years, from chatbots in displacement settings to mapping for emergency response. What was new was the extent to which humanitarians were increasingly being faced with the need to explore and integrate the transformative possibilities of emerging technology into their work.

2. At the same time, there was a need to discuss the ethical complexities, strategic advantages and practical implications of embracing innovation and new technology in humanitarian efforts. Misinformation, breaches of confidentiality and concerns around cybersecurity were just some of the immediate challenges that the humanitarian sector was grappling with to ensure that the new tools were being used ethically and responsibly. Data was the foundation underpinning much of the new technology and innovation. Having good data available, defining what that meant and exploring opportunities to increase the sharing and quality of data must also be part of the conversation.

3. The current panel discussion would touch on such issues as the future of the humanitarian system, whether the right tools were available to solve the challenges ahead and whether there was also a clear understanding of the problems that new technologies and innovative solutions could address. Innovative solutions must be correctly adapted – technologically, financially and politically – to the individual contexts in which humanitarians were working.

4. **Mr. Rajasingham** (Director of the Coordination Division of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA)), moderator, said that humanitarians were no strangers to innovation. They operated in some of the world's most challenging environments, requiring them to adapt to and solve novel, complex and high-stakes problems on a daily basis. They were called on to address global crises on a massive scale, as conflicts proliferated and the humanitarian impacts of climate change deepened. They were also having to do more with less.

5. Embracing innovation was therefore a must, and humanitarians had not been slow to do so. They were integrating new sources of data from satellite technologies into analysis to inform how they prioritized and distributed aid. Advances in climate impact prediction had allowed them to implement more anticipatory approaches to support vulnerable communities ahead of disasters. Digital cash transfers had also allowed humanitarians to get aid to people safely and effectively in hard-to-reach places.

6. The same was true for technologies such as artificial intelligence. Over the past five years, artificial intelligence usage had more than doubled, with groundbreaking innovations such as generative artificial intelligence, giving rise to tools such as ChatGPT. Artificial intelligence offered opportunities to enhance humanitarian work. It could automate routine tasks such as report drafting and data formatting, significantly boosting operational efficiency. It could also analyse vast amounts of data, making it possible to adopt proactive and data-driven approaches that improved responsiveness to crises.

7. OCHA was already leveraging artificial intelligence and machine learning to increase efficiency and enhance processes. For example, in the Philippines, OCHA was collaborating with local governments and the Netherlands Red Cross to create a model using artificial intelligence algorithms that predicted the percentage of damaged buildings per municipality in the event of a typhoon. In Nigeria, OCHA was partnering with Google's Flood Forecasting Initiative to use artificial intelligence-based flood forecasts to enhance early warning systems and potentially trigger anticipatory responses.

8. The OCHA Humanitarian Data Exchange platform included data sources that had been generated through artificial intelligence tools. That included building footprint data from Google and demographic estimates from Meta. In partnership with academia and think-tanks, OCHA was customizing a large language model to allow users to ask questions of the data on the Humanitarian Data Exchange, lowering the barrier for non-technical users to explore and analyse crisis data.

9. However, as technologies such as artificial intelligence were integrated more deeply into humanitarian work, it was important to remain vigilant

about the significant risks that they posed. Issues such as misinformation, bias, cybersecurity threats and privacy concerns must be carefully assessed, addressed and managed. The benefits of artificial intelligence must be balanced with the paramount need to protect individual rights and societal values, while safeguarding humanity in humanitarian responses.

10. Recent international discussions at the United Nations had emphasized the need for global governance frameworks for artificial intelligence. Such frameworks could foster innovation while mitigating risks and ensuring that artificial intelligence could be used safely, ethically and effectively. The current panel discussion was an opportunity to discuss, inter alia: the benefits, opportunities and risks of emerging technologies for humanitarian action; how humanitarians could navigate the intricate balance between those risks and benefits; how humanitarians could leverage partnerships and links between the United Nations, the private sector and academia to take best advantage of innovative technology and make sure that it was integrated in the right way; and how humanitarians could ensure that their work remained principled and accountable to affected people.

