



USAID
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

UNITED STATES AGENCY FOR INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT
BUREAU FOR HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE

Digital Action Plan

SEPTEMBER 2022

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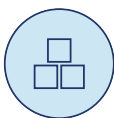
With food insecurity reaching critical levels in the remote hills of Karnali region, aggravated by socio-economic impact of COVID-19, post-monsoon rain and other local shocks and stresses, Mercy Corps Nepal BHAKARI program through Value Voucher Assistance is supporting more than 3000 vulnerable households to meet immediate needs and increase access and availability of food.

Registered vulnerable households through the Value Vouchers – digital cash cards - can buy nutritious food supplies and clothing through selected local vendors to get through the harsh winter. Utilising the advancement of technology, digital cash has been an effective and secure method to transfer required cash to the households in the remote parts of the Karnali region. *Photo by Mercy Corps*

Executive Summary

Digital technology is changing the world where USAID's Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (BHA) works. Digitally connected affected populations use mobile devices to access services, find information, and connect to support networks during crisis. Connected humanitarians use digital technology to coordinate operations, leverage real-time data, and provide remote support. Digital technology creates entirely new humanitarian services and delivery channels. These forces create tremendous opportunity and significant risk. While other industries have embraced this change and leaned into digital transformation,¹ BHA and the humanitarian community have not yet set priorities and aligned resources to successfully navigate the profound challenges digital technology brings.

The BHA Digital Action Plan outlines BHA's commitment and priorities for engagement with digital transformation both internally and externally. The Action Plan sets three priorities and aligns BHA with USAID's Digital Strategy.



Priority #1: Lay Foundations for Digital Transformation – Digital transformation requires investment in skills and staffing, ways of working, and infrastructure. The literature summarizes this as the *People, Process and Technology* required for digital transformation. This first priority underscores the foundational need to invest in BHA's, and BHA partners', internal digital technology capabilities and functions.



Priority #2: Protecting the Data – Digital tools often generate and hold significant amounts of personal and sensitive data. The misuse or unauthorized exposure of this data is a risk to humanitarian operations, humanitarian organizations, and the individuals they serve. Applying humanitarian Do No Harm principles and respecting the central role of protection in all BHA programming, BHA will work to ensure robust data responsibility and cybersecurity within the humanitarian community.



Priority #3: Transformative Digital Programming – New technology creates opportunities for new assistance services and service delivery mechanisms. Based on the research in this Action Plan, BHA will launch a Notice of Funding Opportunities (NOFO) focused on affected community engagement, digital goods and services, and the ecosystem of projects that creates the data and related services humanitarians rely upon. Digital response options will be further mainstreamed through changes to the BHA Application Guidelines and increased guidance, support, and training for BHA staff and partners.

In October 2021, Secretary of State Antony Blinken emphasized the U.S. Government's role in shaping the digital revolution, particularly within the humanitarian sector. Investment in these three priorities will position BHA to navigate the humanitarian crises and shape the responses of the future. This work is already underway at BHA. The Action Plan provides a clear direction and structure, ensuring that BHA is proactively engaged with digital transformation and ready for the future.

¹ Digital transformation is the integration of digital technology into all areas of a business, fundamentally changing how you operate and deliver value to customers. It's also a cultural change that requires organizations to continually challenge the status quo, experiment, and get comfortable with failure. ([The Enterprisers Project](#)).

Introduction

Globally, there are five billion unique mobile subscribers, more than half of the world's population. Of these, 3.8 billion use mobile internet ([GSMA 2021](#)). Two-thirds of individuals in the developing world now own a mobile phone, and internet use is growing by 25 percent per year—five times the rate of advanced economies. Increasingly, the people impacted by crisis that BHA serves have mobile devices and internet access, humanitarian operations and staff are more tightly connected, and entirely new digital humanitarian services are emerging. Just as digital technology is transforming how we access and consume products and services in our personal lives, it is also transforming the humanitarian context in which we work.

Humanitarian services and operations have not kept pace with the shift to digital technology seen in other industries. A 2019 study found, “organizations in the humanitarian sector are laggards in adopting humanitarian technology.”² Many BHA partners are ahead of the bureau in their strategic commitment to address digital technology and explore its application to humanitarian responses. BHA must invest to fulfill its leadership role in the humanitarian community, to optimize outcomes, and to navigate the risks and opportunities of a world increasingly defined by digital technology. Fully benefiting from digital tools – while safeguarding against risks – requires we pursue *digital transformation*. Failure to do so in this humanitarian context will translate to lives and opportunities lost.

Digital transformation can and should serve as a means for BHA to achieve its core mission of saving lives, promoting human welfare, alleviating suffering, and providing the foundations for transformative change and self-reliance. As Secretary of State Antony Blinken stated in his October 2021 remarks on the modernization of American diplomacy, “we have a major stake in shaping the digital revolution that’s happening around us and making sure that it serves our people, protects our interests, boosts our competitiveness, and upholds our values...” including in the humanitarian sector.³

The time is now for BHA to commit to digital transformation within the bureau and across the humanitarian community. Dedicated leadership and investment will save lives and resources for the BHA of the future.

