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PUBLIC FORUM

Information in Crisis

CDAC NETWORK

communicating with disaster-affected communities

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Information in crisis: A critical challenge of our time

Framing paper for the CDAC and fome Public Forum 2025

Why this forum, why now?

In times of crisis, access to reliable information is as vital as food, water, or shelter. Yet, the integrity of information in crisis settings is under greater strain than at any point in recent memory.

The last year has brought unprecedented challenges: dramatic funding cuts, acceleration of disinformation as digital platforms have scaled back fact-checking and content moderation, proliferation of AI, widespread undermining of humanitarian law, and shrinking civic space. The impact on communities has been profound, leaving people in crises unsure whom to trust and preventing humanitarian organisations from providing even the most basic services.

At the same time, affected communities are more connected and vocal than ever. They require not only access to information but also the agency to shape it. The need to listen to and engage with them has never been more urgent. The impact of these ongoing challenges

further underscores the need to reinforce and amplify the space for community voices to be heard.

The CDAC and fome Public Forum (10 December 2025) provides a space to address these challenges together. Building on a long tradition of bringing the most pressing issues of the time, it offers an opportunity to articulate shared principles and future commitments.

Participants can use this framing paper as:

- A lens on the core issues currently at stake.
- Questions to prompt dialogue at preparatory events, consultations, and in Bonn.
- A collective 'call to action' on information integrity in crises.

What has changed?

Across political, economic, technological, and social dimensions, several fundamental shifts have transformed the information landscape in crisis settings:

- **Donor funding is drying up, and freedoms are shrinking**
  Major donors — including the US, UK, and EU member states — have reduced funding for independent media, humanitarian action, civil society, and efforts to promote information integrity. At the same time, journalists and activists face growing repression through legal threats, censorship, and attacks. Tech platforms, meanwhile, remain largely unregulated.
- **Concentration of narrative power in digital platforms**
  Digital platforms have dismantled traditional media revenue models and concentrated influence in a handful of tech companies. Their algorithms favour sensational, divisive content over accurate reporting because emotional, polarised posts attract more engagement.
- **Local and public interest media are shrinking, and funding comes with strings attached**
  Public and donor funding for trusted local media has sharply declined, particularly for those serving marginalised communities. Where funding does exist, it increasingly comes with political or strategic expectations, with some donors treating media as a tool in a global information war rather than an independent public service.
- **AI is blurring the line between truth and lies**
  The rise of AI-generated and synthetic content has increasingly blurred the line between what is real and what is fake, contributing to an 'epistemic rupture' — a breakdown in our shared understanding of what truth is.
- **Distrust and 'information nihilism' among communities**
  When people feel isolated, insecure, and a loss of belonging, they are more likely to believe false narratives. The vast array of easily accessible, highly competitive narratives generates increasingly polarised views. As trust in institutions declines, many disengage altogether, believing that no information can be trusted.

- **When humanitarians are silent, malign actors fill the vacuum**
  Caution over safety and 'do no harm' has led to humanitarian actors saying and doing less. This leaves a vacuum for opportunistic actors to step in and dominate the information and humanitarian spaces with unverified or harmful narratives and actions.
- **Local actors do the work but have little say**
  Those closest to crises carry the heaviest responsibility for response but remain under-resourced, often treated as implementers rather than agenda-setters. As the humanitarian sector is further disrupted, local communities are left to handle credibility, information sharing and aid delivery – often without support.

Questions to guide the road to Bonn

These are the core questions we will be asking ourselves in the lead up to, and at, the Public Forum in Bonn:

- How have you seen the information ecosystem in crisis contexts change in 2025, and what would you like to see change in 2026?
- Where do collaboration efforts on information integrity in crisis settings currently break down, and where are the most promising entry points for working together?
- To what extent do humanitarian actors' interpretations of neutrality and reluctance to engage with information providers they perceive as 'not neutral' undermine their role? Does this result in a space dominated by partisan or ill-informed voices and eroding trust in humanitarian work?
- How do we ensure that deploying AI in crisis contexts strengthens participation, without undermining humanitarian principles or harming communities?
- How do we help enable communities to shape information flows without exposing them to new risks?

Principles to guide our collective action

The response to these challenges must be grounded in shared commitments. Principles long recognised in both humanitarian and media development remain vital but must be applied with renewed clarity:

- **Information is aid**: maintaining a minimum level of information integrity in humanitarian crises should be a key objective for humanitarian actors, donors, and policymakers.
- **Locally led and people-centred:** Communities must co-design and co-govern responses, rather than only being consulted. Harmful information should be addressed by local public interest media and other local actors who can gain the trust of local audiences by platforming their voices, ensuring access to relevant and reliable information, and holding decision-makers accountable. Participation, inclusion, and accountability remain non-negotiable.

- **Technology with accountability**: AI and digital tools can facilitate and amplify participation, but need to be understood as transparent, ethical, and rooted in community sovereignty.
- **Solidarity across sectors:** Humanitarian, media development, and local actors must act together, leveraging comparative strengths while respecting independence. Promoting professional public interest media in crisis contexts requires greater collaboration between the humanitarian and media development sectors.
- **Prevention, not reaction**: Fact-checking is necessary but not sufficient. We must build ecosystems of trust, dialogue, inclusion and respect for different forms of expertise. Both long-term strengthening and timely but verified responses are needed to ensure information integrity in crises.

Call to Action: a provisional compact

The integrity of information in crisis settings is collapsing. Communities cannot trust what they hear. Humanitarian organisations do not reach those who need them most. Local media resources are being cut, questioned and even in some cases labelled as enemies of the state.

This is not a moment for cautious statements. It is a moment for collective action. Both media and humanitarian organisations play a vital role in the communities they work in. Both can benefit from each other's presence, especially in a crisis.

Participants in Bonn will be invited to align around a call to action that responds directly to the crisis outlined in this framing document. This provisional version reflects the urgency of our times:

1 **Protect the information space**: Defend the safety of journalists, local media, and community responders in crisis contexts. We will communicate more with communities through trusted channels and in ways that are transparent, accountable, and grounded in humanitarian principles.

2 **Invest in local information ecosystems:** We support funding local public-interest media as infrastructure, not as implementing partners. Sustainable, long-term investment in locally led models is needed for communication, media development, and humanitarian response.

3 **Align across sectors:** Commit to breaking down silos, and where possible, build stronger coalitions across humanitarian, media development, and local actors. Maintaining information integrity and building trust requires these actors to work in harmony.

4 **Build AI collectively with communities:** Together with donors and other partners, promote the safe, ethical adoption of AI and digital tools that are co-designed and co-governed with communities, and uphold humanitarian principles.

This compact is not final. It will be refined through consultation in the lead-up to Bonn and during the Public Forum itself. But its direction is clear: we must act with the urgency this moment demands, and we must act together.