Stockholm Internet Forum 2023 (SIF23) Brief

THE ROLE OF INTERNET AND ICTS DURING CRISES, CONFLICTS AND DISASTERS

Stockholm Internet Forum 2023

Digital technologies offer unprecedented opportunities and challenges. They have the potential for positive transformation, but, when "improperly or maliciously used, they can fuel divisions within and between countries, increase insecurity, undermine human rights, and exacerbate inequality."[1] Given that so many people around the world are currently living in contexts of crisis, conflict or disaster, it is vital to examine the role played by Internet and ICT infrastructure and data management systems, the frameworks and policies that govern them, and how and by whom the resulting transformations are leveraged in order to deliver on the Sustainable Development Goals and Agenda 2030.

*It is in this context that the Swedish International Development Agency (Sida) will host the eighth Stockholm Internet Forum in Stockholm from 30-31 May 2023 under the overall theme of **The Role of the Internet and ICT during Crises, Conflicts and Disasters.***

SIF Background

The first Stockholm Internet Forum (SIF) was held in 2012 following a decision by the Government of Sweden. At that time the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in collaboration with civil society organisations, other states and the United Nations Human Rights Council (HRC) Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression were actively working for formal recognition of human rights online. This collaboration resulted in the milestone June 2012 resolution that recognised the importance of the Internet as an enabler of freedom of expression and other human rights, and that rights that apply "offline" also apply "online. Initially held annually, since 2015 SIF has been organised on a biennial basis as a unique and valued space for taking stock of the gains and challenges related to the interplay between digitalisation and democratisation, development, gender justice and human rights. The last four SIFs dealt with Access (2015); Access and Power (2017); Shrinking Democratic Space Online (2019) and Mobilising for Digital Resilience in Shifting Landscapes of the Pandemic (2021 on-line event).

SIF brings together Sida development partners and other existing and emerging actors in digital rights, democracy and development, with an emphasis on those working in difficult and repressive environments. It has become an effective platform for collaboration, networking and knowledge sharing, and has facilitated closer interaction and open debate between the private sector and human rights defenders. Previous SIFs gathered around 500 participants – from all stakeholder groups – from around 100 countries – the majority coming from ODA-countries[2]2. In 2021 SIF took place virtually and included over 1000 participants from 120 countries.

More information will follow on the web page [Stockholm Internet Forum](#) as conference planning continues. Contact: Stockholm Internet Forum sif@sida.se

---

[1] [Global-Digital-Compact_background-note.pdf](#)

[2] https://www.oecd.org/dac/financing-sustainable-development/development-finance-standards/DAC-List-of-ODA-Recipients-for-reporting-2020-flows.pdf

Setting the scene - The Role of the Internet and ICT during Crises, Conflicts and Disasters

Crises, conflict and disasters are escalating in scale and impact across the world, leading to increased displacement of people, migration and humanitarian need. Democratic and gender equality backsliding has worsened and there is a global rise in authoritarianism. Many people feel alienated from their political systems. As the 2021/2022 Human Development report states: "Uncertainty is not new, but its dimensions are taking ominous new forms today. A new "uncertainty complex" is emerging, never before seen in human history".[3] Moreover; climate-change linked disasters in the form of massive storms, floods, fires and droughts threaten people's lives and livelihoods, and cause massive damage to infrastructure – damage which many poor and indebted countries lack the resources to repair. Reduced biodiversity and degradation of the natural environment contribute to food insecurity and reduced quality of life. Crises, conflicts, and disasters connect and intersect. New and ongoing conflicts and wars have a ripple effect, impacting on people beyond the borders of the countries directly involved. The COVID-19 pandemic became a global public health crisis, affecting people everywhere.

ICTs and emerging tech have become important in humanitarian efforts to support vulnerable people affected by crises. ICT-led innovation can support climate adaptation and mitigation and provide economic and social opportunities and solutions for people affected by crises, such as online education, cash transfers, and staying in touch with families. At the same time there are risks. The Internet and other ICTs are often used as tools for surveillance and control and for mis- and disinformation. Continuous energy scarcity and deliberate Internet shutdowns by authoritarian governments increases the vulnerability of already vulnerable individuals and communities and drives the need for digital resilience and autonomous infrastructure. Accountability mechanisms need to be in place for the appropriate management and use of data, artificial intelligence and other emerging tech in humanitarian response to ensure human rights are respected online as well as offline. ICTs are a major source of climate-changing emissions. Rare minerals used in ICT manufacture can fuel conflict, placing the health and safety of those who mine them at risk.