² From the [Journal of Language, Technology, and Entrepreneurship in Africa](#).

³ <https://www.state.gov/secretary-antony-j-blinken-on-the-modernization-of-american-diplomacy/>

Digital Action Plan and the USAID Digital Strategy

USAID launched its first [Digital Strategy](#) in April 2020. The Strategy responds to the unprecedented opportunities presented by an increasingly digital world, and the risks of inaction in the face of such change. Digital technology is changing the way we engage and share information with affected populations and all actors in the humanitarian community.

The USAID Digital Strategy has two overarching objectives:

1. Improve measurable development and humanitarian outcomes through the responsible use of digital technology in our programming
2. Strengthen the openness, inclusiveness, and security of country [digital ecosystems](#).

To implement this Strategy, USAID Bureaus and Operating Units are drafting Action Plans that detail how they will achieve the Strategy objectives. BHA's Digital Action Plan is an internal document, which supports the Agency Digital Strategy by articulating BHA's approach to digital transformation and by outlining BHA's implementation plan. BHA's Plan outlines priorities that will improve its work: taking advantage of new opportunities to more effectively serve disaster-affected populations, leveraging efficiencies, and enhancing coordination. Further, by taking a proactive stance toward responsible use of data and technology, BHA can contribute to a stronger, more coordinated humanitarian sector.

Current BHA Approach to Digital

To develop its Digital Action Plan, BHA conducted internal consultations and surveyed staff. This led to the following conclusions:

- **Most digital transformation activity is ad hoc and not guided by higher level visions, strategies or capacities.** There are a number of BHA staff and teams actively working on issues related to digital transformation. In some cases, a team has a structural mandate to lead on a particular digital issue (e.g. HBMO/ITM coordinates BHA's use of technology for internal operations). However, in most cases BHA's digital transformation work is driven by the passion, skill and vision of individual staff or partners. The result is a fragmented collection of isolated initiatives and capacity distributed across the bureau. In contrast, many BHA partners have coherent digital transformation strategies and leadership in place.
- **Cash-based programming drives many of the current affected community facing digital investments.** Mobile money payments in Jordan, digital registration for cash assistance globally, and a shared data platform for participants in cash programming in Colombia are all examples of how the move to cash programming is driving the adoption of digital tools. This progress likely results from the unique constellation of factors in the cash programming movement (i.e. mobile tech, fungibility and duplication concerns, a new approach attracting new talent, etc). Its success raises the question of how to see similar progress in other, traditionally analogue, sectors and methods of response.



In Ukraine, USAID partner People In Need Ukraine created an open dialogue between people living near eastern Ukraine's conflict zone and well-known Ukrainian celebrities including singer Jamala, producer Yaroslav Lodygin and TV presenter, Alexander Fozzy Sidorenko. *Photo by People in Need*

- **Digital tools supporting situational awareness are widely used throughout the humanitarian community, but there is more work to be done.** Mobile data capture applications such as Kobo Toolkit are widely used by BHA partners. Remote-sensing methodologies are mature, but not systematically applied by BHA or partners. Overall data quality and interoperability remain significant challenges to leveraging humanitarian data for real-time or anticipatory insights.
- **Direct engagement with affected communities and digital feedback is still nascent.** Valuable, market-changing and industry-defining technology has established the potential for an unmediated interface with consumers. While there is some movement in the humanitarian response context, particularly with feedback handling mechanisms, few initiatives come anywhere near the direct and seamless digital engagement between consumers and service providers seen in companies like Uber, FreshDirect, and Amazon.
- **BHA staff around the world rely on digital technology to collaborate.** The pandemic forced BHA to scale the use of google drive, virtual meetings, shared documents, and other tools. These tools are well suited for the distributed nature of BHA's workforce. One respondent said "digital technology is helping to close the gap between BHA headquarters and field teams."



In Ukraine, USAID partner People In Need Ukraine created an open dialogue between people living near eastern Ukraine's conflict zone and well-known Ukrainian celebrities including singer Jamala, producer Yaroslav Lodygin and TV presenter, Alexander Fozzy Sidorenko. *Photo by People in Need*

BHA Digital Action Plan Priorities

This section outlines BHA's digital priorities. These priorities are designed to guide BHA's engagement with internal and external stakeholders, facilitate the integration of digital transformation into BHA programming, and identify resources for implementation.

Priority I: Foundations for Digital Transformation

To effectively facilitate and guide responsible digital transformation in the humanitarian community, BHA and its humanitarian partners must have the foundational capacity to successfully navigate digital issues. The following actions are needed to establish this critical foundation and bridge significant gaps within BHA and across humanitarian actors.