11. **Mr. Mazou** (Assistant High Commissioner for Operations, Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)), panellist, said that the mandate of UNHCR was essentially about protecting people. Improvements in technology over the years and increased digital engagement had helped UNHCR to deliver better support. However, efforts did not always rely on the latest technology but were guided by what worked for the people whom UNHCR served and the technology to which they had access. Moreover, as displaced and stateless persons might face barriers in accessing technology, UNHCR needed to ensure that digital tools did not replace other offline means of support.

12. Fundamentally, however, improvements in technology over the years had helped to bridge digital divides, including through the Connectivity for Refugees initiative, which aimed to connect 20 million forcibly displaced persons and their host communities by 2030. At the Global Refugee Forum in December 2023, UNHCR had been part of a wide coalition of actors that had committed to enhancing coordinated action, resource mobilization and knowledge-sharing to ensure that all major refugee hosting areas were connected.

13. UNHCR leveraged technology and innovation to share information with, and receive and provide feedback from, forcibly displaced and stateless persons. Across operations, there had been an increasing uptake of multichannel contact centres, digital platforms, such as WhatsApp, and social media, to allow effective two-way communication, informed by community preferences.

14. Advances in technology had also enabled UNHCR to ensure that refugees and asylum-seekers had autonomy over their own data. Self-service applications supported communication and transparency, and, importantly, gave forcibly displaced and stateless persons direct access to, and control over, their data. The Digital Gateway project had the potential to expand the reach of UNHCR and inform protection and assistance planning.

15. It was important to note the particularly sensitive nature of data on refugees and asylum-seekers as they might have been subjected to violence, persecution and human rights violations in their home countries. Privacy and data protection considerations, and human rights due diligence, were therefore at the centre of any deployment of new digital technologies.

16. UNHCR strongly encouraged field-level innovation and supported innovation projects designed and implemented by refugee organizations. It was committed to empowering refugees and asylum-seekers, who were often best placed to solve the complex challenges they faced. UNHCR worked with partners such as the International Labour Organization to advance opportunities for refugees in the digital economy, balancing safe and equal access with emerging digital risks.

17. As Member States worked on a common vision for a shared digital future through the global digital compact, UNHCR welcomed the prospect of an inclusive and safe digital future for all, in which all persons, including those who were forcibly displaced or stateless, could benefit from the opportunities provided by digital technologies. All UNHCR actions were guided by its digital transformation strategy, which outlined the approach to leveraging innovation and digital tools to strengthen protection, build self-reliance and deliver services to refugees, internally displaced and stateless persons.

18. **Ms. Dagash-Kamara** (Assistant Executive Director for Partnerships and Innovation, World Food Programme (WFP)), panellist, speaking via video link, said that WFP had come a long way thanks to the intersection of innovation and technology. Over the past decade, innovations hubs had been established in Colombia, Kenya and the United Republic of Tanzania, and, since taking office in 2023, the WFP Executive Director had embraced a transformative innovation

strategy that had become the driver of its global operations.

19. Optimus was an online decision support system developed by the WFP Supply Chain Division that helped to identify the most efficient and cost-effective way to reach people. WFP had also partnered with Google to develop Scout, a data analysis tool that helped to determine when to purchase and pre-position food. Use of the tool had recently avoided interruptions to the distribution of food supplies in East and West Africa. Henceforth, Scout would be used for the purchase of all commodity operations through the WFP global supply chain. WFP was also engaged in a partnership to simplify and improve the planning of its meal deliveries and warehouse storage. Launched in Benin and Haiti, the meal programme had shortened delivery times, reduced transport costs and decreased the environmental footprint. It currently served 2 million children but the aim was to reach 22 million children by the end of 2025.

20. To better address the complex factors that contributed to hunger, poverty, conflict and other crises, WFP was exploring and scaling up artificial intelligence and machine learning, including through the establishment of a relevant task force, while bearing in mind the need to ensure the ethical and responsible use of new technologies.