Point of departure for SIF23?

SIF23 is a platform for discussing the opportunities and challenges of digitalisation, ICT and the Internet in crises, conflicts and disasters– highlighting the experiences and priorities of people most affected. The forum provides a collaborative space for debate and knowledge exchange on building digital and societal resilience. Participants include development partners, policy makers, governments, civil society organisations, tech companies, human rights defenders and humanitarian organisations. Gender equality, minority rights and meaningful participation of youth will be cross-cutting themes. Sida will also host "pre-SIF" on 29 May 2023 for development partners, focusing on safe and secure digitalisation. Issues and questions to keep in mind planning for discussions at SIF23 include:

Who defines crisis, conflict and disaster? What qualifies as a crisis? When is a conflict a war? Or a crisis, a disaster? Crises are moments of 'disruption' such as active conflict, war, social, political and economic turmoil, health and climate emergencies, natural and human-made disasters. They are moments when affected people are in need of urgent support. But crises can also persist, and intersect with ongoing conflict. Ongoing structural violence faced by discriminated groups can become invisible and normalised; even if the people affected are living in a state of constant insecurity, facing one crisis after another. Labeling and definitions are political, linked to power, to visibility, to the means and opportunity to get support. How

---

these labels and definitions are assigned and used can risk excluding the perspective of those most affected. ICTs and the Internet play a central role in the discourse surrounding crises, conflict and disasters – particularly in people's ability to share their experience on their own terms, access information and to receive help and recognition.

Crises, conflicts and disasters are multidimensional and interlinked. One crisis can lead to another. The current energy crisis could cause a breakdown of the supply chain, thus creating a commodity crisis and affecting food security. Communities whose resilience has been weakened by conflict, or repression are particularly vulnerable to the impact of disaster. The scale and impact of crises, conflicts and disasters vary, from being localised, to having cross-border and inter-regional repercussions. How can meaningful and affordable access to ICTs and the Internet help in predicting impact, and supporting response?

Context matters. Understanding the role and impact of the Internet and ICTs in crises is done best through an "ecosystem" approach as well as digital good governance models that puts those that are most affected at its centre. Such an approach needs to look at the crisis, conflict or disaster, the circumstances that led to it, and how it interconnects with other crises (in the past, present and potentially the future). It needs to explore the relevant power relations and structures linked to the crisis or conflict, and consider how this relates to the Internet and ICTs and their use in a particular context. Response and resilience ultimately needs to be shaped, and sustained, by the people most affected by the crises.

Dislocation, information and communications. Every crisis is personal, affecting families and individuals at the local level, in different ways, generating fear, loneliness and grief. Uncertainty and the sudden loss of access to services such as water, electricity, the Internet or telephone communications leave people feeling angry and helpless, knowing they need to adapt but not sure how best to do so. Disinformation, Internet shutdowns and cyber-attacks amplify insecurity. Understanding the crisis and the context that gave rise to it is necessary for effective response. The consequences for individuals of not having access to information and communications – including to the media and entertainment and edutainment - is difficult to measure but real, and it can increase the dislocation and isolation caused by the crisis.

Response and resilience. Do we have a common understanding of what these concepts mean? What factors drive different responses, and how response is prioritized and resourced, including through the use of ICTs? Is resilience achievable? What have humanitarian agencies learned from response and its relationship to resilience? What lessons for those focused on the use of the Internet and ICTs? Is it possible to apply the lessons of people-centred development and using a human rights-based approach (HRBA) to crisis response and resilience? Since contexts change rapidly under pressures of uncertainty complexes it is important to build resilient digital infrastructures. An emerging market today can be hit by natural disasters or human made crises tomorrow. What good practices are there to guide us?

Is the Internet a friend or a foe when it comes to vulnerable people in a conflict, crisis or disaster? Technology is not neutral, and not enough. Access inequality in all its dimensions (generational, class, geographic location, language, income, gender) must be confronted. Also Internet shut-downs, and the destruction of information and communications infrastructure during war and natural disasters. Can over-reliance on ICTs and the Internet undermine resilience? Can, or should the contribution of tech to climate change be considered when using it in humanitarian response? What ethical considerations are there in handling data and frontier tech?

