Digital case management tools for social workers: friend or foe?
Tdh and digital case management tools

- Leading Swiss child relief agency
- Member of the CPWG’s Case Management Taskforce
- CM “component” in a majority of our delegations / protection projects
- Emergency to development contexts
- Various “digital tools” for CM have been used for dozens of years: CPIMS, Excel, Access…
- Since 2006: development of digital CM tools in several countries
- 2011-2013: attempt to develop a standardized CM tool within Tdh
- Since 2013: multiplication of national/regional co-initiatives
- 2016: benchmarking exercise led by HQ
Perception of digital CM tools (i)

- From a danger…to the “magic solution answering all CM issues”
- A large diversity of needs/expectations within all our contexts and all our types of users (limited common trends)
- A belief - in a field perspective - that a tool embedding hundreds of features is needed (and possible!)
- Discrepancies between:
  - context oriented tool vs. harmonized tool within the organization / country / whole protection sector
  - a tool mainly dedicated to management / IM / coordination issues vs. in support of day to day work of SW
  - full digital / mobile system vs. keeping (some) paper tools
  - a tool designed to be open to other stakeholders (services provider, link with other sectorial databases…) vs. only dedicated to Tdh staff
  - embedding or not features allowing child participation
  - with “automatic” settings for risk calculation vs. keeping perception
Perception of digital CM tools (ii)

- A need to have some complementary “specific modules” such as:
  - Child migration mapping
  - Foster families
  - ...

- A focus on digital tool whereas harmonization of CM approaches and capacity building of frontline SW are most of time limited

- A strong focus on data protection and data sharing protocol issues (NGO responsibilities) whereas the final users \((usager)\) perspective aren’t really taken into consideration
What about “developed countries”? (i)
Some feedback from French context

- Despite implementation of dozens of tools dedicated to SW, strong and dedicated legislation, existence of regulatory bodies…

- There is still not consensus about digitalization of SW and the debate is still vigorous

Ex: April 2016 – call for boycott and demonstration of social workers following deployment of a new software (GASPER) in Seine Maritime

- Advantages of digitalization of SW seem to have been proven:
  - increase of efficiency
  - capacity to provide a global picture
  - better coordination and collaborative team work
  - allows a greater hindsight etc.
What about “developed countries” ? (ii)
Some feedback from French context

- Observed issues
  - No respect of professional secrecy
  - Absence of consent of final users
  - Non respect of “right to be forgotten”

- Observed/perceived risks
  - Dehumanization of social services
  - Lack of time dedicated to people in need (increase of reporting time)
  - Mechanization and automatization of social work
  - Violation of privacy
  - “fichage” / policing of final users
  - Lack of update of original data (frozen data)
  - driving of social work through “financial and outputs management”
  - Effort concentration on “quantifiable” work,
  - Temptation to use data for personal predicative forecast

- Within some services, it should be noted that allowing access to the final user of data appears to be a good “safeguard”
Some questions which need to be addressed (i)

- Is digitalization of social work processes (which are based on relationship and listening) feasible?
- Is social work really standardizable?
- How could the risk of over-simplification be overcome?
  - Each “final user” and its story is singular vs. need for categorization
  - Observation of subjective topics vs. “arbitrary and fixed boxes without any nuance”
  - Difficulty of modelization: “social work can’t be modeled” [and request] ambiguity, incertitude, complexity, unpredictability [which can’t be informatized]

- How could biases in the relationship with children created by digital tools be overcome?

- Is digitalization a “wrong solution” for insufficiently trained or unskilled social workers? For non-formalized/non-mastered/non-applicated social approaches/protocols?
Some questions which need to be addressed (ii)

- Is digitalization encouraging a too quantitative and statistic approach of social work? A too administrative approach of social work?

- Is digitalization just a “false proof” of efficiency and seriousness (of a highly complex work) for organization in need of donors/public accountability?

- How such digital tools could be used by organizations having not strict data policies implemented and followed?

- How such digital tools could be used within countries where there are limited “safeguards” : absence of legislation or with limited implementation, absence or powerless regulatory body (such as CNIL) or ethics committee, absence or powerless organization representing final users or social workers or etc.

- How to take into consideration the place of the final user in the tool? How, in our context, can they access their data?
Some ideas how to move forward (i)

- To systematically evaluate and ensure that right conditions are met before introducing any ICT tool (e.g. readiness tool developed by Tdh)
  - Needs and relevance of project/activities
  - Operating context: national/local child protection system, CM procedures/processes, ICT infrastructure, do no harm…
  - SW capacities and attitudes: CM understanding, CM practices, SW skills, ICT literacy, volume of cases by SW…
  - Organizational support and resources: management and technical support, material, modalities of design/adaptation of the tools, existing capacity building, existing of roll out plan of the tool…
Some ideas how to move forward (ii)

- To avoid that SW suffer from the tool / are too much passive into ICT development / feel “dominated by the technology”
- SW need to keep the control of their digital tools (instead of IM specialist or manager)
- To focus digital tool developments on SW needs (reminders, support to follow up, family approach…) rather than IM ones (dashboards, reporting…)
- To integrate more ethics reflections into the development (ethics committee, electronic record charter, use research findings etc.)
- To perceive ICT tool as not something replacing “existing” practices but as complementary tool (in a global ranger of tool)
- To never perceive the use of digital tool as an end in itself but keep monitoring CM outcomes and impact!
Thanks for your attention!