PRISM: PEACE & RESILIENCE IN SOCIAL MEDIA

A multi-factor lens for understanding concepts, assessing risks, and developing responses to the weaponization of social media

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Purpose
Violent conflict is on the rise with record numbers of displaced people worldwide, and social media is increasingly playing an important role. Political actors use social media campaigns to target critics with disinformation that increases polarization, echo chambers normalize hate speech against vulnerable groups, and radicalized narratives circulate and move between groups in an instant. At the same time, people everywhere increasingly conduct their lives online, and social media plays constructive roles in commerce, education, and public health. Social media is not all bad, and despite challenges to conflict dynamics, there
are also new opportunities. It is also increasingly a tool for awareness-raising such as hashtag campaigns as well as organizing and mobilizing communities.

To help clarify the challenges and support creative responses, Mercy Corps’ Peace & Conflict and Technology for Development teams have developed this practical guide on social media and conflict. This document guides program and country teams through three steps for addressing social media drivers of conflict: 1) recognizing the main types of social media harm; 2) assessing factors of both risk and resilience where social media drives conflict in a given context; and 3) designing practical and holistic responses. In short, this guide aims to help understand and navigate the digital environment in which we live and work.

Step 1: Establishing the Main Types of Social Media Harms

Definitions and Concepts

Definitions help frame understanding of an issue and affect the design and implementation of responses, as well as the ability to form partnerships or coalitions to address challenges. Starting most broadly, ‘information disorder,’ is a phrase popularized during the COVID-19 pandemic, and is used to refer to specific types of information ‘pollution’ including misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation. But it also is commonly used to characterize the overall information environment within which those types exist. There is general agreement that:

- **Misinformation** is content that is shared by someone who doesn’t realize it is false or misleading.
- **Disinformation** is content that is created and shared with the intention to cause harm.
- **Malinformation** is content that is genuine and is shared purposely to cause harm, such as private video.\(^1\)

These are not hard and fast categories; for example, a person might unwittingly share misleading content that was created by others for disinformation purposes.

In Mercy Corps’ 2019 report on the Weaponization of Social Media, we explore four categories of social media harms, highlighting transformative dangers to conflict contexts:\(^2\):

- **Information Operations (IO):** When information disorders, detailed above, are manipulated for specific purposes, it is considered an information operation. These coordinated disinformation campaigns are designed to disrupt decision making, erode social cohesion, and delegitimize adversaries in the midst of conflict. IO tactics include intelligence collection on specific targets, development of inciteful and often intentionally false narratives and systematic dissemination across social and traditional channels. For example, during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, rumors blaming different ethnic groups ran wild through social media and offline, diminishing social cohesion in many contexts like Northern Nigeria.

- **Political manipulation (PM):** Disinformation campaigns can also be used to systematically manipulate political discourse within a state, influencing news reporting, silencing dissent, undermining the integrity of democratic governance and electoral systems, and strengthening the hand of authoritarian regimes. These campaigns play out in three phases: 1) the development of

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core narratives, 2) onboarding of influencers and fake account operators, and 3) dissemination and amplification on social media. As an example, many political leaders leverage Facebook and other platforms to reinforce positive narratives about their campaign, defame opponents and silence critics.

Digital hate speech (DHS): Social media platforms can amplify and disseminate hate speech, creating opportunities for individuals and organized groups to prey on existing fears and grievances. They can embolden violent actors and spark violence — intentionally or sometimes unwittingly. The rapid proliferation of mobile phones and Internet connectivity magnifies the risks of hate speech and accelerates its impacts. Myanmar serves as a tragic example, where incendiary digital hate speech targeting the majority Muslim Rohingya people has been linked to riots and intercommunal violence.

Radicalization & recruitment (RR): The ability to communicate across distances and share user-generated, multimedia content inexpensively and in real time have made social media a channel of choice for some violent extremists and militant organizations, as a means of recruitment, manipulation and coordination. The Islamic State (ISIS) has been particularly successful in capitalizing on the reach and power of digital communication technologies.

Key Questions for Teams:

- How is social media being weaponized in your contexts?
- In what ways is social media transforming your conflict context?
- In what ways is social media being weaponized at contextual levels, and at individual levels, such as digital risks for women, peacebuilders, youth?

