

DEVELOPMENT ASSISTANCE GOES DIGITAL– THE OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANISATIONS FACE IN DIGITAL COMMUNICATION

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Digital change brings about a profound change in society, life and work. Even non-governmental organisations (NGOs) involved in development assistance and humanitarian aid are affected by the transformation. Expectations that global digitalisation will lead to more participation, democracy and social justice are high. It is uncertain whether or not these hopes will be fulfilled. What is certain, however, is that many NGOs have already recognised the opportunities provided by communication technologies and artificial intelligence, and are incorporating them into their everyday communication practices. However, this is just the beginning. It takes smart strategies and the courage to make profound changes within organisations to make the change successful.

In NGOs, digitalisation is often still equated to the use of digital technologies, especially in communications and in the administrative sector. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and other platforms have long since taken a firm place in the communication mix of many organisations. This has been very successful. However, this is not surprising since, NGOs often offer information with a higher socio-political relevance that interests and moves online users, unlike many businesses from the profit sector. Early on, NGOs recognised the opportunity to improve their public perception and to put more pressure on their demands by using digital communication channels. They collect signatures for petitions, start crowd-funding campaigns or global social media campaigns. Through these new digital channels, NGOs can now get their messages through to people who they would never have been able to reach with traditional communication channels. Increasingly, NGOs are implementing new technologies and testing their impact. In this sense, it is always

about the question of how the remote project world can be made experiential and tangible. Attempts by individual NGOs to use virtual reality technologies that, often with the help of digital glasses, immerse users in the programmed reality of the project have been well received by test subjects. A 360° experience on an NGO's website, in which the user was able to move around a 360° photo and view information using the mouse pointer, was also well received. Augmented reality elements in donor magazines, which meld print with moving images through the use of an app, are another opportunity for technologies to be used to provide readers with much information and a distinctive experience simultaneously.

Not technology, but a so-called “child” of digital communication, is the area of “influencer relations”, which plays an increasingly significant role in NGO communications. So-called “influencers” recount their experiences of project visits in videos and support online campaigns with their Youtube channels. They reach thousands of young people between the ages of 15 and 29 and use their language and way of speaking, behaving spontaneously and emotionally. This means the posts are well received and understood by the target group. In order to succeed when using this alternative form of reporting, it is necessary for NGOs to give up their information sovereignty and to have only limited scope to intervene in content.

The downside of a strong online presence: The clearer and more prominent NGOs position themselves online and the more intensively they report, the more often they become a target for hate that is mostly racist, misanthropic and anti-democratic. There is hardly an NGO fighting for climate justice, human rights or children's rights that has not already experienced an online firestorm and had to learn how to deal with it. Communication strategies to deal with hate messages, the development of a community and precise data analysis regarding which content is aimed at which target group are essential requirements in dealing with this abuse.

For NGOs, addressing the use of digital technologies is of great importance for another reason: digitalisation offers an unprecedented opportunity to make the work of NGOs more effective and impactful and therefore to make every penny donated even more cost-effective and cost-saving. However, many NGOs have a lot of catching up to do when it comes to investing in digital technologies. Unsurprisingly so, as NGOs are not exactly known for being at the forefront of digital progress. After all, it is the mission and goal of a reputable NGO to invest a maximum of the money entrusted to them

into project and programme work. Financial resources are as limited as the opportunities are promising. However, experts believe that it will be worthwhile in the short to medium-term to invest in the optimisation of online content with downstream automation processes and more user-friendliness in order to create new target groups and to generate more donations. Current figures show that the share of online donations in total donations in Germany has risen from two to an average of 20 per cent in recent years. Therefore, it makes sense to focus more strongly on the users and their needs and to provide the desired information easily accessible, transparently and more securely in order to foster this development.

Technological innovations have also found their way into long-term project work and humanitarian aid. They can support or even improve the work on site. Digitalisation has the power to make political and economic participation, a significant reduction in poverty, and global networking possible. The ambitious goals of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development seem to be within reach. However, the realisation is bitter, as almost half of the population worldwide still have no internet access, even though the number of internet users has tripled in recent years. Ninety per cent of all people without internet access live in countries of the Global South and women are more likely to be affected than men. Many NGOs are very concerned about this development and take the position that advancing digitalisation is making the gap (the digital divide) between the Global South and North larger rather than smaller.

There are already lots of ideas and approaches on how digital innovations can be developed together with local partner organisations and how they can be tested in crises. For example, a Dutch NGO had positive experiences with an e-learning service for children in a Jordanian refugee camp: the Syrian children there had hardly any access to education. Using the learning app, these girls and boys can develop their reading and writing skills. Other organisations offer solar-powered tablets with interactive learning games, known as “serious games”. The software gives the boys and girls immediate feedback on their entries. This is supposed to develop independent learning for children when neither schools nor teachers are available.

An example from health care: various organisations offer mobile apps for the early detection of malnutrition in infants and to support medical aid. In Somalia, for example, the work of health workers is thus made more accessible. They are to document relevant patient information via a smartphone and

receive regular training via an app.

With these developments, a logical consequence of increasing global digitalisation is already becoming apparent: it is not enough for NGOs to use digital technologies for communication and programme work. The digital transformation continues: it increases the institutional pressure on NGOs to adapt. Organisations will need to fundamentally change if they want to take advantage of the opportunities of digitalisation and help to shape social change: capacities and knowledge must be developed, and organisational structures, processes, the culture and working practices must be examined and adapted to the market needs. Addressing and managing digital transformation is becoming an increasingly more significant task of non-government organisations. Alongside the traditional development cooperation, in the future, it will also be essential to face the political challenges of fair digitalisation and to act upon these.