

ECHO – PARTNERS’ Annual Conference
14 & 15 October 2002
Charlemagne Building, rue de la Loi 170, 1040 Brussels

**Evaluation of IT humanitarian
platforms and their possible utilisation
as co-ordination instruments**

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WORKING GROUP 3

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Section 1

**Conclusions, recommendations and questions regarding
the present and future role of information technology in
the co-ordination of humanitarian aid**

Conclusions, recommendations and questions regarding the present and future role of information technology in the co-ordination of humanitarian aid

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Conclusion 1

Although it heavily depends on reliable information and long distance communication, the humanitarian community has never taken the lead in developing technologies that are particularly suited to its needs. Nevertheless, over the last decades it has greatly profited from technological innovations in telecommunications and information technology.

Recommendation 1

The importance of information and communication technology (ICT) for humanitarian aid must be fully recognised. Humanitarian organisations should take a pro-active stance on developments in this field. They should actively explore ways in which ICT might improve their work.

Question 1

How can humanitarian organisations anticipate and stay in touch with technological innovations?

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Conclusion 2

Technological advances have increased popular expectations: aid should be available as fast as information. Besides, in the light of what's at stake in humanitarian aid, there has always been little patience with any lack of co-ordination among donors and implementing agencies. Some humanitarian organisations tend to take a very defensive stance on these expectations.

Recommendation 2

The expectations the humanitarian community has to live up to may not be fully realistic. Yet it is highly recommendable that organisations take a constructive stance on developments that are largely beyond their control. In order to remain in touch with the ever-growing information tide and to assure a minimum of co-ordination, organisations ought to share the information they possess and contribute to integrated information platforms.

Question 2

Is there a growing divide between field realities and popular expectations regarding humanitarian aid? To what extent can these two be harmonised?

3

Conclusion 3

IT opens new, tempting opportunities for voluntary action, for in kind donations and for joint initiatives. Academic institutions may for the moment be the most obvious and uncomplicated IT-partners for the humanitarian community. Besides, some NGO's have appeared that are dedicated to providing IT services to other humanitarian organisations.

Recommendation 3

Humanitarian organisations ought to actively explore the new opportunities that are opened by IT. NGO's that provide IT services to the humanitarian community deserve to be financially supported.

Question 3

Does or will the digital revolution fundamentally change the character of humanitarian action?

4

Conclusion 4

Over the last years numerous computer applications have been developed that are particularly aimed at the humanitarian community. In particular static products that don't need to be frequently updated, such as maps, training materials et cetera, have been widely disseminated: the development of this kind of products has become an important aspect of disaster preparedness.

Recommendation 4

Under the heading of disaster preparedness humanitarian organisations should continue to develop information products that can easily be used under a variety of field conditions. Donors, including ECHO, should (continue to) fund for such projects. The sharing of these IT tools should be encouraged: as a matter of fact, a culture of sharing information and IT among humanitarian organisations should be promoted.

Question 4

How can a culture of sharing information – and of sharing information products and services- be actively promoted among humanitarian organisations? What obstacles currently stand in its way?

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Conclusion 5

The general level of IT skills of field personnel has hampered the development of sophisticated, interactive software specifically dedicated to humanitarian aid. A lack of in-house IT skills has also been found to cause poor connectivity of and within some field offices.

Recommendation 5

Humanitarian education should have a strong IT component, while field personnel should have more opportunities and facilities for IT training. The experience that has been gained in rapidly deploying information and technology specialists in the initial response to crises deserves to be shared and joint IT initiatives of humanitarian organisations deserve to be encouraged.

Question 5

How can IT training for humanitarian staff best be organised? Is there a need for specifically humanitarian IT specialists?

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Conclusion 6

The World Wide Web is at present undoubtedly the most widely used information platform for the humanitarian community. Humanitarian organisations regularly visit each other's web sites. These sites hardly reflect this reality: the public part of the web sites of most humanitarian organisations is aimed at a vast, anonymous audience, while the restricted part is reserved for staff. Apart from information on the owner of the site and links to related organisations, the sites seldom provide IT services to visitors.

Recommendation 6

The web sites of many humanitarian organisations can be improved. In particular, they might reflect more clearly that they are regularly visited by humanitarian professionals, for example by setting up a separate specialist section. This also counts for ECHO's web site. This site has already been greatly improved over the last years. However, it still doesn't provide links to the sites of all ECHO's partners, nor does it allow to submit project proposals. If it wants to encourage the co-ordination of European humanitarian aid through IT, the office might make its site an inspiring example for its partners. The site should be frequently updated and should include a special section for partners, with news, discussions on partnership issues, documents on the Annual Partners' Conferences, a humanitarian projects database, project proposal functions, etc. If it is impossible to provide some of these services on the Europa server, ECHO should support the creation of a separate European humanitarian information site, to which it should remain committed as a provider of news and other information.

Question 6

If a separate European humanitarian information site were to be developed, where and how should such a site be managed?

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Conclusion 7

ReliefWeb is the one site that at present may reasonably claim to be a portal to the vast array of humanitarian information on the World Wide Web. Among other things, it functions as an information platform for the humanitarian community. AlertNet also functions as a platform for humanitarian news, both from the Reuters news service and from members in the humanitarian community. Finally, field-based web-platforms, functioning as an interface for humanitarian organisations that are active in certain crisis areas, have in several countries proven to fulfil a real need.

Recommendation 7

ReliefWeb deserves ECHO's continued support. The efforts of the Reuters foundation to set up a news service for the humanitarian community should be better coordinated with OCHA's ReliefWeb/IRIN service. The support of field-based web platforms should be seriously considered on a case-by-case basis.

Question 7

How can the news services and information platforms of ReliefWeb/IRIN and AlertNet be better coordinated, so as to avoid overlap and to assure complementarity? To what extent can the quality of humanitarian aid benefit from the interaction between news organisations, donors and NGO's?

