

Notes from 8th July 2008 meeting on draft UN stocktaking report on crisis information management capacities and best practices.

- The meeting was co-organized by the Office of the UN CITO, the Swiss Mission to the UN and the ICT4Peace Foundation. It was co-chaired by Dr. Choi, UN CITO and Ambassador Maurer, and moderated by Dr. Stauffacher, Chairman, ICT4Peace Foundation.
- Sanjana Hattotuwa made an in-depth presentation of the draft UN stock-taking Interim Report. Participants agreed upon the text of the Interim Report and expressed ideas and suggestions on how to make the final report stronger and more reflective of current challenges and approaches to crisis information management.
- Some suggested the need for an inventory of tools, best practices, mechanisms, processes and products used in crisis information management at present, reflecting on the report's capture of a few such examples.
- There was a repeated emphasis placed on the field as the primary theatre of crisis information generation and dissemination, with the Secretariat looked upon more as an archival, process and standards setting institution with also analytical capacity.
- Accordingly, participants said that it was vital to look at the issue of crisis information management not just from a top-down hierarchical perspective but as an issue that was central to both the field and the Secretariat.
- Some expressed the need for an institutional risk management framework that could be used to promote technologies and tools that helped in crisis information management. Linking the risks and benefits of various mechanisms and tools for issues such as interoperability and field-HQ communications they felt would demystify it for senior management and ensure greater buy-in.
- Others suggested that it would be useful to link crisis information management pilots / mechanisms with the One UN process, even though others said that the One UN process was as yet too embryonic to locate such a process in.
- Alta Haggerty of OCHA noted that the report affirmed that which they had observed through the initiatives of OCHA on humanitarian information management. She spoke of the need to

harness the innovation of “point solutions” and at the same time develop institutional frameworks and standards for interoperability. Without the latter, she noted, institutional learning was severely impeded. She also spoke of the need to animate middle level management in addition to senior management. This level she felt was more sensitive towards the needs of adopting and adapting new technologies as well as common standards and guidelines.

- She went on to push the need for a better taxonomy for information management in the humanitarian field, a key point of the recommendations of the OCHA +5 Symposium. She noted that the consumption of new media (blogs) was growing and not linked to any one event, issue or process and that this needed to be taken into account in the development of IM.
- She also said that the problem of some “point solutions” like Google Groups was that they become information islands. Alta went on to note that it was important to leverage clusters and cluster relationships for crisis IM.
- Other participants expressed a note of caution with regards to a coordinated UN response on crisis IM linked to the One UN process. They noted that the One UN process did not work and without clear guidelines at the field level (where most of the vital information related to an existing / emergent crisis was generated) that just work at the Secretariat level would not improve the situation.
- Some said that field level connectivity was also an issue and that Crisis IM needed to take this into account.
- Christina Goodness from the DPKO IM Unit asked for a clearer understanding of just what a “crisis” was in order to develop solutions and policies. She spoke of the need for common business terms and a common understanding / language to help agencies ascertain what a crisis was and how best to respond to it. She said that senior management buy-in was essential for sustainability of IM mechanisms but also spoke of the need to animate other levels of staff to a system of policies and best practices.
- She said that on-going training was essential and that it was fundamental to crisis IM to first establish a baseline / foundational knowledge base of a particular region / country / issue / actor in order to help with an understanding of the crisis and its best response.
- She also said that key personnel in each organisational needed to be identified to mainstream standards based IM within each agency, so as to move away from the model where personal relations/ relationships determined the quality of information generated, disseminated and analysed.
- Others, echoing that which was expressed in the report, called for a map of roles and responsibilities of agencies in crisis IM specifically, if none existed to date.
- Dr. Choi tabled the idea for a paper on Crisis IM to be presented to the GA, so as to animate member states on the issue and gain political traction for it. Participants at the meeting acknowledged that a paper specifically looking at Crisis IM had not been produced, though there was mention of some of its principles in other documents at the GA and agency levels. Dr. Choi expressed the desire to see a robust, inclusive definition of crisis IM in this paper along with mention of solutions, standards, best practices et al.
- Amb. Peter Maurer expressed a note of caution in this regard and said that any definition of Crisis IM needed to come bottom up / from the field level needs and reiterated Christina’s point that there needed to be a better understanding of baseline information in crisis response.
- Dr. Choi agreed with this point but also noted that a definition was nevertheless necessary in order to capture the attention and eventual support of member states.

- Other participants noted that middle management needed to articulate the needs of Crisis IM in a language that the SM understood and bought into. They said that there needed to be a strategy to move forward with Senior Management to get their buy in for what was proposed as recommendations in the final report.
- With regards to baseline information in a crisis, some said that it was a case of what needed to be shared, for what, with whom, how and when.
- Some went on to say that the development of templates for mobile devices could facilitate this (common needs assessments / rapid needs assessments) and that a good meta data level of descriptors for agency output could also help facilitate better crisis IM.
- Participants noted that unless the tools for crisis IM were used by those staff that would use it daily, they would stand little chance of being used sustainably and to their fullest potential during a crisis.
- Others said that the stocktaking process could lead to a community of practice of crisis IM champions within each organisation.
- Nigel Snoch giving his expert presentation endorsed the need for a risk management framework on crisis IM as a way through which agencies resistant to change could be encouraged to develop their understanding of and approach to crisis IM. This he said needed to be coupled with a far more robust monitoring and evaluation framework for crisis IM, which could also be a powerful way to encourage buy-in from agencies.
- He went on to say that user generated content (through participatory media) needed to be looked at far more robustly by UN agencies and any process of crisis IM. Co-opting new media strategies and leveraging the information generated by new media to support crisis IM was vitally important.
- Jacques Baud made a presentation on field level application of ICT to aid crisis information management drawing upon his experience from UN peacekeeping operations in Sudan and elsewhere. His idea for a system was extremely well received by the audience.
- Based on this presentation and the findings of the stocktaking process, it was agreed at the end of the meeting to develop a simple platform for crisis information management using off-the-shelf technology leveraging existing assets of key stakeholders, enabling inter-agency collaboration and information sharing in a sustainable manner. The system would be scalable and will feature, *inter alia*;
 1. Geo-spatial / Geographical Information visualisation
 2. Templates for information input
 3. Semantic visualisation (the system will associate meaning, not just index information)
 4. Works on PCs and mobile phone / mobile devices
 5. Work over any Internet connection
 6. Capable of multimedia as well as text
 7. Benchmarking system for evaluating in-coming information in order to facilitate rapid analysis and situational awareness
 8. Interface with existing databases at field and HQ level
 9. Entry of information via GIS interface, templates, mobile templates
- It was proposed to have a high-level meeting in September/October to release the final report, discuss its findings and brainstorm ways to apply its recommendations with the

participation of President Ahtisaari, Maria Cattai, Gen. Satish Nambiar, USGs, Member State Representatives, Heads of Missions, Heads of Agencies and others.

- This would, he proposed, animate and raise awareness on crisis information management at the senior management and member state level of the HQ. On the other hand, the development of the demonstrator and subsequent pilot in a field mission would encourage standards based information gathering, dissemination and crisis information management at the field level.
- This mutually reinforcing twin track approach was endorsed by the meeting as a means through which crisis information management would stand the best chance of gaining traction at both the HQ and field levels.
- In addition, Dr. Choi also invited the participants to meet again regularly to discuss progress made in the above mentioned activities and create a “UN champions group for crisis IM”.

DS/SH 14/7/2008.