Peace IT!

Using ICTs to prevent, manage and resolve crises · 1/2006

Early Warning and Response

Sri Lankan Foundation for Co-Existence (FCE) is running a pioneering early warning and response system in the war torn Eastern Provinces of Sri Lanka with the aid of ICTs. What makes it really dynamic is the simultaneous involvement of grassroots level early warning and early response with the use of advanced technology. See page 2.

In this issue:

Welcome

Welcome to the first edition of Peace IT!, journal for conflict and crisis management professionals. The journal introduces how ICTs can be used effectively to prevent, manage and resolve crisis to the benefit of peace and security.

The Crisis Management Initiative (CMI) has worked to establish greater awareness and understanding among different actors on the role that ICT can play in supporting the fulfilment of political mandates. CMI also looks at how decision-makers, governments, NGOs, international organisations and the private sector can ensure connectivity and adequate information sharing.

As a strategic peacebuilding organisation, CMI recognises the added value of ICTs in peace and security and through Peace IT! wants to highlight the good practises in the field and to further contribute to the community of practise.

We warmly thank the ICT4Peace Foundation for its financial and substantive support in producing this Journal.

In this issue of Peace IT! we focus on conflict and crisis management NGOs and how they make use of ICTs in their everyday work. Sanjana Hattotuwa from Sri Lankan InfoShare raises two crucial issues: hope and human emotions, which at first probably do not seem to have much to do with ICTs, but are in the centre of ICT for peacebuilding. In another article about Sri Lanka you can read how a simple SMS can lead to political action among high-level actors. This issue of Peace IT! also features upcoming events, learning initiatives and reports.

Peace IT! encourages discussion, exchange of information and ideas. We would like to invite you to be part of this debate, getting inspired by innovations and good practises and inspiring others with your work. If you have information on case studies, events or good practises, don't hesitate to contact us.

Rob Watson
Director, Conflict Prevention and Crisis Response Programme
Crisis Management Initiative

From SMS to political action

– Early Warning and Early Response in Sri Lanka

Sri Lankan Foundation for Co-Existence (FCE) is running a pioneering early warning and response system in the war torn Eastern Provinces of Sri Lanka with the aid of ICTs. The project effectively combines staff based in the region with motor bikes and handphones, with a computerised system for data input, analysis and dissemination (the Swiss FAST System).

The analysis generated is so reliable it is used by decision-makers across the board for up-to-the-hour information. What makes this initiative really dynamic is the simultaneous involvement of grassroots-level early warning and early response - with the use of advanced technology.

FCE operates on the basis of a strong belief that in order to truly achieve conflict prevention we must seek to build coexistence. Learning to live together and to accept difference is key to achieving sustainable human security and remains a major challenge. FCE is an attempt to respond to that challenge.

Sri Lanka has a long and painful history of violent inter-ethnic and civil war. Since 1983 the country has been in a state of violent conflict, when tensions between the Sinhalese majority and Tamil separatists erupted into war. Twenty years of fighting followed, in which tens of thousands died. In 2002 a cease-fire was agreed between the Government of Sri Lanka and the Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), but violations have been frequent and the situation is deteriorating.

In response to this ongoing conflict, the Foundation for Coexistence began its work in the Eastern Province of Sri Lanka in 2003 with the goal of developing an early warning and early response mechanism. This is an experimental effort to integrate early warning and early response into a common framework.

The early warning system has three main components. The foundation of the system is a **community-based network** made up of coexistence committees, peace committees and zonal committees at the grassroots level. The 610 volunteers involved represent different ethnic groups (Tamils, Muslims and Sinhalese), religious leaders, women and youth organizations. At the same time they monitor and identify the peace and conflict indicators and serve as a mechanism for implementing early action at the local level.

Secondly, the Early Warning system consists of **20 field monitors** equipped with mobile phones and motorbikes. These monitors are local members of the communities they represent and are based in the conflict region to monitor the ground situation through peace and conflict indicators. They report on it daily by phone, sms or email to the Information Centre based in the capital. They also collect the information through a network of contacts at a community level.

