



UN Crisis Information Management Advisory Group (CiMAG) Meeting

**19 May 2011 8:00 – 10:00 am
Hotel Royal – Geneva**

Participants of CiMAG meeting

- David Kaatrud, WFP
- Andrew Alspach, OCHA
- Kimberly Roberson, UNHCR
- Shelley Gornall, UNHCR
- Sanjana Hattotuwa, ICT4Peace
- Barbara Weekes, ICT4Peace
- Daniel Stauffacher, ICT4Peace, Chair

Introduction

Along with and for the development of the UN Crisis Information Management Strategy (CiMS), the UN ASG/CITO established the CiMAG, which meets bi-annually to discuss issues related to CiMS (data architecture, technology development, stake-holder management and capacity building). Dr. Soon-hong Choi, ASG (and UN CITO) requested ICT4Peace to organize a CiMAG meeting to coincide with the WSIS 2011 Forum in Geneva. This year's thematic workshop at WSIS 2011 Forum on 18 May organized by the ICT4Peace Foundation was 'Mainstreaming Crisis Mappers and Social Media in Crisis' (see background note for the panel discussion at thematic workshop in Annex I). This meeting was webcast live also on the Internet. See the tweet archive and related blog post with link to archive of live video of the event - <http://ict4peace.org/updates/thematic-workshop-at-wsis-forum-2011-mainstreaming-crisis-mappers-and-social-media-in-crisis>.

Speakers at WSIS 2011 Forum thematic workshop were: Tom de Groot, EC Joint Research Center, Andreas Wigger, ICRC, David Kaatrud, WFP, Andrew Alspach, UN OCHA, Kimberly Roberson, UNHCR, Sanjana Hattotuwa, ICT4Peace Foundation and TED Fellow with Daniel Stauffacher, ICT4Peace Foundation as the panel's Moderator.

The main points made by the panellists at the thematic workshop included that UN agencies now note web based social networks and ICTs were an integral part of their operations, including content from Twitter and Facebook. Stressing the need for accountability, many suggested that new tools and mobiles significantly empower affected communities to help themselves and each other after a disaster. Challenges regarding adoption and adaptation were also raised for consideration including that it is not always easy to use new technologies in a crisis situation. A key driver of the UN CiM process supported by the ICT4Peace Foundation – the availability of Common Operations Datasets (CODs) – was also underscored by panellists, who said that not all data was the same, and noted that how best to collect, analyse, visualise data as well as categorise it remained key challenges for the UN system as well as other crisis mapping actors. Panellists also brought out a gendered critique of new technologies, suggesting that it was important to look at who actually owned and had access to ICTs that could be of use post-disaster as well as for disaster preparedness.

Panellists stressed the issue of accountability and the responsibility to assess new ICT tools and platforms from the perspectives of the disaster affected community, with humility and eschewing what is a tendency amongst some actors in a humanitarian response work to take credit for when things go right, and disavow responsibility for when expectations are not met.

It is critical to recognize that no technology can replace a physical presence on the ground. Humanitarian work requires a needs assessment on the ground, which is a pre-requisite for any effective action and assistance work. ICT can assist in terms of providing open channels of communication with all parties to a conflict; it can help to improve self-protection; it can improve the analysis of humanitarian problems, needs and responses; it can complement written and oral representations of a given conflict / crisis; it can promote humanitarian services and improve the safety of humanitarian workers. However, the humanitarian community must also recognise the vulnerability of victims and that persons in need may also be targeted via the use of ICT.

It was recognized that a major hurdle for the effective management of information, in particular in light of the plethora of data from social media and mapping, is institutional and no longer technical. How to break down communication barriers within institutions, between institutions and with the wider humanitarian community? Most institutions have vertical information management systems. It is imperative to now focus on building horizontal linkages within and amongst organizations.

Finally, how do we harness technology and integrate it effectively into governance mechanisms within organizations? How can we turn information into sensible and timely action? There was also agreement that IGOs now have a responsibility to provide guidance to the crowdsourcing community:

- What criteria for information?
- What kind of data sets do responders need?
- What are key pieces of data?

Main Discussion points of the CiMAG meeting on 19th May 2011

Pegged to the points enumerated around the table, the Foundation also raised some critical questions during the meeting. The notes below reflect both the submissions by the panellists as well as the critical commentary by ICT4Peace, reflecting challenges, concerns and potential opportunities enumerated in other reports authored by the Foundation on crowdsourcing, crisis-mapping and crisis information management.

