UN WORLD SUMMIT ON THE INFORMATION SOCIETY, WSIS FORUM 2010

10 - 14 May 2010, Geneva

13 May 2010, 09:00-11:00, Room L, ITU

Getting it Right in Crisis Management: Going beyond the hype on ICTs

Haiti is seen as a turning point in the use of ICTs in Crisis Management but many lessons remain unheeded from previous disasters such as the 2005 Tsunami. Indeed, there is an expectation that ICTs themselves can revolutionize crisis management and provide a "quick-fix" in solving intractable, complex situations often in politically unstable locations around the globe. However, the framework in which the ICTs operate is often just as critical, if not more so, than the technology itself. How can we improve interoperability between UN agencies and other aid agencies to ensure the quick, reliable sharing of information both in crisis situations and disaster mitigation? How can we properly assess the impact of ICTs in Crisis Management to date? What works? What doesn't? Are we investing in the right technologies that primarily need to function in very difficult environments? Is the humanitarian community setting the right priorities in the development of Crisis Information Management tools? What about capacity building in local communities?

Speakers:

- **Lin Wells**, Distinguished Research Professor & Force Transformation Chair National Defence University, USA *(joining remotely)*
- **Nigel Snoad**, Microsoft, USA
- **Juliana Rotich**, Co-Founder and Program Director, Ushahidi, Kenya
- **Patrick Gordon,** Deputy Chief a.i., Information Technology Section; Head, ITS Field Support Unit (FSU), OCHA, Geneva
- **Bartel Van de Walle**, Assistant Professor, Information Systems and ISCRAM Chair, University of Tilburg, The Netherlands
- **Sanjana Hattotuwa**, Special Advisor, ICT4Peace Foundation

Chaired by:

- **Ed Girardet, Media21 Programme Coordinator & Author, Editor,** *The CROSSLINES Essential Field Guide to Afghanistan (1998, 2004 and 2006)*; *Somalia, Rwanda and Beyond (1996) and Populations in Danger (1996),* Switzerland

Managing the accelerating complexity of humanitarian response

Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge? (TS Eliot, 1937)
Where is the knowledge we have lost in information? (Sanjana Hattotuwa, 2010)

The new players: crowdsourcing platforms and social networks

The Haiti earthquake and ensuing relief efforts made the broader global community more aware of the "crowdsourcing" movement, which has been developing for some time, and social networking platforms like Facebook and Twitter. Crowdsourcing platforms, such as Ushahidi (www.ushahidi.org), InSTEDD's RIFF (http://instedd.org/evolve) and Sahana (www.sahana.lk) provide unique tools which the local and international community can take advantage of in crisis response and recovery. Of particular importance is that these new platforms are not owned by one agency or government but rather constitute an open process, allowing for and encouraging broad participation. These new platforms also provide an opportunity to change outmoded views on established information sharing policies and practices by bringing new information and crisis management tools to the table. Platforms such as Ushahidi, RIFF and Sahana can empower communities by strengthening community resilience, preparedness and response potential without external intervention.

Ushahidi- background

Ushahidi provides a visual representation of "what's going on or needed where?". It is an open source platform, available for any organization or individual who wishes to use it. Ushahidi can be installed within 30 minutes and can be used with varying levels of connectivity. The key goal is to present information in a way that is useful for many actors. In a multi-polar, multi-player world it is better to work with open data and open platforms that are interoperable with other systems. Data in "silos" or data hugging is no longer an effective way to operate. As a result of the Haiti experience, Ushahidi has realized the importance of working with others in the humanitarian tech community (e.g. Sahana). In Haiti, Ushahidi received 80 000 text messages. A key challenge is how to deal with torrent of information? The public at large is also part of the Ushahidi solution via online communities (e.g. the Haitian diaspora living in Saskatoon, Canada who translated text messages from Creole to English). This also underlines that we are dealing with new systems, processes and actors in crisis response.

What are the key determinants in building bridges between the established formal disaster response communities and new informal communities?

- Interoperability
- Validation
- Pragmatism
- Evaluation

- the development of a "Code of Conduct" for the informal sector (there are often unpredicted implications of providing tools to people in conflict and crisis zones including ethical issues which need to be explored in more detail)

Crisis response, management and information overload: we need to move away from a concept of tools and products and toward a concept of services

There are a growing number of tools that can help the humanitarian community respond to crises. How can this entire process best be managed? Is there a danger of focusing on the individual elements and neglecting the big picture? How can we move toward a comprehensive and harmonised services concept? How can we develop a meaningful "rapid needs assessment process"? How to manage information overload? How to coordinate all the different actors?

Although Haiti was not a typical disaster, and should not be uncritically used as a model or basis for future disaster planning and crisis management, there are many lessons that can be learned from the earthquake:

- Recognize importance of imaging, crowd-sourcing and new media in crisis response (new media played a critical role in implementing the emergency number for the Haiti response)
- Risk management reviews have to be realistic
- Get to 1st day capability as quickly as possible through maintaining social networks on ongoing basis
- Emphasis on civil-military collaboration and coordination: How willing is the military to actually share information? There is currently a paradigm shift in US Military and a recognition that the information flow has to be a two-way street (in preparation for Aghanistan the military held unclassified phone call every 2 weeks with people outside the military)
- Work with local populations is key to success
- An extraordinary interest in helping out was evident after the Haiti earthquake. It is uncertain whether this will be duplicated everywhere but the importance of tapping into a well-spring of goodwill and volunteerism should not be underestimated.