Conclusion 8

Agreement on common geographic codes and adherence to the rules of Standard Humanitarian Assistance Reporting have been some of the most successful ways to streamline integrate information and co-ordinate interventions.

Recommendation 8

Organisations ought to actively contribute to the further dissemination of largely accepted and successful information standards. ECHO and its partners could decide to incorporate such standards in the Framework Partnership Agreement, just as they might agree on the fact that the ability to communicate through e-mail and through the Internet can be considered minimum requirements for humanitarian organisations in the information age.

Question 8

Should donors try to encourage the use of almost generally accepted codes and standards by incorporating them in their requirements for funding? Is the definition of minimum requirements for donor funding a valid instrument to influence developments in humanitarian aid? What is the future of NGO's that will no longer be eligible for funding because they, for whatever reason, cannot live up to minimum IT requirements?

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Conclusion 9

The recent OCHA symposium on 'Best practices in humanitarian information management and exchange' successfully defined a number of principles, themes, best practices and recommendations that are highly relevant for the future of IT in humanitarian aid.

Recommendation 9

Humanitarian organisations should define their stance on the results of the OCHA symposium. Since any joint initiative will always have to remain within the boundaries of a consensus, the construction of such a consensus in the field of humanitarian information exchange is highly desirable.

Question 9

Can and should the ECHO Partner's Meeting endorse the final statement of the OCHA symposium?

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Conclusion 10

In several crisis affected regions 'Who is doing what where' databases have successfully contributed to the co-ordination of humanitarian interventions.

Recommendation 10

The development of 'Who is doing what where' databases needs to be seriously considered in any major crisis situation. In general OCHA should take the lead in setting up the necessary information systems – and should be financially supported for doing so.

Question 10

What determines the success of a WDWWD-database as a co-ordination tool? Can this success –perhaps even more efficiently- be achieved by other means?

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Conclusion 11

The European humanitarian community is still a rather long way from developing an information exchange system along the lines of the '14 point fax system' that is used as a co-ordination tool by the European Commission and the Member States of the European Union. However, most of the current objections do not fundamentally stand in the way of such a system, which might become an important co-ordination and information tool.

Recommendation 11

ECHO and its partners should take preliminary steps towards an IT platform for European humanitarian information exchange. ECHO should publish details on the projects it supports – and should encourage the Member States to do the same. Simultaneously, ECHO's partners should publish details on all their humanitarian projects on their web sites – as many indeed are doing already. If all parties adhere to a common format, these information sources can eventually be easily integrated – thereby establishing a common European database on humanitarian projects. Developing a standard format for the description of humanitarian projects, preferably in consultation with OCHA, would be an important first step in this direction.

Question 11

Should the Framework Partnership Agreement in due course include the requirement for all ECHO partners to publish details on all their current humanitarian projects – be it through their own web sites or through a common information platform?

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Conclusion 12

ECHO's partners differ greatly, both in their attitude towards IT and in their ability and opportunity to develop IT tools.

Recommendation 12

Any collective initiative by the European humanitarian network in the domain of IT will have to recognise the important differences between the organisations that make up the network. A European humanitarian IT platform should recognise and encourage the formation of sub-circles and sub-networks. ECHO should support the creation of ad hoc learning networks and the 'trickle down' of IT tools from larger and more sophisticated organisations to smaller, lagging organisations, be it through funding IT training courses for specialists within humanitarian organisations or otherwise.

Question 12

How can innovative NGO's be practically encouraged? Can and should NGO's actively support each other's learning processes, for example by opening their training programs to staff of other NGO's?

Section 2

Present and future role of information technology in the co-ordination of humanitarian aid

Present and future role of information technology in the co-ordination of humanitarian aid

Introduction

Partners in aid

For all those involved in humanitarian aid it is clear that information technology (IT) is penetrating ever deeper into their work. However, the humanitarian community has never been in the forefront of the technological revolution that over the last two decades has affected almost all walks of life. Besides, most victims of humanitarian crises stand on the wrong side of the so-called 'Digital Divide': they don't have access to the digital information and communication network that has unequally spread around the world. Some aid workers therefore feel that the digital revolution has been forcing them in directions that are only negatively dictated by their humanitarian interests and intentions. They regard information technology as a 'necessary evil' that the aid community simply has to accept, even though its advantages might never weigh up to its costs. Yet at the same time there are others who consider the advent of IT as an opportunity and a stimulus to improve the quality of their work and to strengthen the co-ordination of scattered initiatives. This paper looks at the role information technology does and might play in the co-ordination of humanitarian aid, in particular as seen from the perspective of the European Commission's Humanitarian Aid Office (ECHO) and its partners.

The international humanitarian community is made up of a network of mutually dependent organisations. This mutual dependency is particularly felt by donors and implementing organisations. The mandates of these groups are largely complementary, which makes them natural allies. At the same time, they maintain their individual accountability. Consequently, the need to strike a balance between upholding organisational independence and adapting to a collective effort is felt in almost everything they do. Ever since its creation in 1992 ECHO has tried to maintain a positive and constructive attitude towards this complex situation. This attitude is reflected in the notion of partnership that the office has always actively promoted and that has been welcomed, be it sometimes sceptically, by almost all organisations in the humanitarian world. While maintaining their respective roles and responsibilities, ECHO and its partners work together towards a common goal.