1. Granularity of information is key, so that it is data that is exposed, not only interpreted. This makes it easier to compare and contrast different models, visualisation and understandings of a situation, process or place. This happens when underlying data is known and sources traced. This is why CODs are very important.
2. Social media should be used to help communities map their situation for themselves; a strong *leitmotif* of empowerment present both at the WSIS panel discussion and at the CiMAG meeting. The importance of ensuring that social media have a positive and practical impact on affected communities and response operations was emphasised.
3. There is a real need to ensure data protection and privacy, while at the same time share very personal information in a positive way. This represents huge challenges for humanitarian organizations.
4. Does mapping increase risk? Some contested the assumption that more information in the public domain is good, when in fact less but quality can be more useful. What is often missing was the community's involvement in determining the nature of and extent to which information that concerns them is gathered, used and disseminated. Architecting this is very challenging.
5. Accountability was another overarching theme during the discussions. There is a need to look at work done in the areas of accountability framework / information sharing / participatory approaches / developing staff competencies / complaints handling / learning and evaluation including learning from failure and sharing failure. Donors need to be brought into this dialogue.
6. In terms of information-sharing, the ongoing need for horizontal linkages and the continued fight against silos, even in IASC process, was clear throughout the discussion. Important to note is that there is less fear 1) to share pure data, instead of processed data or information and 2) to share that data at a lower level within the organization. The importance of capturing information once was also stressed. Some noted the potential for the cross-fertilisation of datasets once CODs came on tap. What is the incentive to use, and indeed, regularly update this information? Is it management directives, perceived benefit / value or a combination of both?

7. Technology is the easy part, getting people understanding, using, trained and motivated to provide information to the systems is the challenge.
8. Clear triggers for volunteer task force still missing. There are hidden costs, which for OCHA are around \$10,000 a month based on Libya crisis map exercise. This needs to be analyzed before committing resources, both time and financial. Cost benefit analysis including assessment of the impact (if any) of the Libya crisis map needs to be done in order to assess if this kind of map should be rolled out for every new emergency. Is it worth it?
9. Analysis was repeatedly mentioned as necessary. Real time or post-facto analytical tools embryonic at best. Without analysis correlation and causality are impossible to measure. Also need baseline data – not available most of the time.
10. Some talked about every employee having the ability to create a map (e.g. part of office toolset). This could create problems in terms of accuracy, time management and data collection. Some remain unconvinced that a hundred more maps produced by UN agencies will increase their operational capabilities. This also relies on the assumption of information visualisation leading to action. Again, what is the incentive?
11. Need of risk management, and the need for SWOT analysis also taking into account new media within and outside agencies. Senior management is picking up the ball on new media. Ironically, when in 2008 the ICT4Peace Foundation was struggling to raise awareness of new media, now it's greatest challenge is to peg agencies to a more robust understanding and reflection of its use, applications, potential for abuse and limitations. Several key challenges remain in terms of mobilizing understanding and commitment of leadership: 1) how to turn information into an analytical product that is usable for decision-maker? 2) How to get leadership more interested and aware of the importance of the operational level, which is streets ahead?
12. Some made the point that some actors may feel at risk due to the sharing, availability and transmission of information via new media, and noted that the social media present a similar evolutionary challenge to large organisations as when e-mail replaced fax and telex machines.
13. Some also emphasised the importance of ensuring that IM is perceived as an important supporting element of humanitarian intervention, rather than the humanitarian intervention itself.
14. Finally, participants felt that this is a time of opportunity in terms of encouraging agencies to collaborate and work together on these issues.

Annex I

Background note for the WSIS 2011 Forum thematic workshop discussion

ICT is a huge enabler and source of empowerment, allowing individuals to take some, albeit limited, control of their own destiny within the chaotic framework of a crisis, natural disaster or post-conflict situation. From the SMS/text messages from the Haitian earthquake zone and refugees in Darfur to Rwandan farmers checking grain prices on-line, ICT provides a tool with which individuals can share and obtain information. In some cases this can mean the difference between life and death, economic survival or abject poverty. In turn, the compilation of all these pieces of data on crowd-sourcing platforms and other databases provides an overall picture of a given situation, which can be very useful to humanitarian responders and governments in times of crises, war, conflict and state-building.

Approaching humanitarian relief, with an increasing emphasis on ICT, brings with it hope for a better future but at the same time significant challenges. How can the humanitarian community and other actors physically assess the mountains of data that come in? What steps does the humanitarian community need to take in order to manage this process? How can the accuracy of the information coming into a given platform be validated, in particular in conflict situations where misinformation is often used as a weapon? How can individuals in conflict situations, who provide valuable information, be protected?

Another important series of issues also need to be discussed about the responsibility and role of technology providers. What responsibility do technology platform providers have? What happens when collected information cannot be acted on? How can the links between the information gathering and implementation be improved? How can responders ensure that new systems uphold the “do no harm” principle of the humanitarian community? What criteria exist, or should exist, for ICT providers (including crisis mappers and social media) to determine which crises they should address or “map”?

At the end of the day, the question remains as to whether or not we will be able to use improved ICT in such a way so as to significantly improve the situation for affected communities in crises. Does increased ICT ability and use really mean progress and reduced loss of life? To date, the jury is out but at a minimum new technology provides an opportunity to re-think how we respond to crises, how we prepare communities for disasters and we manage conflict and post-conflict situations.