What are the key challenges facing the humanitarian crisis response community?
In the mid-1990s, the humanitarian community relied on coded cables to communicate. Key questions were: Where is the information? How do we capture it? How do we disseminate it? How do we make contact lists?

In 2010, the same problems still exist despite the rapid rise of ICT and new tools to gather and exchange information. In parallel to the rise of ICT platforms, there has also been an explosion of actors who respond to disasters and crises around the globe, including humanitarian response organizations, businesses, civil society actors, governments, NGOs and private individuals. As a result, the challenges in implementing a coordinated response have also grown.

Despite the changing dynamics of disaster response, the humanitarian community is essentially using the same paradigms as 10-20 years ago. How can this community be better prepared and trained to deal with innovation?

Challenges still remaining:

- Still can't deliver in real time a contact list of who is doing what where; there are a lot of inaccuracies and exceptions in contact lists and data
- Accurate datasets **prior** to the disaster often unavailable or don't exist
- Varying levels of comprehension of complex situations and tools used to respond
- In complex situations, like Haiti, 90% of information is noise. How to sort out important data? (during the Tsunami the OCHA team received 100 emails per day; during Nargis-3000-4000 and in Haiti, one email per minute)
- Coordination of massive number of actors on-site
- How to manage the risk of too much information? Linda Stone, Microsoft coined the phrase "continuous partial attention"; the more we are connected the less we are aware of what is happening.
- How to sustain interest beyond initial crisis phase?
- How to develop systems that are s**ustainable, repeatable and predictable?**
- How to deal with new tech in areas where humanitarian workers don't have access to internet and have to deal with high latency connectivity to the web?

In many crises, the most effective response is still "**walking the beat with a white board" due to complete breakdown in communication.**

What role for the academic community?
How useful can research be for what is happening in reality? How to bridge the gap between researchers and practitioners? There are some basic things that don't work very well in crisis response including contact lists, coordination and making sense of data. How can researchers help?

- Analysis of the response to a given crisis (all old messages and data should be archived (US Congress and Google are currently archiving Twitter))
- Assess how to align ICT with business processes
- Work on technology acceptance issues, drawing from research to date on how people use computers, information technology, new media tools
- Examine and analyze complex systems
- Examine how data can be used later during reconstruction

ICT of the future: how to improve crisis response?

- The new systems often work outside traditional mechanisms and don't necessarily support member states and humanitarian actors. **There needs to be work done to integrate ICT solutions into existing processes and systems**.

- Much more also needs to be done to improve data preparedness.
- **The technology community needs to examine the possible misuse of their platforms (e.g. Radio Milles Collines in pre-genocide Rwanda) and develop a "do no harm" policy (like the humanitarian community). More robust accountability and monitoring mechanisms should also be considered.**
- **ICT systems and responses have to be kept simple;** the more complicated the system the more that can go wrong.
- **ICT systems have to be developed by, or in cooperation with, local communities and the end users, which include victims of trauma and disasters.**
- The importance of political processes should not be underestimated; in Haiti the borders were open to foreign aid and the humanitarian community whereas in many other crises this may not be the case.
- Datasets must be shared on the ground by senior management on all sides (except situations where security issues take priority, with more efficient and effective measures on how best to judge this)
- **Improve interoperability**. Often with very good intentions, ICT platforms are developed that cannot be sustained, contributing to "information islands".
- The private sector needs to be engaged constructively.
- Reserve short codes that would allow victims to send SMS messages out of disaster zones.
- Improve training of crisis responders in the use of ICT, complex systems and innovation.

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ICT4Peace aims to enhance the performance of the international community in crisis management through the application of information Communications Technology (ICT) – technologies that can facilitate effective and sustained communication between peoples, communities and stakeholders involved in crisis management, humanitarian aid and peacebuilding. Crisis management is defined, for the purposes of this process, as civilian and/or military intervention in a crisis that may be a violent or non-violent with the intention of preventing a further escalation of the crisis and facilitating its resolution. This definition covers peace mediation, peace-keeping and peace-building activities of the international community. In bridging the fragmentation between various organisations and activities during different crisis phases, ICT4Peace aims to facilitate a holistic, cohesive and collaborative mechanisms directly in line with Paragraph 36 of the WSIS Tunis Commitment:

> "36. We value the potential of ICTs to promote peace and to prevent conflict which, inter alia, negatively affects achieving development goals. ICTs can be used for identifying conflict situations through early-warning systems preventing conflicts, promoting their peaceful resolution, supporting humanitarian action, including protection of civilians in armed conflicts, facilitating peacekeeping missions, and assisting post conflict peace-building and reconstruction."

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