ICT for peace foundation

Draft Report of Working Session on Crisis Information Management Systems

26-27 February 2009
Tarrytown Estates
New York

Overview
- The Office of Information and Communications Technology (OICT), Assistant Secretary and General and Chief Information Technology Officer Choi Soon-hong along with the ICT4Peace Foundation organised a high level retreat from 26 – 27 February 2009 to strategise crisis information management for the UN.
- Participants from the UN included representatives from DPA, DPKO, DFS, DESA-GAID, OCHA, UNDP, UNHCR, UNICEF and WFP.
- Technology partners invited to the retreat came from Microsoft, Ushahidi with expert input also from eIG.
- Representatives from OICT and the ICT4Peace Foundation were also present and helped facilitate the meeting.

Background
- On 15th November 2007 the ICT4Peace Foundation organised a High Level meeting at the UN hosted by the Ambassador of Switzerland to the UN in New York, Peter Maurer, the ICT4Peace Foundation and under the Chairmanship of President Martti Ahtisaari.
- The event included the participation of high-level representatives from key UN and civil society organizations. The Foundation with the help of the Swiss Mission and UN OCHA, UN DESA and UN GAID facilitated the participation of DPKO, WFP, UNDP, UNICEF, the UN CITO and high-level representatives of other agencies, and Ambassadors of key countries. The working lunch provided an opportunity to take stock of the on-going efforts to bring about greater coherence and effectiveness in crisis management thanks to the use of Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs). The preliminary conclusions of the UN OCHA's Global +5 Symposium "Information for Humanitarian Action" held in October 2007 was also presented and the event provided a valuable opportunity for an exchange of views on how the UN was coping with the challenge of providing a comprehensive response to crisis management with the help of ICTs. Discussions also touched upon the need to identify best practices, lessons learnt and challenges that needed to be addressed presently and in the future with regard to crisis management.
- As a result of this meeting, UN ASG and CITO Choi Soon-Hong invited the Foundation to undertake a stocktaking exercise of UN Crisis Information Management Activities, Capabilities and Best-Practice. Separate yet complementary to the stocktaking exercise, expertise of the Foundation was sought in the Information and Communications Technology (ICT) Strategic Planning process conducted under the leadership of the UN CITO in February 2008.
- An official stocktaking questionnaire circulated to all members of the CEB in April 2008. A draft report was tabled at a meeting held on 8th July 2008 in New York at the United Nations, where respondents and other high level participants were invited to engage with the preliminary findings and observations. Their feedback at the meeting and subsequent input via email was incorporated in a revised version tabled for discussion at a high-level luncheon and working session on 7th November 2007 at the United Nations in New York. This working session addressed points raised at the 7th November meeting.

- The stocktaking report, a copy of which was given to all participants at the working session, indicates that the UN System has developed a number of Crisis Information Management "point solutions" that have emerged in response to particular events or needs, usually within individual organizations. Many of these solutions have produced excellent results and could be leveraged across the UN system in times of crisis.
- However, at present many tools, solutions and processes remain unknown and isolated from one another. Clearly, there is a need for increased strategic guidance, best-practice identification, interoperability and most critically, best-practice sharing.

Objectives
- The objectives of the working sessions was threefold:
    1. Provide 2-3 examples and demonstrations of different point solutions developed to assist in crisis information management.
    2. Formulate the vision and strategy for long-term crisis management information solutions, including actors and responsibilities, roadmap for implementation and timeline.
    3. Begin to identify the high-level specifications for a comprehensive CIMS, including actors and responsibilities, roadmap for implementation and timeline