Step 2: Assessing the Information Environment and Social Media Drivers of Conflict

Mercy Corps has developed an analytical framework\(^3\) that uses six factors contributing to or mitigating against the weaponization of social media, and its contribution to conflict and violence. These factors occur at national or sub-national (e.g., province, county, municipality) levels; some or all may be present at once; or some may be more influential than others.

Social media can present significant risks, as well as opportunities, when these factors interact in a fragile context. The factors may interact with each other as follows:

\(^3\) See Mercy Corps’ Social Media and Conflict: Understanding Risks and Resilience; An Applied Framework for Analysis (2021). A summary of the research underlying the Framework, as well as a policy brief with recommendations for stakeholders were published alongside the Framework.
A country’s information architecture interacts with its underlying conflict drivers. Key influencers can exacerbate issues driving conflict by taking advantage of social media’s accelerating characteristics, particularly during windows of risk.

All of these factors may be countered or mitigated by a society’s sources of resilience. Indeed, in different societies these factors may possess constructive attributes that foster resilience: for example, an information architecture that is accessible and inclusive; key influencers that mobilize to counter misinformation or prevent violence; accelerating characteristics that facilitate organizing; and even windows of risk that present moments for reform.

By assessing the different factors, we can better categorize and organize contributing elements to the weaponization of social media. As we work to understand how social media interacts with conflict, these factors can also point towards entry points. By designing a response that addressing multiple factors, we can more comprehensively address the weaponization of social media and its impact on conflict.

The graphic below shows how these factors may interact with each other. Following the graphic is a detailed description of each of the elements, and a series of questions and details to help assess these factors in any context. A sample worksheet to use with teams, participants, or other stakeholders is in Annex 1.

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**USING THE FRAMEWORK**

This framework is meant to help assess the role of social media in a context. Users can apply the framework to a location, a thematic area (like an election or digital violence against women and girls), or even use it to help identify a digital peacebuilding strategy for their context.

The framework will help to break down the elements of this very complex topic to better identify entry points for programming or design conversations.

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A FRAMEWORK FOR UNDERSTANDING RISKS AND RESILIENCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA AND CONFLICT

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**Information architecture** concerns the level of connectivity and social media use, but also the market and legal framework in which people get their online information. What are the main elements shaping the environment for social media? Consider the following relevant details to understand the information ecosystem:

- the levels of digital connectivity, and how access varies by class, age, gender, or geography;
- how social media use varies by class, age, gender, or geography;
- relative trust and influence of information sources in the community;
- relative popularity of social media platforms;
- level of government regulation over legal framework, marketplace, or infrastructure;
- and the impact of social media on offline information-sharing and/or communication channels.

**Underlying conflict drivers** are social, economic, cultural and historical issues that may be amplified or manipulated online to foster division or undermine social cohesion. How are they viewed on social media? How does social media exacerbate their impact? Consider:

- heightened perceptions between and among identity groups of threat and vulnerability that undermine social cohesion;
- online misinformation and disinformation that inflames perceptions of unfair or unequal access to resources or employment;
- political context, including partisanship, polarization, and election campaigns
- attitudes toward violence that may be fostered and legitimized in online ‘echo chambers’ (e.g., acceptance of the use of violence to protect the family or avenge past aggressions);
- and prevalence of online hate speech and conflict ‘triggers,’ including routinely deployed false narratives, pejorative terms, and insults.

**Key influencers** are people, groups, or institutions who are prominent online (and possibly also offline) and who play a constructive or malign role in shaping what information people receive and how they receive it or in amplifying or exacerbating issues.

- Who are these actors, both online and offline?
- Why are they influential in a given context?
- who are positive influencers, such as online activists or mobilizers?