The issue of partnership was one of the main issues of the ECHO Partners' Conference, held in Brussels in November 2001. The members of a workshop within this Conference tried to analyse the concept of partnership and to identify the limits, the potential and the characteristics of the partnership-relation between ECHO and the humanitarian NGO's. Eventually, they proposed to set up a working group to further develop these issues. In the course of 2002 this working group formulated three objectives that might be pursued in order to strengthen the co-operation between ECHO and its partners: the development of formalised co-operation mechanisms; the development of communication strategies from both sides; and the development of programmes to address specific policy and strategy issues. ECHO has taken on the responsibility to prepare working documents on these issues. In the Partners' Conference of 2002 it intends to continue the debate on partnership and to prepare the ground for relevant joint actions with partners, for which it is ready to carry the financing costs. One such action might be the development of a new co-ordination instrument: a new mechanism, complementary to the ones already in place, might strengthen the co-operation between ECHO and its partners to increase the effectiveness and efficiency of European humanitarian aid. This paper deals with the question how information technology (IT) might be applied to

create a new co-ordination tool and how this tool might fit in with the existing humanitarian web-facilities for information and communication.

Method

This paper is the result of a consultation round, whereby all ECHO's partners have been asked to provide information on their current utilisation of web-based information and communication tools, and to reflect on the progress that might be made through a collective effort in this domain. This consultation round was streamlined through the use of a questionnaire, based on a preliminary analysis of a number of existing Internet tools in the humanitarian sector.

The consultation round aimed first of all at obtaining a tentative overview of the existing tools, with a description of their main features, their objectives and their underlying logic. The list of humanitarian web sites that is attached to this paper is a result of the descriptive information that was provided by the partners and that was gathered on the World Wide Web. The study also aimed at assessing the overall and relative impact of the existing tools: the questionnaire therefore also contained a number of questions on their utility. And finally the questionnaire also asked the partners' opinions on the utility and feasibility of a common information system to improve co-ordination among humanitarian agencies and donors. In that context, the idea of a '14-point fax system' for the exchange of information and co-ordination, much alike the system that is presently used for the co-ordination of the aid efforts of the European Commission and the Member States of the European Union, was put forward and tested.

Twenty-six organisations returned the questionnaire, thus providing a wealth of information on the current use of information technology in the humanitarian sector and a variety of opinions on the utility and feasibility of a new mechanism. An analysis of the response to the questionnaire led to a number of conclusions, recommendations and questions that will be presented and discussed at the Partners' Conference in October 2002.

Structure of this paper

This paper has a simple twofold structure:

- The first part deals with the present situation. It contains an analytical description of the existing IT tools and an evaluation of the uses made of them by humanitarian organisations.
- The second part deals with the future, and specifically with the steps that ECHO and its partners might jointly take in the field of IT. It contains the partners' opinions on the desirability of a new form of information exchange and on the feasibility of a so-called '14 points fax system' to streamline the information flow between ECHO and its partners.

The conclusions, recommendations and questions that can be derived from this paper can be found in a separate document.

Present

Static and dynamic products

The existing IT tools that are used in the humanitarian community may be categorised in terms of interconnectedness and interactivity. On the one end of the scale stands the read-only file on the single personal computer; on the other end the open communication line that is part of an integrated and integrating long-distance information network. Over the last decades several specifically humanitarian IT tools have been developed in the form of software, that can be run on individual, stand-alone computers. On this 'low' end of the interconnectedness and interactivity scale we find a number of 'cold', static products, such as maps, manuals, encyclopaedia's, data standards and training materials, that are directly related to humanitarian aid and that can be used in a variety of crisis situations: the 'toolboxes' that OCHA has developed for the rapid deployment of Humanitarian Information Centres (HICs) in crisis-affected countries, for example, include a whole range of these products. Some ECHO partners have also developed training and information material on CD-ROM. The development of IT tools that don't need to be frequently updated and that function under a wide variety of field conditions has become an important aspect of any disaster preparedness project. Particularly in areas with fragile and unreliable connections there is a strong awareness that the personal computer must be able to maintain its vital functions off-line: in these areas CD-ROMS and down-loads are more valuable than on-line functions.

In humanitarian IT toolboxes one sometimes also finds software applications that at least in terms of their interactivity belong to the high end of the scale. These flexible, dynamic products allow users to produce or adapt information. HARRIS, the humanitarian assistance results reporting system that was developed for USAID/OFDA, is an example. In general, however, humanitarian organisations are very hesitant in developing and applying new, interactive software, simply because it will require new skills from end users. Organisations generally count on the ability of their staff to use standard office applications. Sometimes they develop standards and formats to assure and improve the quality and relevance of the information that is produced within the organisation. But these standards and formats must always be applicable without additional IT training: most humanitarian organisations are intense users of a limited number of software products.

Networks

The survey that was made for the purpose of this paper clearly showed that the European humanitarian community is virtually saturated with servers and personal computers and that all NGO's try to make sure their systems remain ahead of their immediate needs. This means that an important prerequisite for the improvement of European aid efforts through IT has already been met: a lot of multifunctional hardware is in place and is regularly updated. But while computers can even be found in the most remote places and amidst the deepest crises, there are enormous differences in their connectivity. Even though the technical infrastructure for worldwide data-communication already exists and while there is a tendency towards an ever-greater integration of computers and networks into one global web, there still are many places that are more or less isolated. Another prerequisite for the further integration of information systems has therefore only partially been fulfilled: the existing systems are not fully interconnected. Nevertheless, some feel that the necessary hardware is already in place to further develop particularly humanitarian IT tools: in their eyes the main challenge, apart from further refining the system and keeping it up-to-date, is to discover opportunities and to take appropriate action.

For the humanitarian community the main advantages of linking computers lie in the expansion of the digital space that is accessible from the individual workstation and in the

acceleration of digital communication. These advantages, however, are very unevenly spread, even among users with optimal connections. Individual users possess and provide varying degrees of access to the information within or without their proper digital environment. Organisations usually give their staff access to an internal 'Intranet', whereas outsiders may access a much more restricted area through the 'Internet': although the connections may technically be identical, this theoretical and practical distinction underlines the will to maintain the integrity of organisations in the information age.