Proposed Actions

- **Establish leadership and functional responsibility for BHA's Digital Transformation.** Cross-office leadership with the authority to convene BHA stakeholders and coordinate action is needed for success. The BHA Front Office has authorized a multi-office team (G3PC, HBMO, TPQ) to provide the direction and technical support to coordinate implementation of the Digital Action Plan. This leadership function will be led and supported by G3PC, HBMO and TPQ with guidance and input from a steering committee of stakeholders from across BHA.
- **Improve BHA working level staff capacity and formalize roles on digital transformation.** While there are staff across BHA with skills and interest in digital transformation, none have the mandate or the bandwidth to implement this Action Plan. The multi-office leadership team will ensure that working level capacity is available by clarifying roles, setting priorities, creating new training and learning opportunities for staff, restructuring where appropriate and adding staffing resources as necessary.
- **Envision and invest in BHA's future by equipping BHA with the technology needed to fulfill operational requirements.** BHA lacks the suite of integrated technology tools modern enterprises use to manage their operations. Key technologies, such as a comprehensive Human Resource Information Management System, are known gaps. Other technologies, such as data and analytic tools, are only partially implemented or missing entirely. A BHA task team will consider the comprehensive technology requirements for the BHA of the future, review what additions and changes are required, and set a plan to implement that vision. The rapid deployment and success of telework tools is a testament to what can be achieved.
- **Establish a BHA data and analytics strategy.** BHA data and analytic capacity is fractured across the bureau. Different teams use different approaches and tools. Important analytic requirements are underserved. BHA data assets lack governance and clarity on what guidance, principles, or rules should guide decisions on data use. BHA will establish a Data and Analytics Strategy to define priorities, roles, and responsibilities, and technology tools, as well as data governance principles and procedures for data and analytics.

- **Advocate and support Digital Transformation within the humanitarian community.** BHA will use a combination of approaches to continue ensuring BHA partners and the broader humanitarian community are proactively pursuing digital transformation. BHA's current collaboration with OCHA will help shape this effort. Lines of effort could include organizational digital transformation assessments, identifying channels to fund Digital Transformation costs for key partners (potentially via new allowed budget lines or a stand alone NOFO), and engagement in policy forums.
- **Establish a BHA vision for the humanitarian data ecosystem.** The current humanitarian data ecosystem is a constellation of projects and partners that develop and maintain the data assets and infrastructure the humanitarian community needs for coordination and decision support. BHA will build on the work of the TPQ/DDAIM team to set a vision for the modern ideal state of this ecosystem and work towards it with funding, guidance and policy engagement.
- **Prioritize critical actions for future budgetary alignment.** Achieving the objectives of this action plan will require commitment and investment. BHA will set goals and objectives during the initial Action Plan implementation to inform required budgetary commitments.

Priority 2: Protecting the Data

Digital tools generate and hold significant amounts of personal and sensitive data. This can include details about humanitarian staff, the location of humanitarian programs and facilities, and personally identifiable and potentially sensitive information about the people receiving humanitarian aid. Humanitarian operations have always used this type of data. However, digital tools centralize and facilitate the processing of this data.

Data security to safeguard personally identifiable or sensitive data is a critical consideration for humanitarian operations. The 2021 Microsoft Digital Defense Report notes that government, NGOs, and think tanks were among the “most targeted sectors” by hackers. Parties to a conflict or other malicious actors could use data for abusive surveillance, discrimination, persecution or other harmful acts. Humanitarian staff, operations and people affected by crisis could face harm as a result.

On the other hand, excessive concern about these risks and inappropriate mitigation measures inhibit the development of much-needed data systems and data sharing arrangements. Neither do we want humanitarians to resist digital systems or data-sharing because of poorly understood data protection risks or inadequate cybersecurity and risk mitigation measures.

Applying humanitarian Do No Harm principles, respecting the central role of protection in all BHA programming, and promoting existing USAID guidance and policy, BHA will work to ensure robust [data responsibility](#) and [cybersecurity](#) across the humanitarian community.

Proposed Actions

- **Strengthen data protection language and guidance in the BHA Application Guidelines.** These guidelines are an important means for BHA to communicate standards and requirements to partners. Clear and appropriate data protection requirements in the guidelines will improve the quality of Data Protection measures within BHA partner programs.
- **Support the creation and adoption of humanitarian data protection and cybersecurity norms and standards.** These norms and standards will address data protection technology and procedures to improve data protection and facilitate safe and appropriate data sharing for humanitarian operations. Where possible, these norms and standards will be aligned with existing USG policy and guidelines and will be codified in key humanitarian policy documents and agreements. Where relevant, BHA will support additional external and internal resources on data protection and cybersecurity.
- **Measure the quality of data protection implementation.** [Privacy Impact Assessments](#), audits and other tools will be used to measure performance on data protection standards.

Priority 3: Transformative Digital Programming

USAID/BHA will prioritize transformative digital programming in three broad areas:

Direct engagement with affected populations: Digital technology allows BHA and partners to more directly and more regularly share and receive information with/from people impacted by crisis, including early warning information, behavior change communications, assessments, feedback on service delivery, and results monitoring. Digital engagement can speed responses, increase the agency and dignity of affected populations, and ensure more appropriate, targeted, and accountable assistance programs, making use of mobile applications, chatbots, social media, and crowdsourcing.

