Conference on Data Protection in Humanitarian Action
A collaboration between the Ministry of Development Cooperation, Digital Agenda Telecom and Postal Services, the ICRC Delegation to the EU, NATO and the Kingdom of Belgium, and the Brussels Privacy Hub

Summary

On 12 March 2018, the Brussels Privacy Hub of the Vrije Universiteit Brussels (VUB), the Belgian Ministry of Development Cooperation, Digital Agenda Telecom and Postal Services, and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) Delegation to the EU, NATO and the Kingdom of Belgium organised a **Conference on Data Protection in Humanitarian Action**. The event was hosted at the Palais d'Egmont on the premises of the Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and was attended by over 100 participants. There were many questions and lively discussion following each of the presentations and panels.

After a welcome by **Brussels Privacy Hub Co-Director Professor Christopher Kuner**, the first keynote speech was delivered by **Alexander De Croo** (Deputy Prime Minister of Belgium and Minister of Development Cooperation, Digital Agenda, Telecom and Postal Services). Minister De Croo emphasised the need for guidance on the efficient application of data protection principles in humanitarian action, and considered the Handbook on Data Protection in Humanitarian Action published jointly by the Brussels Privacy Hub and the ICRC Data Protection Office in 2017 to be an excellent example of such guidance, creating the right mind-set and incentives to apply data protection principles for application in humanitarian crises. The second keynote was given by **Charlotte Lindsey-Curtet** (Director of Communication and Information Management, ICRC). She highlighted that data protection principles are in essence intertwined with the ICRC's mission to protect the lives and dignity of victims of armed conflict and other situations of violence. Integration of data protection principles in daily ICRC operations is an important accountability measure and underlies the rationale of the 'do no harm' principle. The meaning of this principle has expanded in view of the profound changes brought by digital technology that allow the collection of vast amounts of data of affected individuals.

Two panel discussions followed. The first panel on "**Data Protection Principles in Humanitarian Action**" moderated by **Irene Kamara** (Researcher, VUB and Tilburg University) addressed the main principles of data protection law and their relevance for humanitarian action. **Massimo Marelli** (Head of Data Protection Office, ICRC) noted that human dignity, a core concept for humanitarian work and data protection, provides a link between these two different fields. He then explained that legal principles stemming from a variety of data protection instruments, including the EU's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), are of great relevance to international organisations providing humanitarian assistance. **Azza Chaouch Bouraoui** (Researcher, Rennes University) then mapped out initiatives concerning the use of technology as well as the collection of personal data that are relevant for humanitarian actors. After that, **Stuart Campo** (Research fellow, Harvard Humanitarian

Initiative) presented the work of the Harvard Humanitarian Initiative, which focuses on defining the ethical standards that can be used in the field when applying data protection rules. The initiative intends to produce guidance enabling more effective application of data protection rules in humanitarian action. In the ensuing discussion, panellists pointed out that the legal vacuum in which humanitarian organisations often operate should do not preclude them from applying data protection principles.

The second panel on **"Data Protection Principles and Cash Transfers"** was moderated by [**Lina Jasmontaite**](#) (Researcher, VUB) and dealt with practical issues arising in the context of cash transfer programming. **Joanna Emily Burton** (Cash transfers and market specialist, ICRC) explained the challenges and advantages of delivering humanitarian aid via cash transfers (such as increasing the speed and flexibility of humanitarian response as well as financial inclusion by linking people with payment systems). However, experience in the field demonstrates that cash transfers may not be an appropriate tool in all circumstances. The context in which cash aid is offered as well as the impact of such aid on individuals must be thoroughly considered before launching such operations. **Caroline Louveaux** (Managing Counsel on Privacy and Data Protection, Mastercard) introduced the cash transfer and privacy and security tools that Mastercard has developed for the humanitarian sector. She also pointed out challenges arising in the context of cash transfer programming from a data protection perspective, such as the application of the principles of purpose limitation, data minimisation, and data protection by design. **Ben Parker** (Senior editor, IRIN) argued that the challenges of cash transfer programming in practice are often linked to the accumulation of large amounts of sensitive personal data in insecure databases and the use of privacy-invasive technologies, such as biometrics. Panellists agreed that depending on the transparency and security of the IT systems used to deliver cash transfers, they can either facilitate or impede humanitarian objectives.

The conference was closed by Professor **Christopher Kuner**, who pointed out some of the recurring themes mentioned by the participants during the conference. He noted that speakers' contributions as well as the debates that followed each panel session signify the need to continue the discussion, and stated that the Brussels Privacy Hub and the ICRC would continue their collaboration to facilitate the implementation of data protection principles in the work of humanitarian organisations.

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This summary of the conference proceedings has been drafted by the Brussels Privacy Hub.