The survey conducted for the purpose of this paper confirmed that ECHO's partners differ greatly in the way they have established internal and external connections. In many cases Local Area Networks (LANs) are connected through password protected Internet connections to a web-based 'Intranet'. Yet sometimes field workers are only connected to the computers at headquarters through e-mail or web-mail. Such gaps in the internal network are sometimes due to the fact that in some countries no Internet Service Provider (ISP) can provide the required services, but sometimes also to the fact that the field office lacks the IT skill that is needed to set up and securely maintain a network.

Even though the problems and needs of many organisations are similar, they seldom take part in joint IT initiatives. Only international 'families' of national organisations tend to share IT resources. Here still lies a great opportunity for organisations to learn from one another and for specialised services that might particularly be developed for the humanitarian community. This latter point was understood by the founders of web sites like Aidcommunity.org and Reliefguide.com, the one allowing aid workers in the field to access the Internet and each other, the other functioning as an interface between buyers and suppliers of relief goods. In a similar vein, Télécom sans Frontières provides communication services in humanitarian crisis areas.

Direct and indirect communication

Once their hardware is interconnected, aid workers and organisations can communicate digitally. This communication may be more or less direct: web sites are a rather indirect mode of communication, whereas telephone conferencing allows for collective communication in real time. All these different forms of digital communication require their proper tools.

The World Wide Web is at present undoubtedly the most widely used IT-based information platform for the humanitarian community. The survey conducted for the purpose of this paper confirmed that the Internet is indeed mainly used to access information on the World Wide Web: organisations sometimes even seem to forget that other ways of information retrieval through the Internet still exist. Among the sites that are most visited, news sites, such as IRIN, AlertNet, CNN and BBC, seem to be particularly popular. Besides, humanitarian organisations frequently consult each other's web sites.

Most of ECHO's partners possess their own web site, as shown in the list that is attached to this paper. These web sites are usually mainly informative, designed to inform the public of the vision and activities of the organisation and aimed at increasing interest and gathering support. Beside the options to make donations, to apply for jobs, and to contact the organisation through e-mail, they sometimes also possess interesting educational features and resources: the site of Rescate, for example, gives visitors insight in the life of refugees.

More often than not, the web sites of humanitarian organisations are cut off from the rest of the organisations' information system: most sites are managed as stand-alone tools, often connected to the organisations' e-mail-systems, but remaining under the strict and constant control of a single webmaster. The unrestricted part of these sites is conceived as a number of static pages aimed at a vast, anonymous audience. This situation is at present a major obstacle to the integration of the information that is available throughout the humanitarian community:

the barriers around some of the information on the local networks have been raised so high, that any sharing of information demands additional work.

Portals

The weakness of indirect communication is the distance between senders and receivers: documents are drafted for a target group that in fact may never be reached, while users may be unable to find the most relevant information. There are different techniques to minimise this problem, both from the side of the sender and from the side of the receiver. At the same time, a number of tools have been created to facilitate this kind of communication. Among those, so-called portals have proven to be particularly helpful.

Many humanitarian organisations set the home page of their web site as the home page of their staff, so that this page takes on the double function of providing information to the world at large and functioning as a portal for the organisation's members. The web sites of most humanitarian organisations aren't sophisticated enough, however, to uphold their role as portals. To properly guide users to relevant information on the World Wide Web, a portal should at the very least provide reliable search facilities and web guides.

The search facilities included in most humanitarian web sites limit their search to the pages belonging to the organisation's proper domain. This doesn't make these sites less valuable: as long as they provide reliable information that cannot be found elsewhere, even sites that technically might seem obsolete retain their fundamental utility. Yet they do not qualify as portals to the World Wide Web – and it would benefit many users if the uses and limitations of any particular web site would be better, explicitly specified.

Many sites of humanitarian organisations, including some of ECHO's partners, do include links to other web sites. Yet the range and reliability of these links is often limited, favouring the sites of partner organisations and providing little guidance through the vast array of humanitarian information sites. Also in this respect it would benefit users if they are informed of the limitations of the services provided. The complete logistic guide for European NGO's on the site of Atlas-logistique is a good example of a valuable and reliable service aimed at the humanitarian community.

ReliefWeb, AlertNet and other platforms

Upholding the broad range of the functions usually associated with a portal, such as updating relevant information, providing web-guides and maintaining search engines, is a demanding task. Much of this task would best be left to organisations that specifically strive to cover the information needs of the humanitarian community at large. Thus OCHA set up ReliefWeb as a portal and platform for the humanitarian community. The site includes numerous functions that are particularly useful for aid workers. It contains a guide to humanitarian web sites, a search engine, and direct links to news sites – such as the related IRIN news service.

ReliefWeb also functions as a platform for humanitarian organisations that want to post vacancies and news messages. In that sense it is very similar to AlertNet, set up by the Reuters foundation. The platform function of these sites ties in humanitarian organisations and allows them to communicate more directly than through their autonomous web sites. As with direct network connections, this communication can be more or less exclusive. Thus, within ReliefWeb a variety of platforms has been created, to which the public and humanitarian organisations have varying access. Unfortunately, the relation between ReliefWeb/IRIN and AlertNet has been clearly worked out. For many humanitarian organisations the two therefore simply seem to function side by side, with a lot of overlap.

Web-based information platforms have emerged as remarkably useful co-ordination instruments. Apart from the global ReliefWeb and AlertNet platforms, several local and field-based web sites have been set up, functioning mainly for the humanitarian organisations that

operate in the area. UgandAid is a good example of such a local humanitarian platform. With their common content structure, these sites form a new humanitarian web 'genre': the public area of these sites usually contains static resources such as maps, local regulations and links to support services; a restricted community area then features contact lists, notice boards, discussion boards et cetera.