Information received includes minor altercations between two people of different ethnic groups that may result in a full-blown conflict (an example would include an accident between a Tamil taxi driver and a Muslim cyclist-

FCE Early Warning system
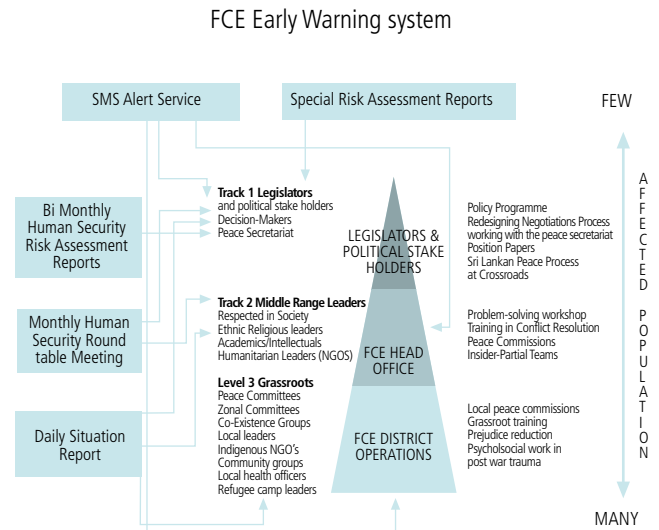
a situation like this could give rise to communal tension). Interestingly, collaborative or peace initiatives are also reported. The officers monitor the national and local press, radio and television media coverage because some events that take place in other parts of the country may affect the situation in the East and vice versa.

At the Information Centre – the third component of the early warning – the information is then collated and entered into the FAST system. Once credibility has been verified, FCE disseminates the information to a network of decision makers, and if necessary, takes action through a Rapid Response mechanism. The dissemination of information is implemented through advocacy programme, which includes producing daily, monthly and quarterly reports and holding monthly roundtable discussions with multilateral agencies.

The FCE early response mechanism is driven by a network of stakeholders that include the field monitors, co-existence committees, peace committees, zonal committees, humanitarian agencies, government agencies, the security establishment, non-governmental organisations, local authorities, religious organisations and victims of violence. Through this response mechanism, these stakeholders have been brought together to work collaboratively to formulate and implement early responses when tensions increase and there is a heightened potential for violence. Many of these stakeholders are involved in gathering and disseminating information. These networks have enhanced the capacity for conflict prevention in the districts.

The value of this innovative system is proven by a range of actors in the peace process in Sri Lanka, including government officials, peace monitors and embassy staff. This system is exemplary in its approach and provides a highly relevant and cost effective model that could be adapted to other needs in conflicts around the world.

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Sanjana is the Head of ICT and Peacebuilding Unit at InfoShare, Sri Lankan NGO based in Colombo.

ICTs Creating Hope
Interview with Sanjana Hattotuwa

CMI: How does the use of ICTs help you in your peace work in Sri Lanka?

Sanjana: In a conflict situation, as in Sri Lanka, fear and polarisation close down the space for the exchange of ideas. We use ICTs to open up space for expressing different options, alternatives, to amplify positive voices and thereby support the resolution of conflict. We are creating networks of collaboration that go far beyond the traditional email lists or websites, to create workspaces where information can be shared with key partners irrespective of where they are in the world and how they connect to the internet

CMI: Where do you see the difference between the use of ICTs for conflict management and other ICT-driven sectors?

Sanjana: For me the central essence of ICT for peacebuilding is the creation of hope using technology to support a peace process. Hope is not a result of the technology itself, but can be engendered in the hearts and minds of those involved in a peace process with the use of technology. The use of ICT in the context of peacebuilding enables marginalised actors to participate more fully in peacebuilding processes.

What results is that, more than any other ICT driven sector, ICT for peacebuilding addresses challenging and rapidly changing human emotions, which are an inextricable part of a peace process. This emotional quotient constitutes a radical new challenge to complex systems design - since as anyone familiar with a peace process will testify, it is bedevilled by sudden and unexpected changes in the actors and factors driving the process.

CMI: What first inspired you to use ICTs in your work - how has it made a difference?

Sanjana: Many mature theories of conflict transformation were developed before the information age. Today's world of connectivity enables the flow of information and knowledge in ways unimaginable even a few years ago.

No longer are news services cut off from the frontlines of conflict. Citizens with mobile phones are the new reporters of our information age. The web is ubiquitous. I was interested in how these developments could engender a radical revision in the way peace processes are designed and implemented. I wanted to find out how peace processes could be strengthened in countries such as Sri Lanka, how they could be made more resilient to the mercurial actions of political leaders and non-state actors, how they could be more reflective of the ideas, fears and aspirations of ordinary citizens, how they could bring in the voices of youth and children, how they could empower women and other marginalised voices to play a fuller role in conflict transformation.

