ICTs for humanitarian aid: Some enduring challenges

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Overarching challenges

- "Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?", T.S. Eliot, 1934

- **Continuous partial attention**, Linda Stone, Microsoft, 1997. *With continuous partial attention we keep the top level item in focus and scan the periphery in case something more important emerges.*

- The **immediate altruistic response** rapidly diminishes over time, Melissa Brown, associate director of research at the Center on Philanthropy at Indiana University, 2010. *Our brains release congratulatory hits of dopamine when we engage in selfless behavior — which we're moved to do the instant we witness something awful.*

Sobering facts

- 3 million people affected by the Haitian earthquake.
- Only **132** people were found alive in the rubble.
- At last count, over 230,000 were confirmed dead.

Some progress: Nargis to Haiti

- Based, inter alia, on *Reliefweb* media monitoring, 4 to 25 May 2008 (Nargis), 12 January to February 2010 (Haiti earthquake)

1. Far emphasis on communications and information provisioning to support the relief efforts on the ground.
2. Greater emphasis on collaboration and coordination of aid and relief efforts.
3. Supported by InSTEDD, there were over 30 volunteers across 4 continents working on localizing Sahana to Burmese for Nargis.
4. In post-earthquake Haiti, the global scale of volunteerism was far greater and more diverse.
5. Many more CiM providers for Haiti, rapid deployment. Nargis only had UN OCHA.
6. Mobiles and web viz central to Haiti response. Telecoms didn't come into play post-Nargis.

Dopamine effect?

- Fundamentally, the simplistic projection of post-earthquake ICT use in Haiti as the future of humanitarian aid (the “turning point” argument)

- Little or no appreciation of geo-politics, big-power strategic interests, sovereignty and government cooperation, culture and language, limited attention span and competing interests of international community, selective attention of donors and media, transitory nature of volunteers

Challenges

- Disaster-affected communities remain largely passive recipients of information. Where is the resilient, sustainable tech that gives them voice? Is it GSM?

- It is often unplanned as to how the ICTs first deployed in the country will be sustained over the long term. Cost, culture, conflict considerations.

- Significant problems of coordination and collaboration dogged the disaster response effort. Data scatter.

Overdue

- The accelerated development and population of easily accessible datasets with essential information shared across UN and other aid agencies, to help identify, prepare for and mitigate disasters.

- Significantly improving interoperability.

Why reinvent the wheel?

- Business engagement in humanitarian relief: key trends and policy implications, Humanitarian Policy Group, http://www.odi.org.uk/hpg/papers/hpgbgpaper_monitoringtrends1.pdf

- Recommendations of Strong Angell III: Lessons learnt, www.strongangel3.net/files/SAIII_working_report_20061106.pdf

- Global Symposium +5: Information for Humanitarian Action, Geneva, 22-26 October 2007, Final Statement, http://www.reliefweb.int/symposium/docs/Symposium%20Final%20Statement.pdf

- Interim Report: Stocktaking of UN Crisis Information Management Capabilities, ICT4Peace Foundation, http://www.ict4peace.org/view_files-1-v-165.html

Thank you