21. **Mr. Harland** (Head of Humanitarian Affairs, International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)), panellist, said that he wished to give some examples of effective innovations introduced by ICRC. For instance, ICRC had begun using virtual reality technology to improve the balance of patients who had received prosthetics and it had convinced some detaining authorities to allow their prisoners of war to access Skype, rather than sending telegrams. ICRC had also tried to convince video game manufacturers to build in negative consequences for players whose actions would violate international humanitarian law in the real world, such as attacks against hospitals and ambulances. ICRC itself used such video technology to train the military about the importance of respecting international humanitarian law.

22. ICRC did not innovate merely for the sake of innovation, but was open to innovation that was driven by needs and based on humanitarian principle, such as humanity and taking a precautionary approach to avoid doing any harm. For example, ICRC had explored the potential of artificial intelligence to search through databases to find missing persons in armed conflict. However, it had identified enough negative consequences from doing so to discount that option. For the same reason, ICRC remained cautious about the use of large language models.

23. Regarding the principle of impartiality, ICRC was also cautious about using certain technologies that might lead to discrimination and exclusion. Instead, it tried to focus on technologies that could mitigate existing data biases that affected the design, functioning and impact of technologies.

24. With regard to the principles of neutrality and independence, it was pertinent for ICRC to ask itself internal questions such as whether the software that it was using was in fact neutral and the extent to which it was dependent on individual technologies. At the same time, there remained scope to partner with others to improve the effectiveness of new technologies.

25. Lastly, he drew attention to the fact that ICRC and the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Lausanne had designed a six-week online training course on humanitarian action in the digital age, which addressed the responsible use of technology for humanitarians.

26. **Ms. Klinova** (Head of Data and Artificial Intelligence Initiatives, United Nations Global Pulse initiative), panellist, speaking via video link, said that there were some contexts and situations where the use of artificial intelligence was appropriate, relevant and helpful but others where it was not, or at least not currently. Therefore, the goal was not necessarily to maximize the use of artificial intelligence in the humanitarian sector. Rather, the goal was to make the option of using tried and tested artificial intelligence products more broadly available to humanitarian organizations, where appropriate, to save time and resources.

27. However, the availability of artificial intelligence tools to humanitarian organizations was still patchy at best, despite the fact that the volume of relevant research for the Sustainable Development Goals and humanitarian operations was growing. There remained a big gap between having a new model or method described in an academic research paper and having it turned into a robust, dependable and safe service that humanitarians could count on in their work. The size of the gap between research and everyday operations explained why many promising pilots were never adopted within the humanitarian sector.

28. The United Nations Global Pulse initiative was working to help close the gap through the Data Insights for Social and Humanitarian Action (DISHA) initiative, which identified existing artificial intelligence models and methodologies that had already been tried and shown to be useful, but were not currently being used

very widely. Such work would lower the barriers to their adoption by humanitarian organizations within and outside the United Nations.

29. One of the main barriers was securing data access. There were plenty of data sources emerging from the digitalization of economies that could be very helpful for disaster preparedness and response, and could complement censuses and needs assessment surveys with near real-time data. Examples of such data sources included mobile phone data, remote sensing data and payments data. Those alternative data sources were often difficult to access, especially since they usually contained highly sensitive information. Organizations that wished to use those data sources therefore had to negotiate data sharing agreements with each data provider, which could take months if not years to finalize and required dedicated expertise to ensure responsible, safe and legal access to data.

30. DISHA was working to eliminate the need for humanitarian organizations to bilaterally negotiate data sharing agreements with each relevant data provider. Instead, the United Nations Global Pulse initiative would build the tools to analyse anonymized data within the environment of the data provider and extract and share with authorized humanitarian users the set of aggregated insights needed by many organizations. By pooling demand, the United Nations Global Pulse initiative was able to save the time and effort needed to unlock access to insights from real-time data sources.

31. Another challenge was that selecting and validating artificial intelligence models, identifying the risks associated with their use and putting appropriate measures in place to response were all still relatively new practices. DISHA was striving to provide full transparency to humanitarian partners on how the products of the United Nations Global Pulse initiative worked and what their limitations were. Such transparency was a basis for a dialogue with humanitarian partners.

