Advancing Good Governance Seminar

8 June 2012 11:15 – 12:30

How Can Technology Assist with Good Governance?

This panel explored the uses, challenges and tensions of technology in the context of promoting good governance. Panelists provided examples of how citizens and organizations use technology and potential difficulties associated with it. The near-ubiquity and accessibility of certain technologies create an opportunity to "empower" people.

Key Points from the Panel

1. **Technology as a tool for empowerment.** Social media and open source platforms provide an exciting opportunity in advancing governance. A key example of how technology "empowers" people is by providing a tool by which they can report illegal acts. It is, however, important to note that technology in and of itself is insufficient to improve governance: how it is used and who uses it matters. For instance, the greater availability of more information may enhance good governance, by empowering communities with the tools they need to make informed decisions; however, the availability of information does not in anyway address the issue of whether the information available is accurate or free of deception. Examples of technological tools for empowerment discussed during the panel included open source technology used in Japan to crowd-source the location of radiation sensors and the use in Kenya of mobile phones to track teacher absenteeism and in Zimbabwe to monitor corruption.

2. **Challenges.** One major challenge is the security of communications, which is particularly acute in vulnerable populations where the social sector often operates. While the information in an open source hub can be protected, the user device cannot be as easily secured. For example, where a mobile phone is seized and messages found on it, there is no protection for the owner. As such, subscriber protection is one of the larger challenges in this area.

    Another challenge relates to "data hugging," which describes a tension in which an organization which has access and capacity to collect a great deal of valuable data but has a financial incentive to limit the release of such data.

3. **Importance of education and community outreach related to technology.** Education and community outreach relating to the importance of technology is just as important as using it in the first place. Local communities, national governments, and other levels of the aid delivery chain need to be educated about what technology is available, and how it can assist in the achievement of their goals. Technology that goes unexploited is an untapped resource. Education consists of more than just showing that a given technology exists; a case must be made for it.

Emerging Questions

1. What are the ways technologies can directly improve good governance? Is it possible to better ensure that the goods technology provides in the social sector are more fit for purpose and tailored to suit the specific needs of that sector?

2. What are they ways that the risks and challenges posed by the increased prevalence of technology in the social sector can be ameliorated, particularly with respect to the vulnerable communities the social sector serves?

3. Is it possible to develop a curriculum and/or program of education/community outreach that will improve understanding of the value technology can add in the social sector as well as of the risks the use of technology might pose? How can the social sector ensure that technological innovations are being fully exploited in this space?