E-mail, Internet relay chat, telephone and video conferencing

While the discussion boards on dedicated web sites are slowly replacing them, e-mail discussion lists still function as an important mode of communication within the humanitarian community. These discussion lists have for long been the most direct mode of collective communication on the web. On a more individual level, e-mail remains the most widely used IT-based communication tool: this mode of communication has become so widespread that it has made IT of vital importance to the communication of and within many organisations. Even where computer networks are only partially and indirectly interconnected, as in some organisations with field offices in remote areas, e-mail, together with telephone, remains the backbone of all communications. Some NGO's have set up their own web-mail service, to assure e-mail communications within their organisation under virtually all circumstances.

For those who are permanently on-line, e-mail can be an extremely direct mode of communication, only surpassed in speed by Internet relay chat, telephone and video conferencing. Some of the existing humanitarian platforms also provide chat boxes –or conference rooms- for the use of humanitarian workers. Telephone conferencing, a service that previously was only provided by telephone companies, is now also functioning in an Internet version. And slowly but surely the quality of web-based video conferencing is improving. Yet while the technology for collective real time communication is improving, this technology may never cover the whole area affected by any particular crisis, let alone the whole community of victims. Fast communications are no guaranty for fast, relevant and co-ordinated humanitarian action: it is rather in the integration of scattered bits of information that a lot a progress can still be made.

Integrating information

The main condition for the integration of scattered information is the introduction of common standards: only when the producers of the different pieces follow common rules and procedures, those pieces may eventually add up to a larger picture. Adhering to common geographic codes, to eliminate confusion about locations, can be a first and necessary step to improve the co-ordination of humanitarian actions. The 'p-codes' that were used to facilitate the work of humanitarian organisations in Kosovo, are a good example of such a basic success. A more far reaching effort to assure the integration of humanitarian information is the dissemination of the SHARE approach. Standard Humanitarian Assistance Reporting (SHARE) is a standard to promote data sourcing, dating and geo-referencing, thus facilitating the integration of data from multiple sources and enhancing verifiability, assessment, analysis and accountability.

IT is very well suited to integrate well-streamlined information into information products, such as tables, maps or databases. The so-called 'Who is Doing What Where' databases (WDWW or W3) that have been set up in a number of crisis regions, are good examples of well-functioning IT co-ordination tools. Apparently until now the need for such databases has been felt stronger in the field than on the global level. Nevertheless, together these local databases eventually might add up to a global information system on current humanitarian aid projects.

Future

Opportunity cost

Ideas about the future of IT tools in humanitarian aid are sometimes almost diametrically opposed. While some see information technology as a sure way to improve the work of the humanitarian community, others are deeply concerned about the opportunity-cost of IT investments. The yearly expenditure of humanitarian organisations on IT and the number of staff permanently dedicated to IT are indeed considerable: between 0,5 and 10% of all resources is spent on IT. Some organisations seem to make these investments only half-heartedly: they feel they have to follow technological developments in order to survive, but they doubt whether the benefits of IT for the humanitarian community as a whole justify its costs. Unfortunately, little research has been done in this domain, so that opinions are still mainly based on gut-feelings. The inconclusive debate on this issue should, however, not lead the humanitarian community to take a passive stance on IT. Investments in this technology might not only improve the functioning of existing systems, but might actually create new venues for action. In the domains of voluntary action, in kind donations and joint action, for example, IT opens the way to unexplored resources.

News about humanitarian crises in many people still provokes the urge to ‘do something’. This urge is still mostly translated in physical action or financial donations. Yet physical distances are often hard to overcome, whereas the readiness to donate money has been explored through other the mass-media – and it is indeed questionable whether the option to make on-line donations, found on the web sites of many NGO’s, is a major asset for the aid community. Through the Internet, however, volunteers can fulfil a number of computer-related tasks from their homes. This is not the place to fully explore these possibilities, but many humanitarian organisations might greatly benefit from the experience that has already been gained and the resources that have already been accumulated in the domain of ‘virtual volunteering’. The web site of UNITEs, the specialised United Nations agency that has been set up to promote developments in this area, might prove a useful starting point for organisations that consider to widen their scope in this direction.

At the same time, IT-companies may be willing to make in-kind donations to humanitarian organisations in the form of hard- or software, or in assisting humanitarian organisations to make their products useful for humanitarian purposes. The co-operation between Microsoft and Mercy Corps and Save the Children, to develop logistics tracking and needs assessments software packages for use with Personals Digital Assistants, is an example of such profit-non-profit collaboration. The Geography Network (GeoNet), a global network of geographic information users and providers created by ESRI, an American Geographic Information System (GIS) and software company, is another. The question of commercial ‘profits’ to be gained from ‘investments’ in humanitarian aid still hasn’t been fully explored. But the temptation to forge partnerships with commercial companies in the field of information technology is felt by many humanitarian organisations.

Similar hesitations as may be felt in the face of commercial companies may play a part when considering co-operation with military organisations, which have traditionally played a leading role in the development of information technology. Some indeed see the military as an interesting partner for humanitarian organisations in search of technological support and reliable information, whereas others strongly fear that humanitarian organisations might lose their credibility as independent actors when they openly co-operate with the military. Perhaps academic institutions, that also have played a leading role in the development of IT, are for the moment the most obvious and uncomplicated partners for the humanitarian community in the development of both information systems and training materials. Thus the University of Georgia Information Technology Outreach Services (ITOS) is already working the

Afghanistan Information Management Service (AIMS), the Sierra Leone Information System (SLIS) and the Data Platform for the Horn of Africa (DEPHA), to manage and host a data repository of critical high-memory graphics, satellite imagery and metadata files.