What are each of the influencers’:

- interests and incentives?
- operational capacities (e.g., social media following)?
- relevant communication channels?
- transnational links with organizations and actors outside the state (e.g., Diaspora)?
- type of methods and tactics (e.g., information operations, political manipulation, digital hate speech, radicalization and recruitment)?
- and competition from other key actors resulting in an escalation or radicalization of activities or rhetoric?
**Accelerating characteristics** are the particular attributes of social media that increase its risk such as its accessibility, low cost, speed and reach of dissemination, and may transform the dynamics of conflict. However, note that these are also attributes that may be beneficial for constructive uses (e.g., broad and quick dissemination of info in emergencies). Consider that:

- Social media spaces may act as echo chambers, where fears and biases are confirmed and perceptions of threat intensified.
- The speed of dissemination of hate speech and disinformation means perceptions can take hold before most tools can debunk or contextualize the allegations.
- The widespread availability of peer-to-peer communication has reduced the costs of information-sharing and collective action—for malign or constructive purposes.
- Online platforms incentivize not only connection but performance— influencers may amp up rhetoric against marginalized groups to compete for clicks or followers.
- Social media may accelerate tit-for-tat, escalatory provocations between groups.
- And it may provide individuals with the sense they are part of something unifying, successful, or bigger than themselves—even if malign or not true.

**Windows of risk/opportunity** refers to events or periods of time where conditions or issues may be amplified online for harm—or for positive ends. These windows might be cyclical (e.g., elections, livestock herding seasons, commemorations) or sporadic (e.g., the onset of negotiations or disarmament activities).

- What time periods or public events may serve as flashpoints for conflict?
- Which actors have the resources, following, or authority to instigate—or prevent—them?

**Sources of resilience** are those elements of societies—people, institutions, even mechanisms like ongoing inter-faith dialogue—that help mitigate against weaponization and resulting division. These sources of resilience may be mobilized to prevent violent incidents or even bolster online peaceful behavior or facilitate its positive role. Sources of resilience related to agency, empowerment, and mobilization can address issues in the community, both online and offline.

- What positive elements exist such as the presence of respected community or religious leaders and social media influencers who champion peace;
- Are there (online and/or offline) non-violent dispute resolution mechanisms or community tools or processes present?
- Is there a role for dynamics such as inclusive governance and policy making and a culture of positive intergroup interactions & social cohesion (e.g., trade, intermarriage, space for dialogue)?

**Reflection Questions**

As you reflect on these different elements, consider the following questions.

- What are the underlying drivers and/or causes of conflict in your context?
- How are these drivers becoming weaponized online, or even offline, in your context?
- How is social media impacting communities’ ability to work toward social cohesion and peace?
- What programs or set of approaches are you employing to address these social media drivers of conflict? If you’re not currently employing any, what approaches are you aware of that might be useful?
After completing the reflection questions and the worksheet, users can better understand where potential entry points may exist – particularly as they may align with existing efforts. In Step 3, examine types of responses that can address the different factors, and which factors rely on each other and interconnect. See Step 3 Response framework for ideas and categories of resilience.

**Step 3: Considering Responses**

In 2019, the Peace and Conflict and T4D teams undertook research to understand how social media can be weaponized for violence – examining information operations, political manipulation, digital hate speech, and radicalization and recruitment – and what can be done in response. We found four main categories of response which are shown in the following graphic and explained below that.

**Prevent**: As a first area on the continuum of responses, incidents of weaponization can be reduced by preventive activities at the outset that include influencing policies and regulations of governments, multinational bodies, industry associations and technology companies. For example, the European Union has developed a set of data protection rules that outline regulations for businesses and organizations in how to process, collect and store individuals’ data, establishing rights for citizens and means for redress.

**Monitor, Detect, & Assess Threats**: Activities that detect or make sense of weaponization threats, associated drivers, and their impact, such as:
- Information and threat mapping
- Open-source rumor monitoring and management
- Identification and analysis of online hate speech
- Social network monitoring, analysis, and reporting

**Mitigate Impacts**: Activities that minimize or manage the worst impacts when crises arise, such as:
- Referral or warning and response mechanisms integrated into monitoring systems
- Weaponization of social media crisis response plans
- Addressing and countering polarization and radical narratives

**Build Resilience**: Activities that improve the ability of vulnerable populations to resist adverse impacts from weaponization, such as:
- Digital media literacy training
- General awareness-raising campaigns on weaponization of social media
- Offline social cohesion building activities
Monitor, detect, and assess threats: Another area of responses are those that can be employed when social media is weaponized and ready to contribute to conflict. Monitoring, detection, and assessment involves bringing together a wide variety of stakeholders, from intelligence organizations to civil society organizations, to identify threats and their potential impact. In Kenya’s Tana River Delta, for example, the Sentinel Project’s ‘Una Hakika’ program counters rumors that have contributed to inter-ethnic violence by creating a platform for community members to report, verify, and develop strategies to address misinformation.

