Guidance for Collaboration with Formal Humanitarian Organizations
*Interview with **Sanjana Hattotuwa, ICT For Peace Foundation***

This interview was conducted with Sanjana Hattotuwa on June 11, 2013 by Annie P. Waldman. For more information on ICT For Peace Foundation, see: http://ict4peace.org/

What is your background with V&TCs/formal humanitarian organizations?

The ICT4Peace Foundation does not get involved in activations. In early 2011, the Foundation got a request to set up a crisis information management wiki for Libya, for what at the time was a very volatile situation on the ground. The Foundation had set up a number of these wikis in the past and they've proved rather useful for a range of actors, including journalists and senior management. There's no set criteria to put it out but given the Foundation's own human resource constraints, we look at setting one up and actively curating it whenever there is a long drawn out crisis (e.g. Syria) or a large scale sudden onset disaster. This is the only extent that we've been directly involved in any activation process. In 2012, the Foundation supported a simulation exercise for the Digital Humanitarian Network just after ICCM in Washington DC. Especially since the Haiti earthquake in early 2010, the Foundation has either led or been part of architecting interactions between the UN and V&TCs, as well as within the UN system to embrace more fully the capabilities and capacities of V&TCs. A short paper published soon after the Haiti earthquake proposed ways, for the first time, through which the UN humanitarian system in particular could work with V&TCs, and vice versa. The Foundation has also worked very closely with UN OCHA for a number of years to support key institutional output, including a number technical platforms and white-papers, around V&TCs. In 2011, the Foundation co-hosted the ICCM conference in Geneva, Switzerland along with the EU's Joint Research Centre (JRC).

What was your opinion on formal humanitarian organizations before working with them?

I don't think its any different from what many perceive around the world. UN agencies in this area are conservative and conventional, and usually, with good reason. They are generally conservative when they gather information, trusting most if not only their field staff. They are conventional in how they approach humanitarian challenges and reform - being extremely risk averse, trusting only their own information networks and platforms created in-house. There was absolutely no interest in ICTs even just a few years ago and when there was, no real desire or interest to go beyond the well known technology companies who sold enterprise level solutions, no matter what the problem was. In-house innovation was not there or at best, under-recognised and not encouraged. There was no culture of creative or positive disruption. No one saw those affected by disasters, on the ground, as resources or with any agency to help themselves. They were always seen as largely powerless victims who needed help. There was little or no understand around how they could help shape relief and recovery efforts. There was no understanding, no yearning, no institutional impetus, no incentive for senior management to go beyond this conservative and conventional structures and cultures. Even if there was an individual with a vision for doing things differently, there were no entities like DHN, the V&TCs or the crisis mapping community writ large who could help. Before Haiti's earthquake,

which I believe was a significant turning point, traditional humanitarian entities were very different to what they are today.

Has your perspective on formal humanitarian organizations changed after working with them?

Yes, it has and especially since 2010's devastating earthquake in Haiti. There was a lot of output around how things could and should be done differently around relief and recovery efforts after a large scale disaster. It changed mindsets of even the most obdurate senior management and leadership within the UN system. It propelled change from within the UN system to do and see things differently. The speed of change was difficult for some to embrace. Soon there were high expectations around traditional humanitarian entities by those affected by a disaster. Greater transparency, accountability, efficiency and effectiveness in relief and recovery efforts were demanded, and placed in the public domain. Institutions were being judged on social media for their work, and increasingly, almost in real time. People on the ground found new ways to channel their needs, and often, discontent. Those around the world found new ways to combine, inter alia, historical data, post-disaster data and create mashups that responded dynamically to supply and demand. This new information landscape required traditional humanitarian entities to be more sensitive to information exchanged on the web, Internet and via mobile devices, or face the ire of beneficiaries and negative publicity through global scrutiny over policies and practices. It really was a change or die moment in the history of humanitarian aid.

Why did you reach out to the humanitarian organizations?

