Consultations: OHCHRs Management Plan 2018-2021

Friday, 21 April 2017, 15h00 to 17h00, Rm XXVI, Palais des Nations
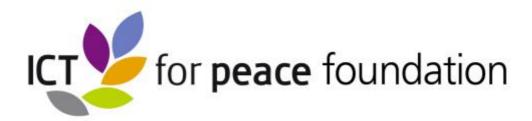
Comments by ICT4Peace Foundation[1]

www.ict4peace.org

1. ## ICT4Peace Foundation comments on OHCHRs Management Plan 2018-2021

a) **From your perspective what are the challenges and opportunities for positive human rights change in the current global context?**

The lack of political will and impunity continue to be major factors fueling human rights abuses. Both continue despite advances in technologies to hold those in power and with authority accountable. Technology alone has made it harder for actionable information to be generated from the tsunami of updates around any given issue, location or situation. Fake news, platform dependencies on opaque algorithmic filtering, news bias, systemic exploits by intelligence agencies that in the wild are being used by other non-state actors for infiltration of civil society, the systemic targeting of civil society through sophisticated phishing attacks, the selective, targeted censorship of content online, curtailing Freedom of Expression online and the spread of hate, hurt and harm through extremist websites and accounts all jostle for attention in the new information economy. This makes it harder for policymakers to take timely, informed decisions.

On the other hand, the democratization of technologies has also helped bear witness to the worst HR atrocities. From gas attacks that kill children to the systemic HR abuses against minorities, from off the shelf drones to mobile phones, from a plethora of ways Silicon Valley companies are battling hate speech to more local, civil society based initiatives around countering violent extremism using counter-messaging, from the spread of non-violent messages through SMS in Kenya to more sophisticated initiatives involving Facebook in other parts of the world, the negotiation of peace, justice, rights and democratic governance is mediated through technologies today that authoritarian governments and censorious non-state actors cannot fully control, contain or censor. This is a historic opportunity for civil

society to take advantage of these technologies to bear witness to violence and also be agents of change, strengthening human rights.

b) **How do you see our comparative and collaborative advantage?**

OHCHR is among those organisations linked to the UN, which still command respect, and at the very least, attention even amongst those who seek to decry it the most. As the expert body for Human Rights in the UN system, OHCHR can be a platform for the innovation and vetting of ideas, technologies and tools in support of strengthening human rights. Importantly, OHCHR can also act as a vehicle to disseminate this knowledge amongst local, in-country actors, who almost always are more vulnerable than international agencies especially within austere, violent contexts.

OHCHR can convene a wide range of actors, including from the private sector, to talk about and plan ways through which rights - both challenged deeply by technology as well as aided considerably by the democratization of technologies - can be secured and strengthened in our social media driven information and news landscape. In seeking to hold Silicon Valley and other technology giants accountable for the deeply troubling effects of the abuse of technology and the unbridled use of tools, platforms and apps to spread hate, OHCHR can also lead discussions around how Freedom of Expression can be protected online, while at the same time clamping down on extremism and violence.

The wealth of experience and expertise at OHCHR dealing with nearly every single major human rights context since the establishment of the organisation, outside of mercurial news cycles, is also an added advantage when talking about how technology can assist and strengthen its core mandate.

Finally, and in line with HRW, AI, the ICJ and other international actors also dealing with human rights and protection, OHCHR can convene all leading agencies in new coalitions of information exchange and collaborative action, facilitated by technological developments that can undergird systematic, timely and effective sharing of verified information.

c) **From your perspective, which thematic areas should OHCHR address as a priority in the coming four years to maximize its human rights impact?**

The advent of the fake news phenomenon is more pernicious than its association with Western electoral and political processes (read https://sanjanah.wordpress.com/2017/03/19/the-propaganda-landscape/). The increasing sophistication of these operations in domains related to human rights will make verification, authentication and veracity that much more important. OHCHR's efforts must embrace the growing volume and the different vectors through which information flows now

occur (for e.g., a shift from Facebook to WhatsApp and other instant messaging apps amongst key demographics in many parts of the world for the dissemination of unverified information) and seek to establish monitoring mechanisms as well as counter-strategies in order to stop abuse and the spread of hate.

At the same time, it must prioritize the exploitation of new technologies to strengthen its core mandate, by going directly to affected communities and harvesting actionable information from the public domain. A pernicious new trend may well be the curtailment of Freedom of Expression, in increasingly sophisticated ways, in the guise of or with the avowed interest in curtailing hate speech. This must be fought against. Collaborating with the private sector will be essential, for e.g. in the use of satellite imagery for the monitoring of human rights abuses - https://sanjanah.wordpress.com/2017/03/12/eyes-in-the-sky/.

2.   On ICT4Peace's cooperation with OHCHR

The ICT4Peace Foundation's substantive engagement since 2012 with OHCHR's Peace Mission Support and Rapid Response Section and the Methodology, Education and Training Sections in particular, covered the following areas of work:

- Critically observe and engage with developments in social and new media and secondly – given the increasing surveillance of human rights defenders and the myriad of ways through which ICTs can be used to spread hate, hurt and harm – how new tools can aid vital communications in fragile and violent contexts. (http://ict4peace.org/?p=3152, http://ict4peace.org/?p=2722);

- CVE and PVE, notably also around the protection of Freedom of Expression online (http://ict4peace.org/?p=4173);

- The former UN SG's Human Rights Up Front initiative, http://ict4peace.org/?p=3668, on how Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs) could assist and strengthen a common operational framework, situational awareness and information exchange around human rights within the UN family, as well as bringing into the UN architectures information from the public domain – in line with the thrust of the UN HRUF initiative.

Geneva, 19 April 2017