CMI: How do ICTs help in ordinary people's lives? Can you give concrete examples of where you have seen the benefits?

Sanjana: ICTs don't just help empower those with access to the devices that facilitate access to the web and Internet. Used appropriately, ICTs can also help communities that will never use such devices in their lives, by the creation of accountable, transparent and responsive systems of governance that uplift the standards of life for all communities, irrespective of how well connected they are to the web and internet.

CMI: What are some of the challenges with using technology in a place like Sri Lanka (particularly due to poverty, human limitations and organisational dynamics), and how do you try to overcome these? What lessons can we learn?

Sanjana: The first lesson in the use of ICTs is the degree of humility one needs to avoid what I would call a collateral arrogance that can take over - leading one to affirm on flimsy evidence that ICTs are a panacea for the problems facing the country at any given time.

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There are many dangers associated with the assumption that greater internet access and more PCs will automatically result in empowered communities.

ICTs cannot magically liberate people, alleviate poverty, erase the 'digital divide', and ensure prosperity. In planning for and using ICTs, many countries often concentrate on the intervention itself, rather than what they want to accomplish with it. It must be remembered that ICT is a means to an end, not an end in itself. Many social activists online suffer from the myopia of believing in short-term social change initiatives automatically resulting in longer-term social change.

Transforming information to knowledge requires context. Context requires education and the ability to discern bias. Wisdom and knowledge are not features of technology- our digital age is an age of information, not knowledge. More knowledge is still to be found in good library than on the internet or web. More wisdom is found in the tale of a village elder than from all of Google combined.

CMI: How do you extend the impact of your work to majority of people in Sri Lanka that don't have access to the internet and computers?

Sanjana: Expanding access must take into account the complex web of human relations. Constructing a cyber-café or internet resource centre in contested geographies requires acute knowledge of local conditions, ethnic sensitivities and other causes of conflict. New Media and the Internet offer unique opportunities to bypass the language, cultural, social and economic rights that have been denied and directly speak to constituencies. Expanding access through mobile phones promotes a very large footprint within which a variety of devices can transmit information in support of human rights, a key support mechanism in an active peace process. These large footprint internet access technologies allow for a qualitative improvement of communication as well, since expansion must not only be seen in light of the increased numbers of people who use the internet. These democratic dialogues are the bedrock of a vibrant polity and society. Rather than rely on the communication mediated by biased politicians and political architectures, blogs (blogger.com), collaborative photo albums (flickr.com) websites that capture oral histories, community mediated news platforms form the pulse of communities alienated from mainstream process of governance. We see real-life examples of the power of expanded access to communication and information in the use of mobile phones in the Philippines, where those in support of democracy used SMSs to overthrow an authoritarian regime.

CMI: How do you see the way international organisations and donors are supporting the use of technology? What lessons can we learn and how can it be improved?

Sanjana: My experience with international organisations is that there is a slow but steady acknowledgement that ICTs need to be mainstreamed into peacebuilding. Closely coupled with the short-sighted nature of most donor funding, initiatives that seek to scale up pilot ICT projects often fail on account of the paucity of funds. Sustained, committed and imaginative funding is required for ICT4Peace and related ICT initiatives in support of democracy, development and governance to succeed in the long term. While the case for sustained, long-term and committed funding is often made, the case for imagination isn't as well articulated. And yet what we often find is that even when donors seek to implement ICT frameworks in countries such as Sri Lanka, they do so with models that are an ill-fit to local cultures and socio-political dynamics. This oftentimes results in a plethora of pilot projects that only run for the duration of project funding, but die an ignoble death soon after funding dries up.

In sum, more money needs to be made available for the research and development of ICT frameworks in support of peace and democracy. This requires that donors and international organisations engage with social innovation and innovators in the Global South as partners - a symbiosis between what has been done in the Global North and the wealth of imagination that exists in the Global South can be a powerful social change agent, lending support to ideas that can empower communities and help them better engage with the technologies that define their lives in the future.

CMI: How do you see the future of ICTs in conflict and crisis management, what will the priorities and challenges be in coming years?

Sanjana: In terms of systems design, we are not even scratching the surface of what is possible today. Today, even the ubiquitous SMS can play a role in democracy. Low cost mesh networks can bring messages to and from communities at the front-lines of conflict. Very large footprint wireless internet access frameworks such as WiMax help bring the power of broadband internet to even the remotest locations, enabling conversations with stakeholders and communities (through technology such as Skype) fertilise the peace process even when there is political deadlock.