I think it's event driven - the nature of the crisis and disaster determines the nature of the interaction. For a sudden onset disaster, such as a tsunami or flood, the activation may be driven by non-traditional humanitarian actors, like those in DHN. The people involved might be very different. For example, the Horn of Africa, the food insecurity crisis in the Sahel region, the crisis in Syria will each attract different actors with different competencies. Yet each will include a mix of traditional and non-traditional humanitarian agencies. Depends on the kind of disaster. Sometimes the non-traditional groups activate themselves, sometimes like with the cyclone that hit the Philippines late 2012, OCHA initiates the activation. For more localised conflicts, there might be another entity like even the government, World Bank or grassroots civil society organisation that may act as a bridge between local and V&TC capacities. One can't say exactly how its going to occur in the future.

How did you find your "point person" within the humanitarian entities?

The ICT4Peace Foundation has worked with senior management of OCHA, plus at a number of other operational levels since 2008 under the Foundation's crisis information management programme. The Foundation has seen a dramatic change in the attitudes of senior management, who are generally isolated from field level and operational work. Mindsets have opened up and it's now really hard to find anyone sceptical around the value and use of social media and ICTs writ large. There are also relatively younger folk with new ideas joining the ranks of senior management. This has changed the way even traditional humanitarian institutions approach and embrace technology. The world writ large has also changed. Even a cursory glance at any media suggests clearly that the way the world generates, curates, collates, disseminates, acts upon and stores information is fundamentally different to even a few years ago. If institutions cannot access these new information flows - that ordinary citizens are plugged into - they are quite simply irrelevant. It is a question of mandate - in order to fulfill it, they need to understand technology. There's simply no escaping this. All this makes the discovery of a point person in traditional humanitarian entities somewhat of an easier prospect that even a few years ago.

How do you learn about the process of humanitarian organizations?

For traditional humanitarian entities: web resources, guidance notes, DHN's website, the amazing collection of resources at crisismappers.net and discussions condcuted on its email listserv, ICCM lightning talks and other material generated from the annual ICCM conference. Though there are a number of ways people can learn more about traditional humanitarian entities, it is not always the case that this information is available in languages other than English, or at best, the official languages of the UN system.

For VTCs: respective websites, speaking to members of the V&TC deployments, email listservs and pretty much the same sources as noted above. This question assumes that participation requires that V&TCs know about the traditional humanitarian entities. While this may be desirable it may not always be entirely necessary if the V&TC engagement is task oriented. For example, generating data points on a map does not require the V&TCs involved in the process to know that Valerie Amos is the head of OCHA, and in-depth knowledge of humanitarian principles.

During the activation, was the humanitarian organization available to respond to inquiries?

Depends very much on the persons involved and the nature of the deployment.

Were the needs of the entity and was the project clearly and realistically defined?

The Foundation has witnessed projects are not always clear and realistic in what they seek to achieve or address and how they go about it. Institutional coherence, from both the UN system and the V&TCs needs to be encouraged. Conversations and interactions need to be framed in such a way that all those involved know what they're getting into. There is a lot of frustration around the perception of V&TC's consisting of superwomen and supermen, able to deliver anything. We need to be aware of technology limitations. There could be a marketplace of needs and solutions, so concerned stakeholders can pose their challenges and members of the V&TCs can address them in an open and transparent manner, that also encourages failing forward and joint learning. But a lot of this is driven by the cult of personality. A few people generally end up making a big difference. But this people-driven change must also be institutionalised and systematised.

How is the workflow between your community and the formal entity?

In an ideal situation, you have clearly defined call which V&TCs can respond to, and there is an institutional culture and architecture to deal with and fully support what is often the technical nature of the collaboration. Before the call is sent out or made, on the side of the traditional humanitarian actors, there needs to be clear guidelines and workflows around working with V&TCs. This often requires, at least initially, senior management oversight and guidance. Inter alia, there needs to be some understand over progress indicators (depending on the nature of the response), coherent internal definitions for key aspects of the work and clear institutional resources devoted to the task of liaising with the V&TCs. The appeal can't be something that is haphazardly engineered or generated ad hoc. Confusion over deliverables, timelines and mismatch expectations are often the consequence of inadequate preparation for collaboration between traditional humanitarian agencies and V&TCs.