Normative frameworks. Do international cooperation or international frameworks for human rights and international humanitarian law effectively respect human rights online as well as offline and put human

rights and human agency at the center of how digital technology is used? Do they ensure that people are protected from online harms and digital security threats and that people in crisis contexts have universal, safe, inclusive, and affordable access to the Internet? How can safe and meaningful connectivity help during a crisis without information gathering systems leading to abuse?

SIF23 will delve into these and more questions over two days of interactive sessions organized into three subthemes approached from the perspective of the experiences of people in different parts of the world affected by conflict, crisis and disaster, irrespective of whether they are caused by the actions of authoritarian regimes or by natural or human-made disasters. Insights gained and suggested actions will be documented, shared, and considered for follow up.

The conference can also create a space to discuss how to reinforce the multistakeholder model to protect an open, free and secure digital future for all. The SIF focus on addressing ICTs in conflict and disasters, towards resilience, crisis preparedness and response and aim to contribute to fulfilling the Sustainable Development Goals and Agenda 2030 may be of particular relevance for the ongoing process of the Global Digital Compact.

SIF23 Sub Themes[4]

SIF23 sessions will consist of plenaries and parallel sessions grouped into three subthemes starting with deployment of tech infrastructure and systems, deepening the exploration of the interplay between access, agency, security and resilience. The next theme will look at data, information and the media, and the risks and opportunities they present in crisis contexts. The third theme addresses the normative frameworks needed to enable agency and security, while always protecting, respecting and promoting human rights.

A. Tech infrastructures and systems: Access, agency, security and resilience

This subtheme will look at the Internet and ICTs as infrastructure and services that connect people and places in times of crisis and that can build agency and resilience over time. They provide meaningful and affordable access to key services, such as access to finance; critical, timely information; support for facilitating community organizing; and opportunities for young people. But infrastructure is never only about the technology; it is also about the human infrastructure that underpins and overlays it. Because of this, disparities and inequalities are key to this subtheme. Technology infrastructure can either contribute to building resilience, or compound and amplify inequalities, especially at times of crisis. Capacity is needed to use it in an empowered manner, safely and securely. Relationships of accountability and care are needed towards developing, governing, sustaining, repairing and making access and use of Internet technologies relevant, meaningful and useful and building inclusive communities. Specific questions to explore in this subtheme include:

- Digital inclusion and access is the basic requirement for digital resilience. Are we getting there?
- Who owns the technology?
- How can autonomous infrastructure thrive for endangered communities?
- What structures can private sector actors put in place that can be put to public use during crises and disasters?
- For whom should online, and offline infrastructures and innovations work best when crises hit?

---

[4]   Subthemes are inspired by principles that are outlined in the Secretary-General's roadmap for Digital Cooperation: Connect, Respect and Protect. Areas identified in "Our Common Agenda" as well as the link to the Sustainable Development Goals and Agenda 2030 remain relevant.

- How are digital public infrastructures and digital public goods designed to remain people-centered, inclusive and sustainable when faced with conflict, crisis and disasters. What examples are there to learn from and how do they correspond to needs on the ground?
- What role does the private sector, i.e. tech platforms and companies play when it comes to ICT in crises, conflicts and disasters?

❖ **Ideas for sessions in subtheme A: Tech infrastructures and systems: Access, agency, security and resilience** [5]

Satellites & bamboos: How connectivity flourishes at times of crisis
- Unpacking alternative connectivity and access in conflict and crisis moments, e.g. satellite-based networks
- Community access networks and how this supported community ownership of connectivity can create resilience
- Unprecedented political and economic commitment in getting the current additional billion online - what did it actually take? Why was it so hard before? What is the opportunity provided here especially in making communities, economies and societies more resilient to crises?
- How can meaningful, affordable connectivity, literacy and economic opportunities be developed in crisis situations that might sustain over long periods of time. Role of innovation? What opportunities and risks for women, youth and marginalized groups.
- How to provide and maintain connectivity in some of the most challenging situations in order to better provide early warning of shocks, and provide connectivity to those affected by crisis.