Best Practices in Humanitarian Information Management and Exchange

Apart from taking such individual initiatives, the humanitarian community might take collective initiatives to further develop the current humanitarian response system. Any such initiative, however, has to take account of the divergent views on the future of the humanitarian system in general, and more particularly on the role of information in that system. Regular surveys and exchanges of opinion on this matter are vital to determine the boundaries for innovative action. The ECHO Annual Partners Meeting may become such a regular forum. Yet this forum will always have to stay closely in touch with the wider, global context. Before embarking on any particular European initiative, it is therefore important to note the current state of ideas on humanitarian information management and exchange.

In February 2002 OCHA organised a symposium to take stock of achievements in the humanitarian information management field, to identify future challenges in this field and to agree on next steps. Some of the participants were ready to give priority to information as a core humanitarian function and resource and tended to place information on an almost equal footing to food, potable water, medicine and shelter. Thereby they almost over-stressed their point that the importance of information management and exchange ought to be recognised by the humanitarian community at large, and more particularly by the donors. Besides, they strongly reminded information professionals that tend to focus on inter-agency communication and co-ordination that the question of informing the beneficiaries is one of the most important aspects of humanitarian information management and exchange. The symposium resulted notably in a final statement, endorsed by all participants, that contains a collection of principles, themes, best practices and recommendations. Most of this statement, which is also attached to this paper, is phrased in general terms and it is hard to disagree with its content. The most concrete recommendation for future action is for OCHA to set up a multi-stakeholder steering committee that should draft specific guidelines for humanitarian information management and exchange, that should catalogue best practices in this domain, and that in general should 'steer' the implementation of the recommendations of the conference.

In his report of the symposium Robin Schofield from Accenture Consulting recently pointed out that two differing 'mental models' increasingly seem to dominate discussions about the future development of humanitarian information systems: a highly structured 'systems' model, with field agencies feeding an information system at the local level, desk officers distilling this information at the national, regional or headquarters levels, and donor officials responding with policy decisions and funding at the international level; and a loosely knit 'service' model, in which agencies or their employees freely choose whether and how to use the available information services that are available to respond to their particular needs. According to Schofield most donors and information specialists prefer the 'systems' model. But he doubts whether this model is suited to the realities of humanitarian aid and whether it will yield quality results. Besides, further systems integration may in Schofield's view work against the interests of operational agencies. In the context of humanitarian aid, therefore, the 'services' model, with its multiple information sources and 'market-driven' character, would be best suited to effectively improve the humanitarian response system. To promote developments in this direction, operational agencies should try to temper the enthusiasm of information professionals and the donor community for greater systems integration. Simultaneously, they would have to commit more resources to their own efforts to develop information systems, in order to avoid dependency on one centrally delivered vision.

Facilities and education

Now one may question whether Schofield does not exaggerate the contrast between the two 'mental systems' he distinguishes. The two systems aren't mutually exclusive and both may be useful for both donors and implementing agencies. Obviously, all actors will be most interested in developments that correspond most closely with their information needs and with their operational logic. Rather than focusing on their differences, one might therefore focus on their similarities and common interests. And rather than focusing on the eventual long-term impact of choosing for any one 'mental model', one might focus on the present realities in the humanitarian world and on the evaluation of practical initiatives.

Until now, IT developments in the humanitarian sector have followed the 'services' model. A number of information and communication services are widely used, as was described in the previous chapter. Indeed all organisations believe that the dissemination of this kind of services has improved the co-ordination of humanitarian aid. As long as the services do not demand advanced computer skills, the majority of aid workers can use them to their benefit. ECHO and other donors should therefore continue their support for ReliefWeb and other information and co-ordination services.

Yet clearly only limited progress can be made if the knowledge and mastery of IT within many humanitarian organisations does not go beyond the most widely used office applications. Many smaller NGO's still lack in-house IT skills, though some have successfully set up internal IT working groups to bundle the existing IT knowledge and experience. Investments in human capital are a prerequisite for the development of joint IT initiatives and they are vital to constructing information networks in exceptional circumstances. IT training should therefore be an integrated part of any humanitarian education effort. The development of such educational efforts remains important if one is to improve the quality of humanitarian aid.

In the mean time, the fundamental weakness of the services model is the lack of commitment of the users. This commitment is vital, however, in order to produce the kind of integrated information that is needed to make well-founded and well-co-ordinated decisions. Apart from developing IT services and educational programmes, ECHO and its partners might therefore consider developing a common information system.

14 points fax

The European Union, as a treaty organisation of independent states, has a large experience in coping with co-ordination problems. In the discussions leading up to this paper it was therefore suggested that the '14 points fax system' that functions to improve the co-ordination of EU humanitarian aid might be adapted to the larger humanitarian community. Already a long time ago the European Commission and the Member States of the EU agreed that they would systematically share information about their funding decisions. An information sheet was then designed that could easily be processed, so that one would always have an updated view of the Union's efforts in any given humanitarian crisis. This system of information exchange has proven to provide decision makers with important and relevant information and it therefore still survives - although the old-fashioned fax system has been changed into an Internet system. Obviously this system would have to be adapted if it was to function for implementing agencies rather than for donors. For the purpose of this paper the information sheet was therefore slightly adapted, so that it could pass as a project information sheet. ECHO's partners were then asked whether they would be willing to systematically provide information on their programmes and projects along the lines of this adapted form.

