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13 April 2015 – The [World Food Programme](#) (WFP) reports that it has teamed up with [Global Pulse](#)

– the flagship innovation initiative of the UN Secretary-General on big data – to analyse how data from mobile phone usage could support networks in fighting hunger and boosting humanitarian response efforts.

“This is a new frontier for humanitarian assistance,” says Arif Husain, WFP Chief Economist.

Using big data to understand vulnerability patterns

Last week, the findings of research projects were presented at the *Netmob Conference for Scientific Analysis of Mobile Phone Data* at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

These projects included e.g. a method to quantify population mobility patterns in relation to the agricultural and livelihood cycles in Senegal, as well as a new method for estimating household expenditures on food based on mobile phone spending patterns in Africa.

“As agencies begin adopting these new techniques, information collection will become cheaper and faster, making relief programmes much more responsive to the needs of hungry poor worldwide,” Mr Husain states.

Particular emphasis is placed on the ‘real-time’ aspect of these techniques. As opposed to traditional data sources – e.g. face-to-face surveys or satellite imagery – mobile phone records allow analyses to be made in near real-time and at very low cost.

What is the background to this development?

Global Pulse: harnessing data safely and responsibly as public good

“New technologies are leading to an exponential increase in the volume and types of data available, creating unprecedented possibilities for improving humanitarian aid,” said Global Pulse Deputy Director Makena Walker.

The mission of Global Pulse is to adopt big data innovation for sustainable development and humanitarian action. Doing so, the initiative recognises the opportunity that digital data offers to gain a better understanding of changes in human well-being, and to get real-time feedback on how well policy responses are working.

Working with these data also entails being aware of its pitfalls, and Ms Walker stresses that

“protecting people’s privacy is of utmost concern as we develop these new approaches.”

Once anonymized to protect such privacy, big data insights can guide the public sector to respond more effectively to emerging crises and vulnerabilities.

More information

To learn more about Global Pulse, discover more on its various projects [here](#) or watch the explanatory video below!