More than cables: It's about the people
- What do inclusive, rights-based digital ecosystems look like when built from the start? How to include resilience (centering people) into infrastructure connectivity design? How can the private sector play a role here? Case studies, speculative methodologies?
- Addressing existing disparities and capacities in crisis preparedness and access to ICTS - ley lines that are known and visible (poverty, rural, age) and those that are less visible (gender, sexuality, disabilities). What kinds of capacities do we need for strengthening resilience

Creating in crisis: Informing resilience
- Activists and local developers developing resilience tech infrastructure in response to crises. Flow between on-ground (analogue), in-person, and online. The kinds of innovation there, looking at the connections. E.g. use of Matrix and Element, creating opportunities and finding resources specific to communities, using Telegram tactically even in precarity etc.
- To use tech and data for e.g. climate adaptation and reducing climate related disasters in crisis responses. Opportunities and risks? What experiences are there of ethical data protection and community involvement in relation to new solutions, powered by frontier tech, from artificial intelligence to big data and the IoT.
- In times of resource scarcity and precarity, how can the digital space enable a sharing economy, less resource use and circular practices while increasing social cohesion.
- How to better anticipate and build systems for better crisis response? Sometimes the lack of preparedness itself creates the crisis - what have been some lessons we can take into the current and future of design?
- Local and smaller tech companies stepping into the work during times of crisis, conflict and disasters - unusual suspects who have been missing in the conversation.

---

[5] The ideas for sessions emerged from discussions within the SIF23 core team held on 19 December 2022.

B. Information, data and media

This subtheme will delve into the domain of the media, information, and data, their potential and risks and how to manage these in a manner that protects the rights of people affected by crisis, conflict and disaster. Inaccurate information can fuel conflict and crisis. Misinformation and disinformation distributed via social media can escalate or even incite conflict and crises. Public access to data can also aid crisis response. Collection, processing, and use of often sensitive data is invaluable in humanitarian work. Strong safeguards, tools and data management infrastructures are critical to ensure protection of the rights of those who are already vulnerable due to on-going crises. Data governance frameworks are needed to treat some data and information as public goods. Also necessary is a global legal framework that allows for the broadest possible circulation of relevant information, while preserving the rights of the people to whom the data ultimately belongs. The private sector plays a significant role in this ecosystem - and is a key stakeholder in either enabling, or preventing online threats and harms, especially amongst the most vulnerable. Media actors play an indispensable role in gathering and sharing stories and news, but they are also at risk. Many journalists, as well as artists and scientists, are injured, hurt, or targeted by repressive forces in crisis contexts. Questions to explore include:

- Surveillance as a tool for control in conflict and crisis.

- Is ICT a secure and effective tool for registering and helping migrants?

- Providing secure, objective and correct information through the Internet in war time, is it possible?

❖ **Ideas for sessions in subtheme B. Information, data and media**

Misinformation, disinformation & the propaganda machines
- Elections as times of crisis - preparing for and addressing misinformation fueled by digital technology in different contexts.
- Fighting disinformation - pandemic, elections, conflict - what has worked, what hasn't, what do we need to know.

Targeted violence & resistance: Gender, sexuality & intersectional identities
- Online gender based violence forms a large part of crisis incidence - more research and attention to organized gendered hate speech and tactical misinformation being undertaken to understand the economics and political economy of this work. What have been some insights into this, as well as work with tech platforms in preparing, addressing and mitigating harms?
- Protecting the rights of specific communities who are especially at the heart and frontline of different kinds of contemporary crises. e.g. indigenous women are often at the frontline of environmental crisis work; young people increasingly young women at the frontline of protests in specific spaces; queer people at the frontline of democracies in crisis often using them as fodder; artists in the frontline as voice bearers of communities; health workers in pandemics. Gaps, realities, strategies.

Data at the frontlines & everyday surveillance
- Data in support of humanitarian responses and strategies and the collection of data from at-risk populations - how to develop strong safeguards, tools and data ethics and management infrastructures to ensure protection of the rights of those who are already vulnerable due to on-going crises.
- How to protect humanitarian actors from cyber threats and build resilience around data protection, also ensuring aid delivery is not hampered by cyber ops?
- Normalization and socialization of data extraction and everyday surveillance from prolonged

---

conflict - safeguards? Response?
- The Impact of Artificial Intelligence and Emerging Technologies: Advancing Technological Innovation and Protecting Human Rights

The role of the media and media development
- Protection of journalists and their sources in times of crisis
- Collaboration between journalists and citizen journalists

C. Normative frameworks: Ensuring rights and upholding responsibilities in difficult times

The third subtheme will explore governance, rights and responsibilities, and the role of normative frameworks in respecting and promoting human rights online and offline. Securing a free open and secure Internet and freedom of expression online in times of conflict can mean the difference between life and death. Governments – including local government - are essential for sustaining response and building resilience. Policy frameworks are needed to promote and protect the creation of digital public infrastructures and digital public goods. Engaging government is essential to ensure positive and sustained impact. Private sector actors have responsibilities too and regulatory frameworks are needed to ensure these companies understand their responsibilities, and meet them. Questions to explore include:

- How do international frameworks for human rights and international humanitarian law ensure that human rights are at the centre of the use of ICTs and the internet in crises, conflicts and disasters?
- Are international and national legal and policy frameworks conducive for rapid tech deployment in times of crisis?

