

100 Voices on Technology & Peace Operations

Supporting the implementation of mandated tasks through digital technologies

| Supporting digital transformation and innovation in transitioning countries

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High-paced technological change is having a major impact on society, including how public sector agencies operate and interact with citizens. The global pandemic put a spotlight on the relevance of advanced citizen-oriented technical solutions that enable individuals to interact in almost all spheres of life amidst restrictions and quarantines.

This accelerated trend towards digitalization massively altered not only the way the public and private sectors work in our home countries but also led to an urgent need for international peace operations to revisit the focus of their activities. In 2020, the gap between challenges and effective citizen-oriented solutions especially in transitioning countries has become evident.

The urgency to embrace citizen-oriented technological solutions in times of disruptive change also creates opportunities for international missions to support activities that have a sustainable positive impact on societies and thus help maintain peace. However, international organizations operating in transitioning countries need to adapt to the new context swiftly, and mainstream new approaches into their work effectively. At the same time, missions need to pay due regard to human rights and data protection standards when supporting technology that may touch upon personal data and privacy issues.

SUPPORT FOR DIGITALIZATION INITIATIVES

Digitalization— whether through increased public access to information via the internet, social media, e-services, or digitally based business solutions – can have a truly transformative effect on societies in transitioning countries. Technology may be an important element in efforts to improve access to services for citizens. For example, technology enables children to gain access to education and opportunities, especially in remote areas and in the absence of traditional or high-quality “brick-and-mortar” schools. Technology can also assist in the fight against corruption through developing efficient and transparent digital services without the need for face-to-face interaction and through a system that tracks the quality of services and provides options for anonymized feedback. This

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being said, both digitalization opportunities as well as limitations undoubtedly depend on the specific context of a country, including the level of development of a society.

International peace operations have a particular role to play in supporting initiatives that have a positive, sustainable, and stabilizing impact on host countries. These may include digitalization projects geared towards serving society, leading to enhanced citizen satisfaction and the building of trust. At the same time, missions need to consider possible pitfalls carefully when advising on and supporting digitalization activities. First, any support should be based on a concrete request to ensure ownership, and be coordinated with other international players to guarantee the interoperability of different technological solutions. Otherwise, missions risk duplication and a waste of money in case systems do not connect where required. Undoubtedly, international missions also need to take into account the different contexts in which they operate, including the above-mentioned level of development of a society but also the capacities of local administrations. For example, the conditions in Ukraine, known for its tech-savvy people, are certainly unique and thus hardly comparable to countries like South Sudan or the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Even though varying contexts will affect mission activities, it should not inhibit missions from supporting worthwhile digitalization initiatives altogether.

Undoubtedly, making digitalization work for the broader society goes hand in hand with improving access to technology and developing digital literacy of all citizens. Furthermore, digitalization initiatives should always be mindful of data protection and human rights and integrate good governance principles. For instance, data protection regulations should be in place before missions fund activities that may touch upon citizen's personal information. Before jumping on the digitalization wagon, any mission support thus needs to be examined carefully with a view to its broader effects on society– and with the do no harm principle in mind.

Notwithstanding time-restricted mandates which make longer-term planning challenging for many peace operations, due regard should be given to sustainable activities that have a long-lasting effect on societies. Smaller quick wins may provide a “way in” and help to establish trust, but do not always take into consideration the broader context. Missions should view digitalization activities as matching pieces of a bigger puzzle. Otherwise, they face the risk of assembling many little pieces of different puzzles that in the end fail to match.

DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION AND INNOVATION

Digital transformation refers to a broader concept than digitalization as it emphasizes the transformative character of technological advances with regard to society. It is based on, but at the same time goes beyond the information and communications (ICT) sphere. Digitalization of the public sector may be less transformative without integrating innovative approaches in the project development and implementation phases, which may lead to missing out on opportunities to become part of one coherent puzzle. Innovative techniques usually engage citizens, and can thus help build partnerships and trust. In this regard, innovation can assist in creating sustainable

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outcomes for the whole society, not just privileged parts of it, which is crucial to achieve lasting peace.

International peace operations should thus also make use of innovative approaches and techniques in their reform efforts to be able to question conventional concepts and beliefs that may not be suitable in view of increasingly complex challenges. Social engineering, techniques in psychology, and foresight are examples of approaches that missions could employ complementary to digitalization activities to influence reform processes in transitioning countries.

GOOD GOVERNANCE

Electronic governance – such as government-to-consumer/citizen (G2C) initiatives aim to facilitate effective interaction of citizens and executive agencies. However, the development phase of G2C initiatives needs to consider more than technical solutions to be successful and accepted. Citizen-oriented innovative e-solutions should follow good governance principles such as openness, participation, accountability, transparency, effectiveness, and coherence. Executive agencies need to encourage citizen participation and recognize that citizens are both beneficiaries of services as well as potential generators thereof. Involving civil society in the development of new digital solutions is of utmost importance to ensure that these will ultimately succeed and that funds are well spent.

International organizations supporting peace and reform efforts in transitioning countries should therefore focus equally on technical support as well as on encouraging government partners to effectively communicate and cooperate with civil society. Without participation and openness, it is unlikely that trust - an important cornerstone of a peace and stability - between executive agencies and society can be built. Digital transformation initiatives supported by peace operations should therefore prioritize activities aimed at sustainability, inclusiveness, and equality. As Paul Poleman, businessperson and co-founder and Chair of IMAGINE, states, “Innovation driven by human ingenuity is key to creating a more sustainable and equitable future for all.”

LEVELLING UP INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL CAPACITIES

To meet the needs of host countries to develop innovative, transformative, and sustainable digitalization initiatives that are in line with citizen's expectations in a rapidly changing world, international peace operations first need to level up both internal and external capacities. Missions urgently need to enhance internal expertise to be able to continue providing top-quality and up-to-date support. They should also reassess internal business processes to ensure that their set-ups facilitate their ambitious goals. At the same time, missions need to be able to redirect budget to worthwhile projects aimed at transformative digital solutions, which are citizen-oriented, based on local buy-in, and fulfil the required standards. This requires flexibility of budgets – which may at times be challenging for international governmental organizations because of fixed mandates and priorities.

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International peace operations need to become more innovative and digital to stay relevant for their partners. Decision makers should consider now how they could develop and integrate technological and innovative approaches when it comes to reform efforts, and equip missions with the expertise and budget they need to meet these disruptive and at the same time exciting challenges.:

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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