Most organisations that responded to the questionnaire were perfectly willing to participate in such an information sharing system. As a matter of fact, some already provide this kind of information through their web sites, so it would cost them hardly any effort to

pass it on to a central database. A few organisations, however, voiced more of less serious concerns. Some mainly hesitate for security reasons: they do not think it a good idea, for example, to disseminate information on the dates of shipments and the amounts of cash involved. In order to commit them to this kind of collective initiative, access to sensitive information would at the very least have to be highly restricted. Others are concerned about the opportunity cost of setting up an information sharing system. They fear that their involvement in such a system could represent a major increase in workload and costs. And finally there are some who hesitate because they fear overlap and duplication: even though they can easily provide the necessary information, they are reluctant to support a system that would establish a parallel process to other co-ordination systems and they would need to be convinced of a clear and major added value if they were to commit themselves to such an initiative. Apparently some organisations do not immediately recognise the added value of a humanitarian project database for their own work. They worry about who is going to use the information they might provide and do not seem to feel the need to join in collective co-ordination efforts, be it through IT or otherwise, in addition to those already in place.

Information sharing

“By sharing information, we all become aware of which humanitarian and funding needs are being met, or not, and of what new factors or developments need to be taken into considerations in our decision making, thus enabling us to better target our respective responses to the victims of disasters,” Carolyn MacAskie said in her opening speech to the OCHA symposium. Unfortunately, several factors stand in the way of acting in accordance with these words. Apart from the technical and financial constraints that are felt by some organisations to provide information on their own activities, humanitarian organisations are said to sometimes withhold information to maintain a competitive advantage, particularly when funding is at stake. The final report of the OCHA conference on ‘Best Practices in Humanitarian Information Management and Exchange’ therefore concluded that “perhaps the greatest challenge for this field is creating a culture of information sharing that promotes the systematic collection, use and free flow of data, information and ideas, facilitates informed decision-making and builds trust and commitment among stakeholders.”

While not sharing information by humanitarian organisations might indeed, directly or indirectly, harm the interests of the victims of humanitarian crises, it may prove very difficult to break through the barriers that for the moment stand in the way of developing collective information systems in the humanitarian community. At present, probably the best way to promote a culture of information sharing is by a combination of providing services, of having organisations ‘buy in’ to systems that are of obvious use to their work, and of constantly repeating the collective aim of the organisations that are involved. Where the systems and services cannot be expected to constantly produce tangible benefits for all stakeholders, an approach is needed that combines both practical solutions and deeply felt convictions.

In the mean time, any serious initiative must reflect a clear vision on the shape humanitarian aid can and should take in the near future. In fact, developments in IT are already testing the ability of the established humanitarian community to adapt to new realities. While the principles of humanitarian aid remain the same, its character is constantly changing. These changes must be recognised -and they must be addressed in policies that may not seem humanitarian in a narrow sense, but that determine the quality and success of any important enterprise in the 21st century. Coming to terms with the digital revolution is one of the major challenges all humanitarian organisations will have to face in the years, if not in the decades, to come.

Section 3

Reference materials

Alphabetic list of humanitarian websites

Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance (ALNAP)
www.alnap.org

Afghanistan Information Management Service (AIMS) (UNAMA)
www.aims.org.pk

Aidcommunity.org
www.aidcom.org

AlertNet (Reuters)
www.alertnet.org

Asian Disaster Reduction Center
www.adrc.or.jp

Asia Disaster Preparedness Center
www.adpc.ait.ac.th

Assistance Georgia Web (Save the Children)
www.assistancegeorgia.org.ge

AzerWeb (Open Society Institute)
www.azerweb.com

Center for Humanitarian Cooperation (CHC)
www.cooperationcenter.org

Centre for humanitarian dialogue
www.hdcentre.com

Center for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters (CRED) (Catholic University of Leuven, Belgium)
www.cred.be

Center of Excellence in Disaster Management and Humanitarian Assistance
www.coe-dmha.org

CLONG / NGDO-EU Liaison Committee
www.oneworld.org/liaison

Conflict prevention network (Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik)
www.swp-berlin.org

Coordination Sud
www.coordinationsud.org

CrisisWeb (International Crisis Group)
www.crisisweb.org

DEC Disasters Emergency Committee
dec.londonweb.net

Eldis
www.eldis.org

E-Mine Electronic Mine Information Network (UN Mine Action Service)
www.mineaction.org

ECHO
www.europa.eu.int/comm/echo

European Platform for Conflict Prevention and Transformation
www.euconflict.org

Euronaid
www.euronaid.nl

Global Information and Early Warning System on
www.fao.org/gIEWS

FEWSNET (US Agency for International Development, Famine Early Warning System)
www.fews.net

Geography Network
www.geographynetwork.com

Global Disaster Information Network (GDIN)
www.gdin.org

Global IDP Database
www.idpproject.org

Groupe de recherche et d'information sur la paix et la sécurité
www.grip.org

Heidelberg Institute of International Conflict Research
www.hiik.de

Humanitarian Action in the Northern Caucasus
www.ocha.ru

Humanitarian Affairs Review
www.humanitarian-review.org

Humanitarian Practice Network (Overseas Development Institute)
www.odihpn.org.uk

Human Rights Watch
www.hrw.org

ICVA
www.icva.ch

Information Technology Outreach Service (ITOS) (University of Georgia)
www.itos.uga.edu

Integrated Regional Information Networks (IRIN)
www.reliefweb.int/irin/

InterAction
www.interaction.org

The International Committee of the Red Cross
www.icrc.org

The International Federation of Red Cross Societies
www.ifrc.org

Journal of Humanitarian Assistance
www.jha.ac

Kosovo Humanitarian Community Information Centre (HCIC)
www.reliefweb.int/hcic

Martus
www.martus.org

Mozambique Flood Information (US Agency for International Development)
edcnts11.cr.usgs.gov/mozflooding/

NetAid
www.netaid.org

Northern Caucasus web site
www.ocha.ru

Occupied Palestinian Territories Humanitarian Information Centre
www.reliefweb.int/opt-hic

OCHA
www.reliefweb.int/ocha_ol

OneWorld
www.oneworld.org

Operation Lifeline Sudan
www.olssudan.org

PFEDA Project; Partners and Food in Emergency and Development Aid
www.univ-lille1.fr/pfeda/