Digital assistance: Humanitarian assistance that incorporates digital tools and processes as a part of the service or delivery modality, includes digital cash transfers, biometrics and digital identification, unmanned aerial vehicles, blockchain, connectivity, 3D printing and other initiatives.

Real-Time data and analytics to inform decisions and anticipatory action: Digital tools and processes to speed real-time data analytics of large and complex data sets can inform program decisions and anticipatory actions (including mitigating climate change risks and disaster risk financing). This can include using crisis maps and dashboards and applying artificial intelligence and machine learning techniques.

Proposed Actions

- **Identify and amplify existing good practice:** Conduct a comprehensive landscape assessment of all BHA programming to identify current digital programming and good practices. This work will establish BHA standards and approaches, identify opportunities for replication and increased investment, and set a baseline for measuring progress on this work.
- **Establish and encourage standards and good practice in digital programming:** The BHA Application Guidelines will be reviewed to ensure standards such as the [Principles for Digital Development](#) and [Principles for Digital Payments in Humanitarian Response](#) are addressed. BHA will identify any gaps in these standards and work with partners to advance new standards to fill gaps.

- Mainstream the consideration of digital options in BHA and partner response.** Opportunities for digital response will be new to many humanitarian actors. BHA will encourage partners to consider these options by issuing NOFOs, revising the BHA Application Guidelines, and training BHA staff on digital response options for their sectors and areas of operation.
- Digital beneficiary engagement NOFO:** This NOFO will solicit new programs and partners within the NGO community to use digital technology to communicate directly and digitally with affected populations to advance humanitarian outcomes. A goal is to bring some of the positive aspects of digital user engagement found in existing private-sector platforms to humanitarian operations.
- Digital assistance NOFO:** This NOFO will solicit new programs and partners within the NGO community to provide digital goods and services to advance humanitarian outcomes. These may be information platforms like [IRC's SignPost](#), services such as Wifi and charging stations, skills training on privacy and data protection, or other as yet unimagined digital goods and services that will address humanitarian needs .
- Transforming the international humanitarian data ecosystem NOFO:** Real-time analytics and anticipatory action depends on a strong humanitarian data ecosystem of partners creating data assets and maintaining the infrastructure to analyze and make them available for decision makers. The DDAIM team in TPQ has done a detailed analysis of the gaps obstructing progress toward the anticipatory action vision and will launch the first round of this NOFO in FY22.
- Enable anticipatory and responsive programming:** Strong data is the basis for timely program design decisions by BHA and partners. Successfully acting on this data requires that award management systems allow for rapid and flexible program design in response to new evidence. BHA will review its Application Guidelines, reporting requirements, award procedures, and partner relationships to ensure that these systems enable partners' application of data for rapid programming decisions. BHA will also review its own work on anticipatory action to ensure it is coherent and fit for purpose. BHA will also promote good practice with partners so they enable the same.
- Partner with the private sector to leverage their expertise and technology.** BHA is already using private-sector resources in both traditional and novel ways. BHA recognizes the unique capabilities that the private sector can bring to humanitarian response and commits to further developing partnerships with private-sector entities to leverage their resources, knowledge, and experience. This includes supporting the private sector, via innovation challenges, blended finance, and other mechanisms, to develop relevant digital solutions to humanitarian issues.

Humanitarian Digital Trends and BHA

The following trends will greatly impact BHA and humanitarian response.

Connected Communities

Opportunities

As people affected by crisis become increasingly connected, new opportunities arise to communicate with and distribute assistance to remote populations. For instance, many humanitarian organizations now use messaging apps such as WhatsApp to communicate with affected populations en masse and at little to no cost. WhatsApp alone is used by 2 billion people globally. Another 1.2 billion use WeChat and 1.3 billion use Facebook Messenger ([Statista 2021](#)). Humanitarian organizations can leverage these apps—which people affected by crisis already use⁴—to lower costs, communicate across borders, and reach people in insecure areas.

The prevalence of digitally connected people is also transforming the delivery of cash assistance. As of 2021, there were more than 1.2 billion registered mobile money accounts worldwide (300 million of which were used monthly), with more than \$2 billion transacted via mobile accounts per day. Also in 2021, \$1 billion worth of international remittances were sent via mobile money every month ([GSMA Mobile Money 2021](#)). Sixty percent of mobile phone operators report working with humanitarian agencies to support the digital delivery of cash and voucher assistance (CVA) ([CALP 2020](#)).

Emerging Risks

With the rapid expansion of digital access comes several risks that BHA and partners must be prepared to address: digital divides, data management and consent challenges, misinformation, and increased opportunities for surveillance by unfriendly actors and governments.

Digital divides exist between countries (with ‘developed countries’ having more and faster access), within countries (with urban areas more connected than rural areas), and across genders. In Africa, for instance, 37 percent of men are using the internet versus only 20 percent of women ([ITU 2020](#)).