Do formal humanitarian organizations understand the work/methodology/structure of V&TCs and understand the implications of working with volunteers?

To varying degrees. With 'traditional' UN entities like OCHA and UNICEF, there is certainly now a higher awareness of V&TC capacities and capabilities. With other entities, who are only now realising the potential of embracing more fully the V&TCs, not as much.

Do formal humanitarian organizations provide private feedback and publicly acknowledge the work of the V&TC?

Feedback is essential, and not just at the end of a project or collaboration. The nature of the feedback is also essential - whether it is structured or not, private or public, restricted to emails and social media or reflected in some sort of a physical document. It is also dependent on the nature of the V&TC - geographically dispersed communities cannot expect individualised feedback. The nature of the work also drives the forms of feedback. If the work is sensitive - say around the crisis in Syria - V&TCs may not always want to associate themselves publicly with the on-going work, and may be more than happy for the UN system or traditional humanitarian actors, used to absorbing pushback, to act as institutional cover for their work. In other projects, the V&TCs may seek recognition and even open acknowledgement for the work they have facilitated or engineered. Sometimes it may be, for legal reasons, necessary to acknowledge that the information generation or showcased has been generated by non-traditional actors and networks. Occasionally, work that is under wraps during a collaboration - for whatever reason - could generate feedback that after some time can and should be made public. Essentially, institutions and key individuals should agree upon feedback structures and forms before sustained and serious engagement.

What are the benefits of working with formal humanitarian organizations?

For traditional humanitarian orgs: There is no alternative or option - if there is an institutional mandate around relief and aid, V&TCs are today inextricably entwined in operational responses. They are part of the ideational landscape as well, providing fresh ideas and thinking around the use of information and data for more efficient and effective relief mechanisms. They are part of a global community whose expertise often easily matches or far exceeds institutional human resources. V&TC network span as many time zones as the UN itself, and operates in languages and cultures often the UN system has no competence in. Their tools, apps, platforms and systems - at their best - can give senior management fresh perspectives on even old, vexed challenges and processes.

For VTCs: Visibility, respect, trustworthiness are amongst the benefits of working with traditional humanitarian entities. Access to big data is another. Traditional humanitarian organizations have operated in the field and in complex political and humanitarian emergencies for years. V&TCs, though robust in form and function, neither have this experience nor the mandate the UN system has for example, around disaster response and recovery. Warts and all, the UN system's mandate remains valid and invaluable in today's complex world, and V&TCs can themselves learn and grow through a mutually beneficial collaboration.

What were the challenges?

Bureaucratic delays and impediments, old thinking, senior management that is excited by the prospect of working with V&TCs yet don't sign off on the institutional resources - financial and human - necessary to foster such collaboration, information overload and a sense of hopelessness driven by the inability to analyse this flood, constantly changing technology. V&TCs are far more agile, which is why there is enduring frustration when working with traditional humanitarian institutions.

How did your community's process change from your experience working with formal humanitarian entities?

There is a certain maturity to the interactions between the UN system and the V&TCs, from even the time of the Haiti earthquake response a little over three years ago at the time of giving this interview. V&TCs realize that they need to acknowledge that the UN thinks, works and responds differently to what they are used to. V&TCs have become more patient, less strident in their demands, more constructive in their feedback and more willing to collaborate with each other. There is a strong sense of community.

Other thoughts?

Given the work and input the Foundation has put into processes that have sought to bring together key actors from the traditional humanitarian institutions and V&TCs, it is extremely heartening to see how things have evolved even after 2010. Those in the the V&TC community, and those within the UN system are increasingly aware of and respect each other. There is a real sense of community that undergirds the interactions, a real drive for professional, care and learning that results from collaborations. Driven in no small part by leading thinkers and practitioners from the V&TCs (some of whom are ex-staff of traditional humanitarian agencies) and the leadership of forward thinking actors like UN OCHA, today's relief and aid landscape has fundamentally changed from even a few years ago, and definitely for the better. One cannot for certain say how these models will evolve and morph, but it is certainly the case that support around closed architectures, information hoarding, obdurate leadership and resisting the potential of ICTs for aid and relief has ceased.