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Technology and peace: What's the connection?

In an ideal world, we'd all find the peace connection in whatever we do. One technologist hopes his group ICT4Peace can make a difference in world crises.

By [David Kirkpatrick](#), senior editor
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NEW YORK (Fortune) -- As 2008 gets underway we don't have peace. (Just look at this [depressing list](#) in Wikipedia of ongoing conflicts worldwide.) But Daniel Stauffacher doesn't get depressed. Instead he thinks technology can help. This entrepreneur and Swiss diplomat leads a recently-formed group called the [ICT for Peace Foundation](#), which aims to promote the latest digital and Internet tools for the people who truly need them most. (ICT stands for Information and Communication Technology.)

Geneva-based ICT4Peace, as it is known, is funded by the Swiss and Norwegian governments, along with private foundations, and has set itself a goal of improving the use of IT by the many groups working to alleviate humanitarian crises. It may seem a modest goal, compared to stopping war itself, but it is vexing enough.

While there are many humanitarian relief efforts underway around the world, Stauffacher says in most cases technology is not used effectively. The problem, he has concluded, is more often one of leadership than of a lack of technology itself. While standards for communicating data between groups are insufficient, on that technologists can make steady progress. The bigger challenge is making relief and peace groups want to use them to better collaborate in the field.

"The IT person has been telling the head of an operation what they could and couldn't know: 'We don't have that information,' or, 'There are no standards for sharing information.' But that's baloney!" he pronounced during a recent breakfast in New York. "This is a question of leadership - of the leader of a relief group determining what they need to know in a crisis situation. What are the human needs and who has what resources?"

But leaders of UN agencies and NGOs have typically not put much emphasis on IT. So ICT4Peace is putting a priority on educating them. In a crisis the UN, NGOs, and often military and business groups need to be able to communicate quickly about needs and how best to collaborate. Chaos typically reigns after a disaster or in a war zone. Relief often goes to the wrong places, and groups resist sharing information. Turf battles are common.

"But these turfs can be broken," says Stauffacher. "We need to name and shame. Perhaps we need something like a Moody's rating system - which could say, for example, this is an excellent NGO which is good at sharing information."

In the Web 2.0 age it's easy to imagine new ways for recipients and aid groups to better communicate, using cellphones, wikis, social networks, and other simple free tools. "Maybe you can have a feedback system for the recipients," says Stauffacher. "A kid in Darfur with a cellphone camera can go into a hospital and show that the supplies have not arrived, or that they sent outdated yogurt. And the old lady in the village who was supposed to get food or shelter should be able to say if what she got was valuable or useless."

While it's not intended for responders, if you type "crisis in Darfur" into the amazing downloadable [Google Earth](#) software, you can get a sense of the kinds of systems that are possible to keep track of crises.

ICT4Peace is working closely with, among others, the first Chief Information Technology Officer of the United Nations, Choi Soon-hong, just appointed last summer. Microsoft and Oracle, among others, are contributing resources.

Along with the [UN Global Alliance for ICT and Development](#) (led by former Intel CEO Craig Barrett), ICT4Peace sponsored a meeting at the UN in mid-November to raise awareness of the need for IT collaboration among aid groups. Former Finnish President Martti Ahtisaari, an ICT4Peace board member who also heads a peacebuilding group called the [Crisis Management Initiative](#), opened the meeting, which was attended by top diplomats from Russia, France, the EU, and Switzerland as well as leaders of many UN agencies. Though there were a lot of the usual windy truisms which characterize many UN meetings, the session ended with a commitment to continue such dialogues at least twice a year in New York.

"The first step is to get the house in order within the UN family," Stauffacher says. "Then we can start to engage with the U.S. Department of Defense, with the EU, NATO, the African Union, Latin American peacekeeping forces, and development agencies."

Who better than a Swiss guy to try to play the neutral role helping to bring so many often fractious parties together? As he says "Peace is a nice word. Everybody wants to build peace. But the question is 'What can you bring to the table?'" ■

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