Another challenge for humanitarian agencies is managing, using, and sharing the large amounts of personal data generated by digitization. For instance, in order to use, store, or share personal data, humanitarian organizations, like private sector companies and government bodies, should obtain *informed consent* from the people they collect data from. However, the concept of informed consent is challenging across industries.

⁴ Digital tools also help people impacted by crisis to help themselves. For example, unable to wait for help from their own government or the international community in face of famine, Somalis used WhatsApp to organize help from the diaspora for the families in their community most in need, which was then sent through Dahabshiil, the international funds transfer company ([The Guardian](#), 2017).

Lastly, more connected communities generate more digital data, which creates more opportunities for *surveillance* from unfriendly actors and governments. Hacking and other cyber warfare tools are becoming increasingly affordable and accessible. Governments are using surveillance and interception technologies, and increasingly regulating and controlling digital activity ([DHN 2018](#)). Humanitarian actors have a role to play in protecting affected communities against such harms, at the very least by responsibly managing data generated in the context of receiving humanitarian assistance.

Connected Humanitarians

Humanitarian organizations are digitizing operations and programs with some success around remaining connected during a crisis, reaching more people through new types of programs, getting better/faster data for M&E and real-time decision making, and digitizing cash assistance. However, challenges remain around obtaining informed consent to use personal data during crises, protecting data from cybersecurity threats, and overlooking data obtained by local actors.

To accelerate the use of digital tools, humanitarian organizations are taking on new types of partners, particularly from the private sector, including global technology giants such as Google, Microsoft, and Facebook. There are also new funding models and platforms emerging, such as [Give Directly](#), which uses mobile money to send funds to low-income households without additional intermediaries.

Donors are also adapting, including by developing digital strategies, changing internal processes, integrating digital considerations into programs, and funding initiatives to address the current risks and challenges of using digital technologies (i.e. the digital divide). Some donors have specifically adopted the principle of “do no digital harm” or developed data protection policies for themselves and their partners.⁵

Emerging Risks

Digital transformation at the institutional level also comes with risks. One of the main risks to consider is how the transformation will impact *equity*, particularly among already marginalized populations. As the previous discussion on digital divides highlights, access to new tools, approaches, and opportunities can deepen existing inequality if equity is not at the center of an organization’s approach to its transformation.

As humanitarian organizations are collecting increasing amounts of data, they have become a new target for *cyber attacks*, and yet they have not kept pace with the necessary corresponding security infrastructure or policies. To do no harm and maintain its “very legitimacy” the humanitarian sector must acknowledge that it is operating within the cybersecurity landscape and adapt accordingly ([DHN 2018](#)).⁶

⁵ For example, FCDO produced the [Frontier Technology Playbook](#), a set of activities, strategies and methods that anyone anywhere can use to apply cutting edge technology to complex, high-stakes environments. [GIZ](#) has transformed itself across the board to meet the demands of the digital age, including internal and project-related priorities in the Corporate Strategy 2022.

⁶ Specific risks include data incidents through physical breaches of infrastructure, unauthorized disclosure of data, and the use of people’s anonymized data for non-humanitarian purposes, among others (Guidance Note: Data Incident Management from the Center for Humanitarian Data, 2019 and OCHA Data Responsibility Guidelines, 2019).

Digital tools also allow humanitarian organizations, in many cases, to conduct their work remotely, far from where the people impacted by crisis actually live. This was extremely beneficial during the initial months of the COVID-19 pandemic, when travel was impossible and yet humanitarian assistance work continued. At the same time, there is a risk associated with *remote working*, if it becomes the preferred aid option, as it can change how aid workers perceive realities on the ground, with the danger of losing sight of local knowledge, priorities and critiques.⁷

Other specific measures include establishing commonly agreed standards for data sharing among partners, and ensuring strong data protection and responsible management internally and externally among all humanitarian partners. One respondent shared that, to better improve humanitarian responses, the humanitarian data ecosystem needs to be more digitized, and include more real-time data.

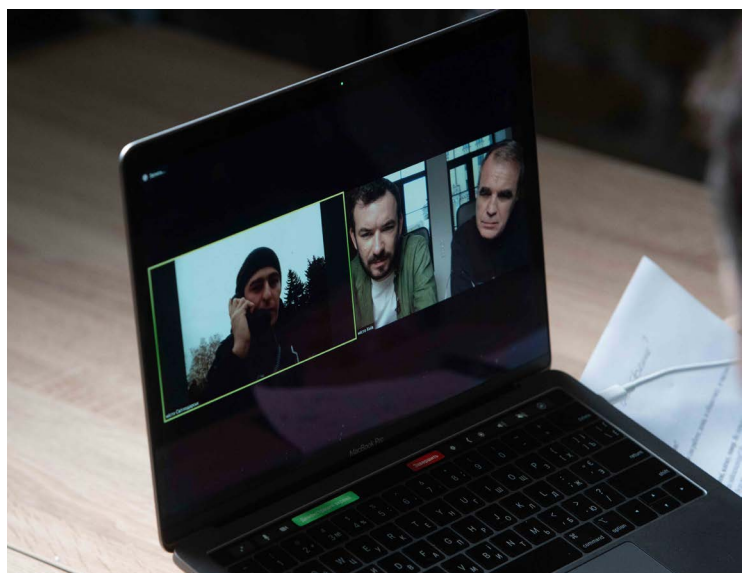
Anticipatory Action

Aid workers and organizations have been trying to use new and emerging technologies to facilitate earlier, faster, and potentially more effective humanitarian action. Part of this technological shift involves the use of artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning to improve the efficiency of humanitarian responses and field operations.

