ICT for peace foundation

DRAFT

Notes from 7th November 2008 planning group discussion on taking forward Crisis Information Management development at the UN

- The planning meeting was organised by the Office of the UN CITO and the ICT4Peace Foundation and and chaired by Dr. Soon-Hong Choi, UN CITO, following the 2nd High-Level Meeting on Crisis Information Management at the United Nations, the same day co-hosted by Swiss Ambassador Maurer and Dr. Soon-Hong Choi to discuss the findings of the Interim stock-taking report on crisis information management, conducted by the ICT4Peace Foundation, and the recommendations of the 8 July working group meeting.

- All participants noted the need to break down walls – policies and practices – that impeded information flows in the UN system.

- UNICEF commended the stocktaking report, endorsed the recommendations and said a comprehensive work-plan was needed to realise better crisis information management. Practical problems could and needed to be dealt with in parallel to the development of institutional policy and deliverables needed to be identified.

- Others concurred and said milestones needed to be identified as markers of progress that could be independently audited, and that pressure and intervention from high-level policymakers needed to backstop practical action to strengthen crisis information management.

- Some participants said that integration with the UN's Delivering as One initiative could help mainstream crisis information management.

- The need for timely, accurate and verified information to feed into decision-making process was reiterated. Equally important was, as some noted, the need to give information and analysis to actors – e.g. local NGOs – outside the UN, to combat the perception of the UN as an entity only interested in taking information, with no reciprocal benefit for NGOs involved in crisis mitigation, prevention and recovery.

- Participants noted that crisis information management was integral to disaster preparedness, early recovery and post-crisis development.

- It was noted that besides from OCHA, UNDP, UNICEF the two UN USGs fom DPKO and DFS were supportive of improving crisis information management.

- The disconnect between the rule and standard setting mechanisms at the Secretariat level and the policies and practices at the field level were noted by some as possibly vitiating crisis information management at an institutional level.

- In response, others noted that walls impeding information sharing were higher at the Secretariat level than in the field and that in the field, often out of sheer necessity, it was easier to break down the silos and walls.

- The issue of information security and confidentiality was raised. Participants were not clear as to what rules governed the confidentiality of information produced in the UN, and present for example on agency intranets.

- In response, some said that all information produced should be by default non-classified with a more rigorous classification system (meta level descriptions) developed to aid information sharing within and between agencies and beyond the UN.

- The problem of information analysis during a crisis was reiterated at the meeting, with participants noting that it was difficult for some sources to admit that they did not have information regarding the crisis, or that what information they had was unreliable. Crisis information management systems needed to classify more rigorously information received and collected from the field and other sources in order to aid better analysis and decision making.

- In response to the need to create trust and verify information coming in from multiple streams, some asked how the UN was going to deal with the growth of Web 2.0 and social networking. In response, some said that the UN data needed to move into the cloud as opposed to the walled garden approach of individual agencies that maintain their own distinct intranets and databases. Trust and information of data in the cloud, it was perceived, could be facilitate more easily than proprietary systems scattered around agencies.

- Many said that even though the top level management agreed with much, if not all of what was being discussed and in the stocktaking report, including the need to strengthen crisis information management, middle level management often resisted such moves.

- In response, others said that it was important to recognise the vertical and horizontal information sharing that already occurred between individuals across and within agencies. Trust relationships between individuals often resulted in the use of email or even public web services such as Gmail, social networking platforms such as Facebook and collaborative document management platforms such as Google Docs to exchange critical information during a crisis – transcending restrictive or non-existent information sharing policies and practices of respective agencies. While this could be seen as positive, the *ad hoc* nature of these information sharing mechanisms and that fact that they only existed for as long as the individuals were tasked with responding to the same crisis were seen as significant problems.

- Participants noted that this is why institutional policies and practices governing interoperability were vital. A two pronged approach was proposed – one to develop a crisis information management system demonstrator (e.g. a working model) and another track to develop high-level policies that could be put into practice at the UN to facilitate crisis information management.

- Participants noted that there were already tools in this regard that should be looked into. OCHA said that in collaboration with Microsoft, a tool that addressed many of the challenges noted in the UN crisis information management stocktaking report was already in the process of being developed and would be released by the end of 2008. Others also pointed to

systems and tools they were using (e.g. OASIS by UNDP, DevINFO) that could be leveraged in the development of a crisis information management system. Leveraging existing systems and adding value was seen as better than development a crisis information management system from scratch.

- Participants also noted that the UN should look into the creation of a composite database of hardware and software vendors working with UN agencies through preferential agreements – e.g. Microsoft, CISCO, ESRI, Google. The cost savings through the harmonisation of preferential agreements could, some pointed, be significant for the UN as a whole and also help in the development of a common software and hardware platforms to backstop crisis information management policies and practices.

- A two-day retreat in Glen Cove in late January 2009 was proposed by Dr. Choi, the UN's CITO, as a way to discuss in more detail the issues involved in crisis information management, engineer detailed strategies to deal with the challenges and identify projects that could bear early harvests. It was proposed that the group assembled around the table and those invited to the discussion could meet in December to plan for this high-level retreat.

- Ambassador Maurer from Switzerland supported this approach to work on policies and practices at the UN to strengthen crisis information management and said that transparency and accountability engendered by crisis information management was also as important aspect for member states at the UN. Successful projects that built confidence in information sharing he felt was vital in mainstreaming crisis information management.

- Participants noted that crisis information management could be easier to foster with individuals actually involved in, or with significant experience in crisis response, mitigation and prevention. More difficult they said would be to engage those at a policy level with no direct experience of dealing with the intricacies of a sudden onset disaster or complex political emergency.

- Others responded by noting that it was important to define the areas and issues crisis information management was anchored to.

- Participants agreed that quick wins and examples of low hanging fruit could greatly help in convincing more sceptical colleagues and high-level management on the need to strengthen crisis information management.

- The group agreed that it was important to factor in feedback to the stocktaking exercise from the WFP, ITU, WHO, UNHCR and WMO.

- The ICT4Peace Foundation agreed to support the UN and tabled a work-plan and future steps, including the development of a demonstrator that was in principle endorsed by the group.