Key observations and decisions
- There was demonstrable buy in from all the UN organisations and departments represented at the working sessions to address challenges flagged in the stocktaking report and move towards coherent, interoperable, inclusive and sustainable crisis information management standards, services, products and platforms.
- This buy in included now also WFP in Rome and UNHCR in Geneva. Steps need to be taken to include WHO, FAO, UNEP, the IM Task Force and other key stakeholders.
- Participants, including the ICT4Peace Foundation, agreed to establish what was provisionally called CIMAG (Crisis Information Management Advisory Group) under the leadership of the CITO / OICT.
- CIMAG would lead the development and implementation of a UN Crisis Information Strategy over the next 3 years, with clear goals, objectives, activities and outputs.
- A steering group was also created to backstop operations of CIMAG and undergird the development of a Crisis Information Management Strategy Plan of Action and implementation. The CITO, OCHA, WFP, UNHCR, DPKO and ICT4Peace Foundation are members of this group. Its final constitution would include two agencies or UN departments from New York, one from Geneva and one from Rome.
- It was decided to have an annual meeting of the entire group, with bi-monthly virtual meetings over WebEx or comparable web based virtual meeting platform. The next virtual meetings were scheduled for April and June. The next high level face-to-face meeting of the group was tentatively planned for November 2008 in Brindisi, Italy.
- A high-level meeting with Ambassadors, Heads of UN agencies and other representatives, such as invited in the meeting on 7th November 2008 will be organized again in New York in November 2009 to report and discuss progress of the process sofar..
- A secure, closed collaboration platform for CIMAG and the steering group is to be established on www.ning.com, or a comparable site.
- The CITO expressed the need for a stakeholder map that also marked clearly the qualitative nature of relationships between stakeholders and between them and the OICT, so as to help strategise opportunities to widen and deepen the partnership network for the CIM strategy over the next 3 years. This map would also serve to identity champions – individuals and organisations – that could help energise the CIM strategy development and subsequent implementation.
- The CITO suggested that around 3 months is spent formulating a detailed strategy paper for Crisis Information Management at the UN, leveraging the agency buy-in, experience and developments noted at the working sessions. The strategy paper would also flesh out CIMAG's mandate and constitution.
- The group was keen to pursue the idea of organising a briefing meeting during the High-Level segment or humanitarian segment of ECOSOC, to be held in June 2009 in Geneva.

- The Crisis Information Management strategy for the UN over the next three years would be based on the ICT4Peace Foundation's stocktaking report as well as other pertinent reviews and knowledge. It would include and address, *inter alia*:
  1. Create a succinctly comprehensive mission statement for CIMAG.
  2. Benchmarks and waypoints for the development of the strategy so as to ascertain progress made, challenges met and obstacles faced.
  3. Development of evaluation guidelines and indicators for *post facto* evaluation of crisis information management of field missions including integrated and multilateral missions.
  4. Stakeholder mapping with work plan and priority for engagement
  5. Use demonstrator developed by ICT4Peace Foundation as low-cost, adaptable, resilient proof of concept tool to get buy-in for new common platform in the future that also addresses the problem of verifying crowd-sourced information.
  6. Address the need for stakeholder training before deployment, based on the understand of and approach to Crisis Information Management as a daily routine as opposed to workflows, tools and systems only adopted during crises and emergencies.
  7. Harmonisation of information across the UN system to augment interoperability
  8. Related to interoperability, look at an inventorisation of ICTs already used in Crisis Information Management at the UN as well as existing meta data harmonisation, standards, best practices and means of gathering, storing, disseminating and verifying information.
  9. The OICT will also look at the possibility of developing clear ICT policies related to Crisis Information Management that are easy for all UN agencies to embrace and adapt. The OICT would also look at augmenting federated identity management and robust yet easy to use authentication systems for UN agencies to promote collaboration and information sharing.
  10. Funding and financing the development and implementation of the Crisis Information Management strategy.

Notable developments
- The ICT4Peace Foundation was pleased to note that recommendations regarding interoperability and specific ICT, including Web 2.0 technologies, have been adapted by all agencies present at the working sessions, representing a dramatic change from the understanding of and approach to such technologies just over a year ago.
- The demonstrations by agencies at the working sessions echo what was recommended, predicted and concluded by stocktaking report.
- Interoperability between agencies is facilitated by the common use of technologies (e.g. Google Maps and underlying data sets stored in public databases). However, significant political and managerial hurdles remain, and create new challenges. So while the technology is helping the UN writ large invariably move towards interoperable systems that allow for seamless, on-demand information transfers and collaboration, the walled garden approach to information sharing by actors resisting opening up their networks (human as well as IT) to others still need to be whittled down.

SH/DS 5 March 2009