Mobiles play a key role here. More people in the Global South have mobiles than they have PCs. Mobiles are now second only to radios in their coverage and accessibility. From SMS broadcasts - with region specific messages in the vernacular to prevent, mitigate or transform violence – to mobile video, the spectrum of use for mobiles in peacebuilding is only limited by one's imagination.

Much more than information I am concerned with that ephemeral construct - knowledge. How does one produce, capture, store, analyse and disseminate knowledge in meaningful ways in a peace process? This is a central challenge. The need to support small initiatives is one that is vital to the development of ICTs for peacebuilding, which is as much about the networking of smaller initiatives and a concert of activities in support of peace as it is about envisioning the large macro-level systems that can nourish smaller networks.

CMI: Thank you.

For the full podcasted interview, see www.itcm.org

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# Linking up Lebanon
- Télécoms Sans Frontières operation

Télécoms Sans Frontières (TSF), an emergency relief crew for international disasters, is now working in Lebanon to help refugees and NGOs to communicate.

The team arrived in Beirut on Wednesday 9 August, crossing from Cyprus to the capital Beirut on board the ship 'Rainbow Warrior', which is owned by Greenpeace and has been charted by Médecins sans Frontieres.

On arrival, the team made use of logistic support provided by Ericsson, in particular for the installation of TSF's emergency base in Beirut. Since 20 July, TSF has been in constant communication with the United Nations, thus it has been possible for team to immediately begin the evaluation process of refugee camps in Beirut. The needs of internally displaced people from the south of the country, now numbering over 900,000, are enormous. In the refugee camp of Senaweh (East of Beirut) the telephone operations for international calls began in mid-August. Equipped with mobile satellite apparatus, this telecom centre helps 1,000 refugees keep in touch with friends and family.

TSF is in permanent contact with the UN agencies OCHA and UNICEF, present in Beirut. TSF is planning to deploy teams to the south of country, when security conditions permit.

Télécoms Sans Frontières is a humanitarian NGO specialised in emergency telecommunications. With its 24-hour monitoring centre and relying on its operational bases in Nicaragua and Thailand, TSF logistics workers and technical aid crews can intervene anywhere in the world less than 24 hours after the start of any catastrophe or a conflict and set up an operational centre on site in a matter of minutes.

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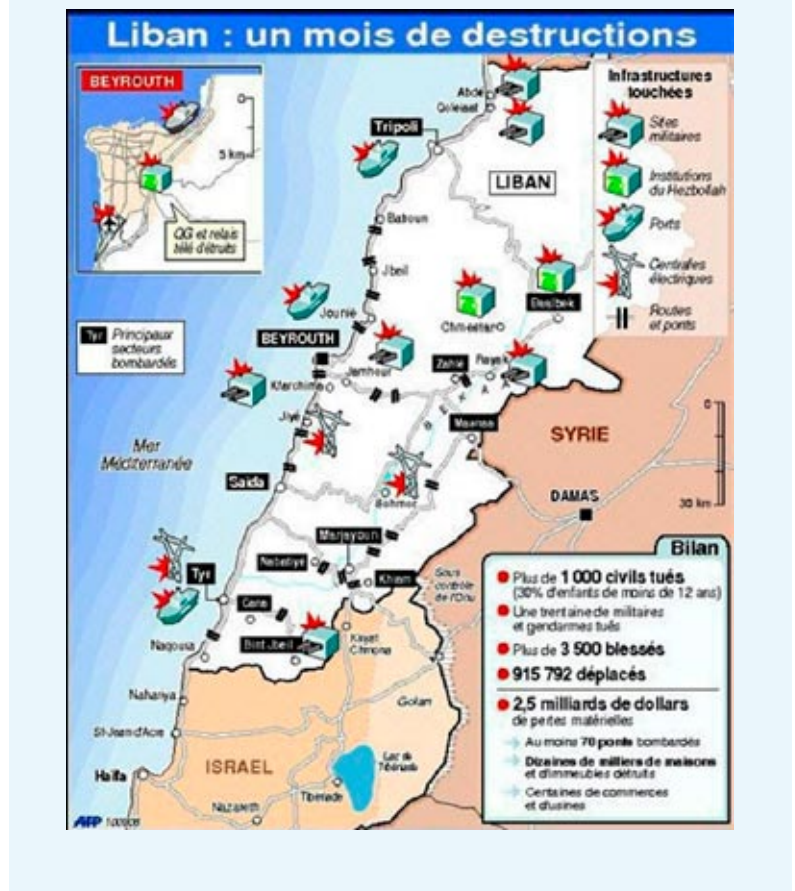
Safer Field Operations

Launching SIRS:
The Safety Information Reporting Service

SIRS is a concept for IT-enabled safety information reporting system for different actors in conflict situations worldwide. SIRS brings technical and networking expertise to support increased information sharing on security matters among actors in conflict situations in the field. It is a joint effort of NGOs, intergovernmental organisations, governments and the private sector.