Program Example: CREATE

In this multi-country program, Mercy Corps is partnering with Wasafiri on social media monitoring to inform contextual analysis. Wasafiri has continued to build out its online social media analysis to better understand how social media and messaging platforms contribute to radicalisation and recruitment. The analysis focuses on the following questions:

- What type of propaganda is circulating on social media and messaging platforms?
- How do users interact with the propaganda and those posting the messages?
- What can we determine about the profile of individual interacting with the content?
- How is online content being used in in-person recruitment/radicalisation?
- What key themes are emerging in the content?
- What techniques/styles are used to make the content more engaging?
- How can our enhanced understanding of the online space inform programming?

A presentation of this work was given during the regional strat-comms training, focusing on what we are learning about how recruiters and VE actors relate to and engage with at-risk individuals on social media and what type of content is circulating on the various social media platforms. It highlighted the increasing risks of online recruitment pathways, and the need for both online and offline strategies to combat this threat.

Mitigate Impacts: Once weaponized information has already spread on social media, responses to mitigate the threat and its impact are appropriate - particularly in times of crisis. These activities might take place offline or online and include integrating referral or warning and response components into monitoring systems, establishing crisis and response plans, and addressing and countering online hate speech and radical or violent extremist narratives. An example is the Dangerous Speech Project’s ‘Nipe Ukweli’ project in Kenya, which provided public information on dangerous speech as well as mechanisms to report and remove such speech online during the height of electoral tensions.

Build resilience: A third and longer-term approach is helping fragile populations resist the worst impacts of the weaponization of social media, with digital media literacy training, online and offline awareness-building and education, and strategies to build social cohesion. For example, the Digital Storytelling initiative in Sri Lanka seeks to build skills in citizen storytelling as a way to balance polarizing rhetoric online, while also helping individuals become more responsible consumers of online information. In another example, Mercy Corps’ peacebuilding work in Nigeria’s Middle Belt has increased trust and perceptions of security across farmer and pastoralist groups while including specific initiatives to support religious and traditional leaders in analyzing and leading discussions aimed at reducing the impacts of hate speech in social media.

4 https://www.digitalstorytelling.lk/
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Key Questions for Teams:

- When examining the different factors, how do different responses address or leverage these factors? Often, multiple responses can leverage multiple factors.
- Which actor or entity is capable in your given context for each type of response area? For example, is there an effective governmental telecommunication authority, responsive legislature, or relevant civil society watchdog?
- Are you able to program in these areas? Is there a need for technical expertise? Is there a role for policy and advocacy around regulation of the internet or social media?

The digital risk and resilience framework (see Step 2 & 3) is helpful for context analysis, strategic thinking, and insights for design and programmatic entry points. In addition, the framework can be applied by program participants & community members themselves - to not only educate and build confidence of users to better understand and respond to their social media & conflict environment, but also to use as a design element for communities to gain insights and identify solutions.

Afterward

Core to our PRISM approach is to facilitate local, community-owned solutions to community-identified problems. Therefore, the approach can be applied to any level of implementation, and individuals from the community should be key stakeholders in using the framework for contextual analysis – and in the corresponding response design.

Facilitated workshops with participants can generate community-owned findings and assessments, as well as realistic entry-points. In this way, key stakeholders build confidence in assessing the social media landscape and identify appropriate program responses and localized solutions based on their own interests, needs, and capacities.
Alongside this process, context analysis and social cohesion assessment activities can be especially relevant and help to inform some of the insights.