Situational awareness tools powered by AI can aggregate information from satellite images, news reports, and social media to provide rapid updates on unfolding crises (USAID). For example, [Grillo](#) uses machine learning (ML) to rapidly generate earthquake early warnings based on data from inexpensive ground motion sensors.⁸

However, such a promise is also accompanied by potential pitfalls. Inadequate data governance and data protection might cause unintended harm to vulnerable populations, while poor artificial intelligence and machine learning implementation can exacerbate and intensify existing bias and inequalities.⁹ As such, these risks and challenges must be identified and mitigated to ensure that the use of new technology does no harm and protects the life and dignity of those it is intended to serve.

BHA's own work on anticipatory action is siloed and uncoordinated. Extensive capacity exists in BHA teams and partner projects. However, these activities are not united in a coherent and comprehensive set of objectives and strategies.



In Ukraine, USAID partner People In Need Ukraine created an open dialogue between people living near eastern Ukraine's conflict zone and well-known Ukrainian celebrities including singer Jamala, producer Yaroslav Lodygin and TV presenter, Alexander Fozzy Sidorenko. *Photo by People in Need*

⁷ Technology can 'facilitate distance' and allow existing approaches to continue without the meaningful involvement of aid users, rather than build a more participatory or inclusive model of aid (ODI 2020).

⁸ To reach low-income Timorese without a bank account or access to mobile money, the Timor Leste government partnered with Catalpa to develop a fit-for-purpose cash transfer system. By integrating a robust complaints process, the Timor-Leste government was equipped with an accountable system, enabling them to meet their obligations to constituents by delivering a near-universal financial benefit. Complaints about payment distribution were captured on tablets and able to be resolved by a dedicated team through a response tracker system. The data collection also allowed for complaints to be aggregated for improvements and continual refinement to the system (Catalpa 2020).

⁹ <https://research.utwente.nl/en/publications/the-changing-face-of-accountability-in-humanitarianism-using-arti> and <https://blogs.icrc.org/law-and-policy/2021/08/19/artificial-intelligence-anticipatory-humanitarian/>



The BetterTogether Challenge is announcing its first award (\$500,000) to US-based company Premise Data, which, through local Venezuelan partners, will use an innovative digital platform to crowdsource, analyze, and use real-time data to identify local needs and more effectively deliver basic services for Venezuelans in need. The BetterTogether Challenge is a global initiative to crowdsource, fund, and scale innovative solutions from anywhere in the world to improve the lives of Venezuelans and communities hosting them across Latin America and the Caribbean. *Photo by BHA Partner*

Interoperability

Interoperability is the ability of different applications to access, exchange, integrate, and use data in a coordinated manner through the use of shared application interfaces and standards, within and across organizational, regional, and national boundaries, to provide timely and seamless portability of information and optimize outcomes ([Digital Square](#)). Interoperable applications can facilitate and bolster opportunities like real-time insights and anticipatory action, as they make it possible to work with data from separate systems, platforms, and organizational entities.

Interoperability requires a *well-designed digital architecture* and *adaptive change management* in addition to intentionally *phasing out* redundant systems. Achieving the benefits of interoperability in humanitarian aid requires coordination among different humanitarian organizations, a key obstacle to achieving the benefits of digitalization.

Relevance to USAID Strategies and Objectives

The BHA Digital Action Plan recognizes and reinforces other strategic commitments for the Bureau and aligns its digital transformation efforts with these broader development priorities.

Localization: USAID has been moving to support locally-led development and efforts to partner directly with local stakeholders. Engaging local stakeholders will be critical to designing accessible digital programming for affected populations, ensuring that data-driven solutions such as those driving anticipatory action reflect local needs and priorities, and providing communities with an equal say in protecting their own data.

Protection & Gender Equality: USAID has a longstanding commitment to Protection, Gender Equality, and Women's Empowerment. The Digital Strategy recognizes the role of protection and gender in mediating access and use of digital technology. Further, it notes that the gender digital divide significantly hampers the ability of women and girls to access opportunities within the digital ecosystem. This Action Plan recognizes that this divide and protection concerns could be exacerbated in humanitarian contexts.