❖ **Ideas for sessions in subtheme C. Normative frameworks: Ensuring rights and upholding responsibilities in difficult times**

Resilient legal frameworks and safeguards
- What do governance models for inclusive and rights-based digital infrastructure look like?
- Since contexts change rapidly under pressures of uncertainty complexes it is important to build resilient and people centered digital infrastructures serving communities. An emerging market today can be hit by natural disasters or man-made crises tomorrow. What good practices are there to guide us?
- How can economic policies and accompanying legal frameworks support and promote environmentally sustainable approaches to technology? E.g. supporting circular economies, encouraging multisectoral collaboration towards less environmentally harmful technology, curbing energy-squandering tech market speculations etc.

Accountability and respect of rights
- Are there sufficient legal protection against threats and harm towards specific communities through the use of technology? E.g. trafficking through spread of misinformation during times of conflict.
- How are specific laws or principles applied to behaviors in cyberspace? E.g. shutdowns, use of pegasus spyware against environmental activists and journalists etc. How are principles of the International Humanitarian Law or International Human Rights Law applied in online situations?
- How does the private sector make decisions that affect and impact on crisis, conflict and disasters, and how can this be more transparent and accountable?
- Governments in transition, democracies in crisis, on-going conflict - how to ensure that digital

rights are defended? E.g. right to access education online for women in Afghanistan under the Taliban rule, how to avoid misuse of digital public goods e.g. digital ID:s in conflict situations, ability to move resources and money across borders when financial regulation increasingly used to control and dismantle civil society.

Breaking silos: multistakeholder, cross-sector, transborder collaboration
- What kind of multistakeholder collaboration needs to take place to ensure rights of people, especially the most impacted and excluded, are protected at times of crisis?
- How can the Global Digital Compact provide an opportunity to think about how to work together towards crisis preparedness, response and addressing conflict and disasters?
- Role of Internet governance in a fragmented world.
- Who needs to be part of this conversation and is missing? Activists at the frontlines, those most impacted, judiciary, telcos, smaller private sector actors, researchers, funders who resource community and movements - where are these multistakeholder, cross-sector conversations happening?
- Digital divide /gap. How can we address it collaboratively?
- E-waste responsibilities

ANNEX I: DESIGN PARAMETERS FOR SESSIONS[6]

>Cross-sectoral:

Each session to include input/participation from actors in the following sectors:

- Humanitarian
- Digitalization
- Human Rights

>Diversity of Voices:

Representing input from affected populations (e.g. **South, Youth, Artists, Minorities, vulnerable people, migrants, LGBTQ+, Women)**

>Multi-stakeholder:
- Academia
- Civil society
- Technology
- Private sector
- grassroot orgs
- policy makers
- Human Rights

>Interactive sessions:
- Preferably not panels
- Include discussions, break-out groups, workshops and other ways of involving the participants present

> Each track producing (a) key insights and (b) key suggestions for action.

---

[6] The following was result of processing and prioritizing the input from the Partner workshop Dec 2022.

ANNEX II: TENTATIV AGENDA – SIF23

	SIF23 AGENDA		
08:45-09:15	Registration		
09:15-10:00	Opening Plenary | High-level Discussion		
10:00-11:00	Interactive Plenary: Scene Setter		
11:00-11:30	COFFEE		
11:30-12:45	Parallel Session 1-1	Parallel Session 1-2	Parallel Session 1-3
13:00-14:00	LUNCH		
14:00-15:15	Parallel Session 2-1	Parallel Session 2-2	Parallel Session 2-3
15:15-15:30	pause		
15:30-16:45	Parallel Session 3-1	Parallel Session 3-2	Parallel Session 3-3
16:45-17:00	pause		
17:00-18:00	Synthesis session		
09:15-09:45	Plenary | Review		
09:45-10:00	pause		
10:00-11:15	Regional/interest group Conversations		
11:15-11:45	COFFEE		
11:45-13:00	Regional/interest group Conversations		
13:00-14:30	Lunch | Networking		
14:30-15:30	Closing Plenary		

Side activities ongoing throughout the day