Sifting hype from reality

The absence of useful metrics for success is a persistent challenge in information and communication technology projects in the humanitarian sector but how should we judge whether a new technology is worth adopting? Unlike commercial technology projects, success has nothing to do with how many users you have or the value that they might derive from the technology. The key measure is whether that technology improves the lives of individuals and communities affected by conflict, either directly or indirectly. At first glance measuring this kind of impact looks impossible but the difficulty of measuring impact is not an excuse for attempting it. At present the tendency is to rely on anecdotal evidence provided by operational agencies or assumptions imported from the technology sector. However, both of these parties have a vested interest in promoting their own work, and so we remain largely in the dark about the real impact technology has.

The opportunity costs of technology – not just developing but implementing and maintaining it – are relatively high, making the sector conservative rather than innovative. In practice this means that innovation usually comes from outside established actors, increasingly in the form of partnerships with individuals or groups coming from the private sector. This leads to more challenges as each sector struggles to understand the others and it is particularly important to remember that the definition of 'success' may be different for each side.

Lastly, you don't hear much about projects that promise a lot and then fail to deliver, or about projects built on technology that is out of date by the time they go public. We don't discuss the reasons why projects start strongly but then grind to a halt or deliver little operational value – yet these are exactly the projects which we need to hear about, and these are the discussions that we need to have, if the sector is to learn from experience.