Climate Change: USAID's [Climate Strategy](#) outlines objectives on accelerating climate targets, investing in a long-term shift to net zero and climate resilient pathways, and addressing climate change within USAID and partner organizations. Digital transformation within BHA requires using technology to more efficiently and equitably respond to climate-related risk. Technology can also enable the humanitarian community to coordinate a more efficient, data-driven response to global crises. At the same time, new technologies should be evaluated with respect to climate impacts.

Diversity Equity & Inclusion: This plan recognizes that digital transformation must align with diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts underway across USAID/BHA and the broader humanitarian community. Digital transformation has the power to help or hinder DEI efforts. As BHA builds its digital transformation capacity, BHA will take steps to ensure that processes, trainings, and opportunities expand USAID's goal to have an equitable workplace and opportunities for career growth and advancement for all BHA employees. In addition, as BHA brings in the talent and expertise needed to meet opportunities and challenges in the digital sphere, we will support the agency's goal to build a workforce that reflects the global community we serve and live in. Beyond BHA, this Action Plan acknowledges the potential of digital transformation efforts to create conditions that foster diversity, equity, and inclusion among the affected communities we support.

Private Sector Engagement: USAID's Private Sector Engagement Policy recognizes the value of engaging the private sector in development and humanitarian assistance to shape solutions that achieve sustained impact. Given the increasing scale, length, and frequency of conflicts and disasters, there is an increasing need to partner with private sector actors to meet the needs of crisis-affected communities in innovative and effective ways. This Action Plan supports opportunities to engage private sector stakeholders to increase digitization across BHA's systems and platforms and to develop innovative approaches to affected community engagement and transformative programming.

Appendix A. List of Acronyms and Abbreviations

4G	Fourth Generation of Mobile Communications	GSMA	Groupe Speciale Mobile Association
AI	Artificial Intelligence	HBMO	Office of Humanitarian Business management and Operations
API	Application Programming Interface	IAA	Interagency Agreement
APS	Annual Program Statement	IASC	Inter-Agency Standing Committee
ARC	Anthem Room Correction	ID	Identification
BHA	Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance	IP	Implementing Partner
CAPI	Computer-assisted Personal Interviewing	ITM	Information and Technology Management
CHOPP	Common Humanitarian Operating Picture Portal	ITU	The International Telecommunication Union
CUA	Cash Consortium for Urban Assistance	M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation
CVA	Cash and Vouchers Assistance	ML	Machine Learning
DAV	Data, Analytics, and Visualization	NOFO	Notice of Funding Opportunity
DTT	Digital Transformation Team	NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
FARO	Office of Field and Response Operations	OCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
FCDO	Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office	PII	Personal Identifiable Information
FEWS-Net	Famine Early Warning System Network	R&D	Research and Development
G3PC	The Office of Global Policy, Partnerships, Programs, and Communication	TPQ	The Office of Technical and Program Quality
GIS	Geographic Information System	USD	U.S. Dollars
GIZ	German Agency for International Cooperation	USG	U.S. Government
		WFP	World Food Programme

Appendix B. List of Key Terms

Artificial intelligence (AI)	The science and technology of machines that perform activities normally thought to require human intelligence. One subset of AI is Machine Learning (ML), a technique in which computers “learn” to recognize patterns in existing data, creating systems that can be more flexible, responsive, and adaptable than previously possible. Some AI systems use computers to automatically make decisions, while others create recommendations for human decision-makers.
Anticipatory Action	The practice of providing financing and aid activities based on risk triggers to mitigate the effects of a disaster before it hits. (TNH)
Application Programming Interface (API)	A software intermediary that allows two applications to talk to each other. Each time you use an app like Facebook, send an instant message, or check the weather on your phone, you’re using an API. (MuleSoft)
Biometrics	Technologies that measure and analyze human physical and / or behavioral characteristics, e.g. fingerprint, voice print, iris recognition. In the context of this document, these characteristics are used to authenticate a person’s pre-verified identity. (CALP)
Blockchain	Blockchains are an example of a distributed ledger technology (DLT), which is a type of shared, peer-to-peer computer database that enables all network participants to agree on a set of facts or events without needing to rely on a single, centralized, or fully trusted intermediary party. Blockchains are the most common form of DLT, and require data on the “chain” to be structured in linked, sequential “blocks.”
Cash and voucher assistance (CVA)	CVA refers to all programs where cash transfers or vouchers for goods or services are directly provided to recipients. This is broader than cash transfers or cash assistance, which do not include vouchers or restricted cash, and is often used to distinguish from in-kind assistance where goods or services are provided directly to recipients. (CALP)
Cybersecurity	The prevention of damage to, protection of, and restoration of computers, electronic communications systems, electronic communications services, wire communication, and electronic communication, including information contained therein, to ensure its availability, integrity, authentication, confidentiality, and nonrepudiation. <i>USAID Digital Strategy</i>