**Program Example: Iraq Youth Against Disinformation**

40 youth across Ninewa and Basra, Iraq participated in a pilot program, Iraqi Youth Against Disinformation (IYAD). The youth worked to identify ways in which social media was impacting their communities, assess the weaponization of social media, spearheaded design and implementation of small projects. The youth designed and implemented responses to deepen their confidence in the digital peacebuilding space, ensuring their relevance and ownership over the solutions.

One youth group focused on intergroup tensions between rural and urban communities, identifying the role of hatespeech and rumors triggering conflict between these groups. The team gathered approximately 100 residents from both urban and rural areas from diverse backgrounds, including activists, clan elders and local media to a workshop to strengthen tolerance and encourage peaceful coexistence. By organizing the camp, the youth team aimed to provide the foundation for future interventions and discuss the role of Iraqi youth in countering rumors that could lead to conflict. Participants alongside the youth team transformed discussion on three influential social media pages from incitement of hatred to letters of tolerance and dialogue. The youth team manually monitored hate speech and immediately responded with counter posts urging rejection of extremism and acceptance of others, reminding the community of historical examples of collaboration between both sides.

While the information and steps above can help you assess the information environment and the role of social media within a conflict, each context is unique, and technology is constantly evolving; the dynamics at play and responses to them will likely require a customized approach for your situation. In addition, we are considering developing tools from this for specific thematic areas, such as gender or broader protection issues.

This guide is an approach to digital peacebuilding at Mercy Corps and is not intended to provide specific responses or tools, but rather guide the design of a program. In the annexes, you will find links to other resources at Mercy Corps and developed by partners that are more tool specific - and could be incorporated into program responses once teams have identified their design and approach. Finally, this initiative is continuously evolving, so please feel free to reach out to the Peace & Conflict and Technology for Development teams if you have questions, comments, or are seeking additional support.
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About Mercy Corps
Mercy Corps is a leading global organization powered by the belief that a better world is possible. In disaster, in hardship, in more than 40 countries around the world, we partner to put bold solutions into action — helping people triumph over adversity and build stronger communities from within. Now, and for the future.

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## Annex 1: Sample Worksheet to supplement framework

**WORKSHEET:**
*(blue example is from Ethiopia)*

### Case: Ethiopia

#### Underlying Conflict Drivers

*heightened perceptions between and among identity groups of threat and vulnerability that undermine social cohesion; attitudes toward violence that may be fostered and legitimized in online ‘echo chambers’; prevalence of online hate speech and conflict ‘triggers’*  
- Interaction between conflict in the North and mobilization around Oromiya
- Inter-ethnic conflict dynamics across regions
- Historical narratives around conflict between ethnic groups and state formation
- Role of state and contestation of power

#### Information Architecture

*levels of digital connectivity; how social media use varies by class, age, gender, or geography; relative popularity of social media platforms; the impact of social media on offline information channels.*
- Role of diaspora in media
- How much of the information is controlled by state?  
- How safe is it and how safe do people perceive it to be/level of surveillance?
- Facebook, YouTube most popular, Twitter, Whatsapp, Telegram (latter two difficult to police or detect harm)
- Gender difference in use: more men on Twitter and FB?
- Information-poor environment allows mis/disinfo to spread more because of vacuum of information

#### Accelerating Attributes

*echo chambers; speed of dissemination; information sharing peer-to-peer changing communication; performance influencing; tit-for-tat; sense of belonging*  
- Hidden mass influence of Whatsapp and Telegram
- Ethnic biases playing into how people use social media and how they spread information
- Conflict ‘war of propaganda’ - interaction b/w social media and offline spaces
- Incitement b/w ethnic groups on Facebook, mobilizing followers on the basis of identity
- Coded language/dog whistles can go under the radar of platform monitoring
- Performative element - signalling who is loyal to gov’t or flagging people as traitors

#### Windows of Risk & Opportunities

*What periods of time or public moments may serve as flashpoints for conflict? Which actors have the resources, following, or authority to instigate—or*  

#### Key Influencers

*Who are the key actors—politicians, critics, celebrities, or religious leaders—shaping what information people receive and how they receive*
### Prevent—them?