32. The last prominent challenge was that the deployment of artificial intelligence within the humanitarian sector required long-term funding, which was a rare luxury in humanitarian settings. Experimentation with new tools and methodologies, which would be easy in other domains, naturally warranted more caution in the humanitarian domain. Products using novel technologies therefore took longer to go from proof of concept to business as usual. DISHA was fortunate to have long-term funding because its donors fully understood the length of the journey and what it entailed.

33. **Ms. Neff** (Executive Director and Professor, University of Cambridge, Minderoo Centre for Technology and Democracy), panellist, said that the Minderoo Centre was focused on making digital technologies work for people, communities and the planet. Since the public release of ChatGPT, many people around the world were concerned with how artificial intelligence would impact them and how to ready themselves and their organizations for both the opportunities and the challenges presented by such new technologies.

34. A key challenge for the humanitarian sector was that new technologies such as artificial intelligence presented opportunities for organizational and social transformations. Questions that might arise in that regard included how humanitarian organizations could best use those technologies to deliver value while preserving their core values; how such technologies could be used responsibly and appropriately while meeting and matching the unique cultural values of the sector; and how the technological innovations developed could support teams on the ground to innovate around the emergent problems they faced.

35. There were reasons to be optimistic about responsible innovations. For example, the High-level Advisory Body on Artificial Intelligence, convened by the Envoy of the Secretary-General on Technology, would ensure that the conversation about artificial intelligence was not dominated by the few, but considered the needs of the many. Work on governance and regulation was also providing the guardrails that helped people and organizations to innovate responsibly, and the research community stood ready to assist on best practices. A focus on the problems to be solved was more likely to produce lasting success than a focus on the technology itself.

36. **Mr. Diaz** (Head of Artificial Intelligence for Social Good, Google.org), panellist, said that for the past five years, his organization had been seeking to ensure that the benefits of artificial intelligence were available to everyone. Assisting non-profit organizations in harnessing the potential of artificial intelligence could solve some of humanity’s biggest challenges and help as many people as possible, especially during humanitarian crises. Through programmes such as the Google.org Fellowship, over $200 million and over 160,000 pro bono hours had been invested to build artificial intelligence tools that accelerated the impact of non-profit institutions. Those benefiting from the tools had since reported that they were achieving their outcomes in a third of the original time and at half the cost.

37. At a time when the world was not on track to meet the Sustainable Development Goals, the accelerant potential that artificial intelligence could provide must be harnessed. Artificial intelligence served as a force multiplier: it could analyse massive datasets, identify patterns and provide insights in a fraction of the time and cost that humans required. Artificial intelligence pursued boldly and responsibly could be a foundational technology that transformed people's lives. However, that was possible only when artificial intelligence was used appropriately for its intended purpose and when systems were built with users in mind and guided by experts in relevant domains through an inclusive approach based on partnerships.

38. His organization was partnering with DISHA of the United Nations Global Pulse initiative to scale up technology in order to better identify areas affected by hurricanes; with WFP to improve weather forecasting technology; with OCHA to improve predictive analysis; and with organizations, Governments and the World Meteorological Organization to improve flood forecasting. It was also actively collaborating with humanitarian organizations that utilized flood information to accelerate their anticipatory actions. However, in addition to partnerships, collective willpower would be needed to make the humanitarian system less responsive and more proactive. Ultimately, early disaster warnings were only helpful if they prompted early action.

39. **Ms. Delaney** (Observer for Australia) said that new technology could play a critical role in disaster risk management by equipping Governments and communities with the information they needed to respond in a timely manner. Her delegation welcomed the focus in the panel discussion on the importance of partnerships, dialogue, localization and a demand driven response. For example, Australia had been supporting the Women's Weather Watch programme, which was giving women in remote areas access to appropriate timely information and building their capacity to take the lead in disaster preparedness.

