HARVARD HUMANITARIAN INITIATIVE

EUROPEAN REFUGEE CRISIS | DATA, TECHNOLOGY & COORDINATION BRIEFING NOTE

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On November 4, 2015, the Harvard Humanitarian Initiative (HHI) brought together representatives of a range of organizations working to address the needs of refugees arriving in Europe, to take stock of the current status of data collection and coordination among key actors, to discuss critical areas of improvement in the collection and use of data, and to identify concrete next steps to be taken both by the meeting's participants and to be recommended to policy-makers dealing with the crisis. This briefing note highlights three key questions addressed during the meeting: who are the decision-makers, what are their information needs, and what challenges are hindering the effective collection and use of data in the crisis?

Decision-makers, information needs and challenges

The refugee crisis involves a number of stakeholders and decision-makers: European Union (EU) institutions, national political leaders in individual countries, national and local authorities including health and social services, the large numbers of volunteers giving their time to assist refugees, professional humanitarian actors including United Nations (UN) agencies, and the migrating people themselves. Each of these groups has different information needs. EU institutions and national political leaders need information on which to base their decisions, but information is not the only factor: political concerns and perceptions of popular sentiment toward the crisis are equally relevant. For national and local authorities, the most important question is how many people will reach the country, and when they are expected to arrive so they can adequately plan to accommodate them. National and local authorities also need to be aware of the long term social outlook for migrants in terms of education, basic services, and the impact on host communities. It can be hard for them to convince political decision makers of the importance of longer-term planning. Professional humanitarian organizations and volunteers need information on their immediate surroundings so that they can quickly adapt their operations to evolving situation. There is also a need for information that allows for coordination of operations among volunteers, professional humanitarian organizations, and local or national authorities.

Volunteers have a further need for information systems to permit coordination among themselves, since they are mostly not associated with formal organizations. Volunteers on the front-lines of the crisis are also working in an environment of great uncertainty since, for example, it is never clear when the next migrant influx will arrive or when a camp might be closed. Any information that helps them to predict needs and engage in the mid- or long-term planning is highly beneficial. Volunteers also have difficulty connecting with decision-makers at other levels which further hinders their ability to plan their operations or influence policy. Finally, the migrants themselves need information on what services are available to them, where they can go next, how to get there, and along the way, what information they need to share and with whom. The moving population also encounters a range of decision makers and service providers on their journey, from their countries of origin, through transit countries, at entry points to Europe, and finally in the destination countries.

Each group of decision-makers also faces data-collection challenges. The EU and national political institutions look for data that is both broad and detailed, but this kind of dataset is impossible to assemble with current data-collection arrangements. The EU's response to the migrant influx has been entirely reactive and no EU-level institution has taken a leadership role in data collection. This role has also not been adopted by national and local authorities: different approaches have been adopted in different countries, and countries on the front-lines have been overwhelmed and have not put adequate systems in place. Even countries farther afield, though dealing with lesser numbers, are reliant on NGOs, UN agencies, embassies and other actors to provide them with information. Some volunteer groups do not collect data since their operations run on a day-to-day basis.

Volunteer efforts mixing crowd-sourced, locally-sourced and official information, and geodata can be beneficial but relying solely on volunteer efforts limits the results they can produce. Even for established organizations – with proven data collection protocols – the refugee crisis has raised new challenges. There has been a strong focus on the Balkan routes, but there is a major lack of data from the point when the refugees go beyond Italy or another point of arrival. Data collection continues to be site-based, thus the data collection is static while refugees are moving. In general, there is a great excitement about the potential of big data, but there needs to be some analysis of this kind of data for it to be useful to decision-makers.

More generally, the lack of coordination of data collection and a lack of information sharing are major factors hindering effective response to the refugee crisis. Information is derived from diverse sources and difficult to compile systematically since (1) the terminology is not consistent (eg. refugees vs. migrants vs. persons); (2) the data is not comparable, e.g., daily vs. weekly registrations; and (3) numbers differ greatly between sources. There is lack no central body coordinating the response effort as a whole. The UN's Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) is not taking the role because the situation has not been declared a humanitarian crisis. Most observers agree that the EU should take the coordinating role, but the crisis does not fall neatly into the mandate of any existing EU agency. The EU external action service does not deal with crises within Europe, and since the migrants are not EU citizens, they are outside the remit of the EU's civil protection mechanism. Moreover, there is a lack of coordination within EU agencies on how to deal with the crisis. A lot of actors are in play, leading to political dynamics that are preventing the EU from optimally addressing the crisis.