- National events, commemorations - holiday events provide occasion for misinformation; offline ground security and online misinformation
- Assassination events

### it?

- Diaspora community, activities
- Mainstream media, state-owned media companies
- Religious leaders - online?
- Sub-national ethnic leaders
- Politicians

### Elements of Resilience (enabling environment)

*(Presence of respected community or religious leaders and social media influencers; non-violent dispute resolution mechanisms; and dynamics such as inclusive governance and policy making and a culture of positive intergroup interactions)*

- Existence of elders, ethnic and religious leaders
- Customary institutions - working on dispute resolution mechanisms
- Social fabric is generally strong
- Cultural figures/singers trying to pull people together
- Less ethnic division in older generations
- Information architecture has some places that are less easily controlled/surveilled
- Not everyone online, helps slow the spread of mis/disinfo
Annex 2: Sample Tools

- **Ethiopia Workshop Deck**: Sample workshop deck to walk through the PRISM approach
- **Ethiopia Worksheet**: Sample worksheet to facilitate a conversation and activity around the framework for analysis. This is from the Ethiopia case presented in the document above. Please make a copy and re-use this document.
- **Training of Trainers**: This training guide was developed for the IYAD program and can provide a reference for a training of trainers activity.

Annex 3: Related Resources

This resource focuses on analyzing the role of social media in transforming conflict. It is predominantly an assessment tool to guide practitioners toward entry points and comprehensive program design and responses. In this section, we will provide additional resources that may support those responses - as additional avenues for teams to explore or engage with as a design is solidified or implementation begins.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Resource</th>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social media scanning document</td>
<td>Mercy Corps T4D &amp; Peacebuilding</td>
<td>Overview of social media scanning and social media listening to help teams get started with social media monitoring.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hate Speech Lexicons</td>
<td>Peace Tech Lab</td>
<td>Lexicons identify and explain inflammatory language on social media while offering alternative words and phrases that can be used to combat the spread of hate speech. Our Lexicons serve as a pivotal resource for local activists and organizations working to stop and prevent hate speech worldwide.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phoenix</td>
<td>BuildUp</td>
<td>Phoenix is an open-source, non-commercial, customizable process and tool to support peacebuilders and mediators who want to work ethically with social media data to inform programming</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learn to Discern</td>
<td>IREX</td>
<td>Learn to Discern's curriculum builds communities' resilience to state-sponsored disinformation, inoculates communities against public health misinformation, promotes inclusive communities by empowering its members to recognize and reject divisive narratives and hate speech, improves young people's ability to navigate increasingly polluted online spaces, and enables leaders to shape decisions based on facts and quality information.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bad News</td>
<td>(online game)</td>
<td>Bad News puts players in the role of producers of misinformation and fake news in return for badges rewarded to the “masters of disinformation.”</td>
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Players learn to distort the truth, plant falsehoods, and deflect attention among their virtual Twitter followers. By exposing people to fake news production processes and helping them gain hands-on experience, Bad News is able to help people develop increased familiarity to fake news distribution practices and immunity towards manipulation.

| Digital Peacebuilding Guide | Search for Common Ground, BuildUp | Designed for peacebuilding practitioners, this interactive online guide helps you to first understand what you're trying to achieve as a peacebuilder, and then points you towards several digital peacebuilding options. You'll find guidance, examples, and links to many more resources. And it works great on a mobile phone! |

Tools for Digital Gender Peace & Security

| Digital Harms for Women and Girls | NDI | This report outlines recommendations for NDI, its partners and those working globally to mitigate the democratic harms of disinformation, to ensure women’s safe participation and leadership in politics, and to monitor the social media and information environment in elections. |
| Internet Safety for Kids | GCFGlobal | This tutorial is designed for any parent or guardian who wants to learn how to keep their kids safe online. You may want to review their Internet Safety tutorial first so you'll have a basic understanding of online safety. |
| Cyber Women Curriculum | CyberWomen | The guide is geared towards both professional trainers and those who want to learn how to train others on their digital protection, and include gender considerations as they do so. It is made up of training modules, interactive games, recommendations for evaluating the training, as well as audio-visual and graphic materials as instructional aids. There are some recommendations about which modules to use for different learning levels, time and contexts. |

Annex 4: Partners & Tools

- Dataminr
- AiFluence
- Crowdtangle
- Wasafiri