40. At the same time, any new technologies used must do no harm and the communities involved must be able to genuinely consent to and participate in their design and roll out. While greater data sharing and interoperability across humanitarian actors was welcome, it must be done safely, legally and with respect for people's rights, particularly when dealing with sensitive or personal information.

41. **Mr. Widmer** (Observer for Switzerland) said that artificial intelligence was transforming the ability to predict the humanitarian impact of conflicts and climate shocks. New technologies could improve responses to crises through better needs assessment, geospatial imagery, early warning systems and improvements in the search for missing persons as a result of armed conflict. However, new technologies also entailed major risks for the humanitarian ecosystem. Cyber operations could target critical infrastructures, seriously threatening civilians and their property and disrupting humanitarian aid. Personal data could be hacked, increasing the risk of misuse, surveillance and harm to civilians. In addition, the increasing use of digital technologies could amplify the spread of false information and hate speech, affecting the delivery of humanitarian aid and the work of humanitarian organizations. Those risks underlined the urgent need to put in place robust safeguards.

42. It was crucial to clarify how international humanitarian law applied in practice and governed the digitalization of conflicts. In Geneva, for example, Switzerland was organizing discussions on open-source intelligence and the increased blurring of lines between civilians and combatants. Switzerland was also taking part in the Humanitarian Data and Trust Initiative, which aimed to raise awareness of the need to protect data and use it responsibly. It had strongly supported the drafting of a resolution on the protecting civilians and other protected persons and objects against the potential human costs of information and communications technologies during armed conflict at the thirty-fourth International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent. Switzerland had also decided to support the extension of the Digital Hub on Treasury Solutions and the creation of a United Nations centre of excellence in Geneva, in partnership with the United Nations International Computing Centre, UNHCR, the United Nations Development Programme and the International Organization for Migration. The aim was to facilitate access to financial ecosystems and transactions in order to make them more efficient and reduce their costs.

43. The humanitarian system must have the capacity and resources to respond to risks, including at the local level. Promoting the sharing of knowledge and technological tools across the humanitarian sector would help to strengthen the collective impact. At the same time, new technologies must be used responsibly and ethically, based on humanitarian principles.

44. **Mr. Avramović** (Representative of the European Union, in its capacity as observer) said that the Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations of the European Union, following extensive consultations with humanitarian partners, had recently adopted a policy framework on humanitarian digitalization. The policy aimed to enhance

trust in the ethical use of reliable digital tools and to find ways of promoting and scaling up the use of successful innovative technologies. In addition, the European Union was supporting specific tools, through UNHCR, to address misinformation, disinformation and hate speech in humanitarian contexts. Among other initiatives, the European Union was seeking to support the emergence of a humanitarian digital community to discuss recurrent issues and the elaboration of an ethical framework for humanitarian digitalization. It had also recently launched the European Prize for Humanitarian Innovation.

45. **Ms. Benaken Elel** (Observer for Cameroon) said that technological advances had enormous potential to improve humanitarian work and responses. Her country was particularly interested in the use of new technologies such as artificial intelligence to improve data collection and weather forecasting, given the recurrent flooding in Cameroon that had resulted in population displacement and ensuing humanitarian needs. As States had a major role to play in that context, national capacity-building and technology transfer needs must be addressed. She asked the panellists what was being done to meet those needs.

46. **Mr. Stanis** (United States of America) said that the digital strategy of the United States Agency for International Development, launched in April 2020, was grounded in the reality that digital technology had the potential to change the way in which information was shared. That realization had driven the support provided by the United States to upgrade the digital infrastructure of international organizations so that they could better serve the affected populations under their mandates. The United States partnership with the WFP Innovation Accelerator, for example, had led to greater efficiency of WFP operations through the shared use of digital tools. The United States was also sharing digital innovations, including satellite imagery and artificial intelligence, to facilitate humanitarian responses during disasters. At the same time, his delegation stressed the need to ensure privacy and security while using digital technologies.