Why SIRS?

Despite a sharp rise in deaths, hijacking and injury among the staff of humanitarian organisations, the routine gathering and sharing of information about imminent dangers is either non-existent or limited to specific organisations. Since 2001, CMI and the United States Institute of Peace have been bringing together international NGOs, IT experts and policy-makers to discuss how the use of technology could enhance inter-organizational collaboration and information sharing. Possibilities of launching SIRS were discussed at the conference in Saint-Paul-de-Vence, 11-14 December 2005 (see conference report: www.cmi.fi or www.itcm.org).

Focus and future plans?

SIRS acts as a hub of exchange and information for sharing good practices in the area of security information. Field assessments have been carried out in Afghanistan and Indonesia. CMI continues working on the development and deployment of SIRS.

Emergency Telecommunications Event, Jamaica, 26-28 September

A CTO and ITU Emergency Telecommunications event will be held in Jamaica, 26 - 28 September 2006, to enhance the region's disaster management strategy. Attendance at the event is free.

The Commonwealth Telecommunications Organisation and the International Telecommunication Union have organised the Using ICT for Effective Disaster Management Caribbean Forum 2006, which is supported by the Caribbean Association of National Telecommunication Organizations (CANTO) and hosted by the Jamaican Office of Utilities Regulation.

The event will take place between 26th & 28th September in Jamaica. The point of this 'call for action' is to provide the organisers with an opportunity to work with countries in the region for disaster prevention, preparedness and relief. This event will look at practical ways how disasters can be mitigated using Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs).

For more information visit:
www.itu.int/ITU-D/emergencytelecoms/index.html
and
http://www.cto.int/dmcaribbean/
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Report on the Role of ICT in Preventing, Responding to and Recovering from Conflict

The report "Information and Communication Technology for Peace: the role of ICT in preventing, responding to and recovering from conflict" by D. Stauffacher, W. Drake, P. Currion, and J. Steinberger, with a preface by UN Secretary Kofi Annan, published by Swiss ICT4Peace provides an overview of selected issues and initiatives in the field of ICTs in peacebuilding. It describes some of the leading organizations and programmes in the sector.

The report is not a definitive catalogue, but provides a good illustration of how ICTs are used in conflict prevention and management, humanitarian relief, and post-conflict peace building and reconstruction. Cross-cutting areas such as the use of internet, the role of media, technical development, networking and learning are also investigated. The report was published as part of the UN ICT Task Force Series.

The ICT4Peace project started in 2004, with the support of the Swiss Federal Departments of Foreign Affairs and Defense, Civil Protection and Sport, with the goal of investigating the relation between the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and peace in the context of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), Geneva 2003 - Tunis 2005.

To read the report see www.ict4peace.org

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Fahamu
- Learning for Change

Established in 1997, Fahamu (www.fahamu.org) provides training for human rights and social justice organisations in Africa. It aims to help them become sustainable, effective and vibrant organisations that are able to hold governments and policy makers to account, and to allow the voice of the most disadvantaged to be heard.

Fahamu's Learning for Change programme, originally developed with the University of Oxford, offers a wide range of courses for human rights and social justice organisations, including courses on investigating and reporting on human rights violations, conflict prevention, prevention of torture, fundraising, financial management and others.

Fahamu's distance-learning methodology, involving CDROMs, email-based facilitation and workshops, has been widely adopted by institutions such as the University of Oxford, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Article 19, the UN-affiliated University for Peace and others. The courses are also offered on a residential basis.

Fahamu publishes the weekly e-newsletter, Pambazuka News (www.pambazuka.org), which reaches over 100,000 people in Africa and internationally. It is the forum for human rights defenders and others working on social justice in Africa to share their ideas and experiences.

For more information please contact info@fahamu.org or visit the Fahamu website at http://www.fahamu.org.

CRISIS MANAGEMENT INITIATIVE
Building Bridges for Sustainable Security

ICT for peace

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