Without a central coordinating body, a multiplicity of actors is developing independent systems, platforms and data collection methods. This is not an problem in itself: meeting participants also noted that the type of data to be gathered depends greatly on the objectives of the organization gathering it and the purpose for which it is to be used. It also depends on the time and resources available to gather the best possible quality of information. Data collection has to have a certain, clear aim; otherwise it is hard to justify.

Yet, while recognizing that different types of information are gathered for different purposes, participants agreed that minimum data standards and more open sharing of data are desirable. Standardization would create efficiencies by allowing for easier coordination among responders, for example, allowing smaller organizations and grassroots initiatives to benefit from data gathered by others. Standardized data would be easier to share, aggregate and combine so that governing bodies can make decisions based on more accurate information. This would allow for better support to individuals by creating a way to track their movement across Europe, giving more accurate numbers as they cross different points in their journey, and allowing better protection of refugees' safety, for example by identifying specific needs and providing the right forms of support. Freer exchange of data could also support better integration in the longer-term by allowing countries to be prepared to meet certain needs and provide opportunities. One initial type of assessment that has not been done in Europe since the refugee crisis began is a mapping of organizations with the capacity to respond in each location, similar to a typical OCHA 3W assessment (who does what, where?). This would be a useful starting point, however it need to be done at the local level, since the information is highly dynamic and changeable.

While coordination, standardization, and sharing are desirable, data protection concerns cannot be overlooked. Refugees flee persecution, mostly by the State in their country of origin, but also often by other perpetrators of violence. Data sharing therefore needs to be both positive and responsible. A large part of the data, particularly individual, identifiable narratives, is too sensitive to be shared. Data collection is seen as a risk, but its advantages outweigh the risks, particularly if data security is effectively managed. It should be possible to reach consensus on minimum data standards (such as standardized terminology and definitions) and minimum core agreed items, e.g., locations, numbers of people, key indicators, and critical day-to-day developments. This kind of minimal data should gathered in a way that it can be shared and aggregated, then follow up assessments can be undertaken for more detail on specific needs or for deeper analysis.

Finally, all parties agreed that data while data is needed in order to inform governing bodies and organizations, it must not be disconnected from the people it represents. Humanitarian actors and governments should be wary of 'automated' decision making. The refugees are also largely disconnected from policy-making processes, such that efforts to encourage their participation need to be promoted.

Solutions

Potential next steps for stakeholders include:

- Appointment of a coordinating body: The EU, UN, and EU member States should work together, and in collaboration with major humanitarian agencies and other 'decision-makers' identified during the meeting, to decide on a central coordinating body to manage the response to refugee crisis.

- Improving the use of data in the refugee crisis response:

    - Coordination of information management: While a centralized response body may take time to establish, a central information management agency could be set up quickly to coordinate information through various levels. This could be a bottom-up, non-governmental platform where various actors can share their data and/or information products, provide information to the public and press, and serve as a central database of actors dealing with the refugee crisis.

    - Adoption of minimum standards of data collection: Researchers and organizations collecting data on the refugee crisis should work on agreed data collection standards in order to be able combine data. These include semantic and syntactic terminology, technical standards, and agreement on what data should be collected and in what form. This could also include the sharing of practices and tools among different agencies.

    - Mapping of actors: To facilitate this process, in the absence of a coordinating body, leading organizations addressing information management on the crisis should start by mapping what actors are present and collecting data in this crisis context.

    - Support for innovation and added-value: Recognizing that even with standardization, there will still be a need for specialized data-collection initiatives. Donors are encouraged to support these, while avoiding duplication of existing activities.

    - Maximizing the value of data: Organizations that collect data should consider carefully how their data can be best put to use to help refugees and the communities hosting them. This could include gathering data for outreach or advocacy on improved integration, more safety during travel, and better understanding among communities. It may also include making information accessible to a wider group of stakeholders such as businesses, to promote new initiatives that alleviate the situation of refugees.

- Harmonizing data collection practices and procedures: Practitioner organizations and researchers should examine the practices, information products and procedures currently being used in data collection on the refugee crisis in order to identify areas of overlap and common interests, and to avoid duplication of effort through sharing of data collection protocols.

While questions remains as to which official agency should take the lead in the response to this crisis, it was suggested that an informal group, such as the Standby Task Force (SBTF – an online digital volunteer group) or even an initiative resulting from the meeting, could take some immediate steps on the data front. These steps include:

- Mapping the data already available within the group;
- Mapping and aligning existing platforms, practices and efforts; and
- Identifying gaps in current data collection efforts.