47. **Mr. Sahraoui** (Observer for Algeria) said that the disparity in access to new technologies had never been more apparent and was particularly concerning in the humanitarian sector, where the potential of such technologies to transform responses remained largely untapped, particularly in developing countries. To address that gap his delegation emphasized the need for tailored capacity-building programmes, the importance of the responsible use of new technologies, such as artificial intelligence, and the urgent need to bridge the technological divide between developed and developing countries. To that end, his delegation called on developed countries, international organization and the private sector to commit substantial resources, not only through financial support but also by sharing expertise, open-source technologies and best practices. The promise of technology to transform humanitarian assistance could only be fully realized if the international community committed to equitable capacity-building and technology transfer. Empowering developing countries with the tools, knowledge and skills to leverage technological innovations would enhance global humanitarian efforts and help to build a more resilient and equitable world.

48. **Mr. Mazou** (Assistant High Commissioner for Operations, Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)) said that new technology used in humanitarian assistance must be people-centred and do no harm. In that context, UNCHR partnered with research institutions to understand the impact of the new technologies being used. It also worked closely with Governments to strengthen their data collection capabilities.

49. **Mr. Harland** (Head of Humanitarian Affairs, International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)) said that, to address the military aspects of new technologies, ICRC had called for the adoption of a legally binding instrument prohibiting the use of autonomous weapons in armed conflict and had also published a report on how to better protect civilians in armed conflict from digital harms. ICRC was also working with universities to better understand the impact of new technologies on humanitarian work. For example, misinformation, disinformation and hate speech spread on digital platforms could have real effects on communities, leading to more violence, including potential threats against ICRC. Any technologies over which ICRC did not have full control would continue to be used with extreme caution.

50. **Ms. Klinova** (Head of Data and Artificial Intelligence Initiatives, United Nations Global Pulse initiative), speaking via video link, said that she agreed that the benefits of technology were not currently distributed evenly and that bridging the digital divide remained a prerequisite for anticipating and responding to crises. She also agreed that partnerships were critical for developing solutions that were truly driven by needs on the ground and that data sharing, while critical, must be done safely and legally.

51. **Ms. Neff** (Executive Director and Professor, University of Cambridge, Minderoo Centre for Technology and Democracy) said that the Minderoo Centre had published a report in 2023 calling for the

humanitarian sector to be careful when experimenting with new and untested digital technologies because, at times, the harms of their use could outweigh the benefits. For example, she noted that in 2022 she had helped to launch a report on how women's lives could both benefit from and be diminished by emerging technologies. Lastly, she noted that tailored local solutions to address the digital divide would require greater data sharing and capacity-building efforts.

52. **Mr. Diaz** (Head of Artificial Intelligence for Social Good, Google.org) said that his organization had worked to make many resources publicly available, such as a free online course on the essentials of artificial intelligence and free flood forecasting on the Google Flood Hub platform. There were troves of publicly available data that could be extremely useful for combating climate change, hunger and epidemics. The problem was that most complex problems were not solved by a single data source and many data sets were fragmented, which made it difficult and costly to access and analyse them. A Google team was harnessing the power of artificial intelligence, including large language model programmes, to make such data more accessible and useful to users.

53. **Mr. Rajasingham** (Director of the Coordination Division of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA)), summing up, said that embracing technologies such as artificial intelligence in humanitarian efforts offered a number of opportunities, from enhancing operational efficiency to improving crisis responsiveness through data-driven approaches. While integrating artificial intelligence and other technologies, it was crucial to remain vigilant about risks such as misinformation, bias, cybersecurity threats and privacy concerns. Upholding humanitarian principles and protecting individual rights must be prioritized.

54. Effective partnerships between the United Nations, the private sector and academia were essential for maximizing the benefits of innovative technologies in humanitarian action. International governance frameworks for artificial intelligence were crucial to ensure safe, ethical and effective use globally.

55. **The President**, summing up, said that the discussion had exemplified the collaboration that would be needed to drive forward innovation in the humanitarian sector and manage the integration of new technology. Joint work in future should maximize the benefits and mitigate the risks to people in need with the primary objective of providing safe and timely humanitarian assistance to as many people as possible.

The meeting rose at 4.40 p.m.