Cyberthreats	Any circumstance or event with the potential to adversely impact organizational operations (including mission, functions, image, or reputation), organizational assets, individuals, other organizations, or the Nation through an information system via unauthorized access, destruction, disclosure, modification of information, and/or denial of service. (NIST)
Data privacy	The right of an individual or group to maintain control over, and the confidentiality of, information about themselves, especially when that intrusion results from unintentional, undue or illegal gathering and use of data about that individual or group. <i>USAID Digital Strategy</i>
Data protection	The practice of ensuring the protection of data from unauthorized access, use, disclosure, disruption, modification, or destruction, to provide confidentiality, integrity, and availability. <i>USAID Digital Strategy</i>
Digital Financial Services (DFS)/FinTech	Financial services enabled by or delivered through digital technology (e.g., mobile phones, cards, the internet). These services (e.g., payments, credit, insurance, savings, advisory) can be offered by a range of providers, from banks to a host of non-bank financial institutions, such as microfinance institutions, digital credit providers, payment providers, technology vendors, and electronic money issuers.
Digital security	The practice of understanding one's digital footprint, identifying localized risks to information systems and taking reasonable steps to protect one's owned assets from loss or capture. <i>USAID Digital Strategy</i>
Digital economy	The use of digital and Internet infrastructure by individuals, businesses, and governments to interact with each other, engage in economic activity, and access both digital and non-digital goods and services. <i>USAID Digital Strategy</i>
Digital ecosystem	The stakeholders, systems, and enabling environment that together empower people and communities to use digital technology to gain access to services, engage with each other, or pursue economic opportunities. <i>USAID Digital Strategy</i>

Digital identification (ID)	Identity is defined as a set of attributes that uniquely describes an individual or entity. Digital identification (ID) systems often require registering individuals into a computerized database and providing certain credentials associated with each individual (e.g., birth certificates, identifying numbers, cards, digital certificates, etc.) as proof of identity. Digital ID systems sometimes use biometrics (fingerprints, iris scans, etc.) to identify individuals, but many advanced systems do not. Government actors can set up these systems to create foundational, national ID programs, or donors or non-governmental organizations (NGOs) for functional purposes to identify affected people, e.g., for humanitarian assistance and service-delivery.
Digital infrastructure	The foundational components that enable digital technologies and services. Examples of digital infrastructure include fiber-optic cables, cell towers, satellites, data centers, software platforms, and end-user devices. <i>USAID Digital Strategy</i>
Digital Payments	Payments initiated or received by electronic means. For an end-user, these payments might be made via a text message, mobile application, website, or merchant-level point-of-sale device, such as a dongle or QR code. A financial institution—e.g., bank, switch, MFI, or payment service provider—might facilitate these payments to or from a range of instruments. Instruments might include: prepaid wallets (i.e., electronic money accounts), cards, transaction or bank accounts, and other instruments that serve as stores of value and permit payments.
Digital tool	Application of digital technologies to meet a specific human need. Digital tools differ from infrastructure in that they are geared toward a specific application, while infrastructure tends to be more general-purpose. <i>USAID Digital Strategy</i>
Digital rights	Human rights in online spaces. These rights include, but are not limited to, the right to privacy, freedom of opinion and speech, freedom of information and communication, gender rights, and the right to freedom from violence. (Roberts 2021)
Digital transformation	The reimagining of business in the digital age. In other words, the process of using digital technologies to create new — or modify existing — business processes, culture, and customer experiences to meet changing business and market requirements. (Salesforce)
Digitalization	Updating processes, job training, etc. in order to effectively employ digital technologies and information to transform business operations. (Forbes)
Digitization	Process of changing analog information to digital form. (Forbes)

Disinformation	Information that is intentionally false or misleading and deliberately used to achieve a specific social, economic, and/or political objective. <i>USAID Digital Strategy</i>
Informed consent	As defined by the U.S. Government, this involves three features: 1) disclosing sufficient information about direct risks and benefits to a participant so he or she can make an informed decision on whether to participate, 2) making sure the participant truly understands this information, and 3) making sure the decision to participate is truly voluntary. (USAID Using Data Responsibly)
Interoperability	The ability of computer systems or software to exchange and make use of information from other systems. For example, interoperable data systems allow for data sharing and reuse with common formats and definitions, and interoperable payment systems allow digital transfers of money between different financial service providers.
Machine learning (ML)	A set of methods that train computers to learn from data, where “learning” generally amounts to the detection of patterns or structures in data. ML approaches begin by finding patterns in a subset of existing data and use them to make predictions for new, unseen data. <i>USAID Digital Strategy</i>
Misinformation	False or misleading information shared by error or mistake. <i>USAID Digital Strategy</i>
Mobile money	Mobile money is a financial product that allows users to store funds electronically and access financial services such as payments, transfers, insurance, savings, and credit through their mobile phone. (CALP)
Remote sensing	The process of detecting and monitoring the physical characteristics of an area by measuring its reflected and emitted radiation at a distance. Sensors can be attached to satellites, aircrafts, unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV) or placed directly into the ground, to name a few examples. (USGS)
Platform	A group of technologies used as a base upon which other technologies can be built or applications and services run. For example, the Internet is a platform that enables web applications and services. <i>USAID Digital Strategy</i>



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