PROMIS-Afghanistan
www.pcpafg.org

ProVention Consortium
www.proventionconsortium.org

Regional Disaster Information Centre (CRID)
www.disaster.info.desastres.net

Reliefguide
www.reliefguide.com

ReliefWeb
www.reliefweb.int

SIGCO (Sistema de Gestion de Informacion sobre Cooperacion Internacional)
www.reliefweb.int/SIGCO

Sphere Project
www.sphereproject.org

SUMA (Pan American Health Organization)
www.disaster.info.desastres.net/SUMA

UgandAid
www.ugandaaid.net

UNHCR
www.unhcr.ch

UNICEF
www.unicef.org

Virtual Diplomacy Initiative (US Institute of Peace)
www.usip.org/oc/virtual_dipl.html

Voluntary Organisations in Cooperation in Emergencies (VOICE)
www.ngovoice.org

Volunteers in Technical Assistance (VITA)
www.vita.org

World Agricultural Information Centre (WAICENT) (FAO)
www.fao.org/waicent

World Bank Development Gateway
www.developmentgateway.org

World Health Organization Emergency and Humanitarian Action Website
www.who.int/eha/disasters

Web sites of ECHO Partners

Austria:

AUSTRIAN HELP PROGRAM ahp.or.at
CARE ÖSTERREICH care.at
CARITAS AUSTRIA caritas-austria.at
MALTESER HOSPITAL DIENST malteser.at
HILFSWERK AUSTRIA- AUSTRIAN ASSOCIATION FOR DEVELOPMENT AND COOPERATION
hilfswerk.at
ÖSTERREICHISCHES ROTES KREUZ roteskreuz.at
SOS- KINDERDORF INTERNATIONAL sos-childrensvillages.org

Belgium:

CARITAS SECOURS INTERNATIONAL caritas-int.be (under construction)
CAUSES COMMUNES
CROIX ROUGE DE BELGIQUE redcross.be
FONDS MEDICAL TROPICAL (FOMETRO)
HANDICAP INTERNATIONAL handicapinternational.be
IEDER VOOR ALLEN boerenbond.be
ARTSEN ZONDER GRENZEN / MEDECINS SANS FRONTIERES msf.be
MEMISA BELGIUM memisa.be
OXFAM-SOLIDARITÉ oxfamsol.be
SOLIDARITE LIBERALE INTERNATIONALE
VETERINAIRES SANS FRONTIERES BELFGIQUE vsf-belgium.org

Denmark:

ADRA – ADVENTIST DEVELOPMENT AND RELIEF AGENCY adra.dk
ASF DANSK FOLKEHJAELP asf-dansk-folkehjaelp.dk
CARITAS DENMARK caritas.dk
DANISH REFUGEE COUNCIL / DANSK FLYGTNINGEHAELP drc.dk
DANSK RODE KORS www1.drk.dk
FOLKEKIRKENS NODHJAELP-DANCHURCHAID noedhjaelp.dk
MISSION OST miseast.org
RED BARNET- DENMARK redbarnet.dk

Finland:

FINNCHURCHAID
SUOMEN PUNAINEN RISTI (CROIX ROUGE FINLANDE) redcross.fi

France :

ACTION CONTRE LA FAIM acf-fr.org
ACTION D'URGENCE INTERNATIONALE aui-ong.org
AGENCE D'AIDE A LA COOPERATION TECHNIQUE ET AU DEVELOPPEMENT (ACTED) acted.org
AIDE MEDICALE INTERNATIONALE amifrance.org
ASSOCIATION POUR L' ACTION HUMANI TAIRE
ATLAS LOGISTIQUE atlas-logistique.org
AVIATION SANS FRONTIERES (ASF) asf-fr.org
CARE- FRANCE carefrance.org
COMITE D'AIDE MEDICALE ET DE PARRAINAGE SANS FRONTIERES (CAM) cam-fr.org
CROIX- ROUGE FRANCAISE croix-rouge.fr
DIA
ENFANTS DU MONDE/DROITS DE L'HOMME (EMDH) emdh.org
ENFANTS REFUGIES DU MONDE
FRANCE LIBERTES FONDATION DANIELLE MITTERRAND
HANDICAP INTERNATIONAL/ ACTION NORD SUD FRANCE handicap-international.org
INITIATIVE DEVELOPPEMENT
INTERAIDE
INTERVENIR
MEDECINS DU MONDE medecinsdumonde.org
MEDECINS SANS FRONTIERES paris.msf.org

MISSION D'AIDE AU DEVELOPPEMENT DES ECONOMIES RURALES (MADERA)
OEUVRES HOSPITALIERES FRANCAISES DE L'ORDRE DE MALTE
PHARMACIENS SANS FRONTIERES COMITE INTERNATIONAL (P. S. F. C. I.) psfci.org
PREMIERE URGENCE premiere-urgence.org
SECOURS CATHOLIQUE- CARITAS- FRANCE secours-catholique.asso.fr
SECOURS POPULAIRE FRANCAIS secourspopulaire.asso.fr
SOLIDARITE PROTESTANTE FRANCE ARMENIE
SOLIDARITES solidarites.org
TELECOMS SANS FRONTIERES tsfi.org
TRIANGLE

Germany:

ACTION MEDEOR medeor. org
ADRA adra-deutschland.de
ARBEITER- SAMARITER- BUND asb-online.de
CARE DEUTSCHLAND care.de
DÄZ
DEUTSCHE WELTHUNGERHILFE / GERMAN AGRO ACTION welthungerhilfe.de
DEUTSCHER CARITASVERBAND caritas-international.de
DEUTSCHES ROTES KREUZ drk.de / rotkreuz.de
DIAKONIE DER EVANGELISCHEN KIRCHE IN DEUTSCHLAND diakonie-emergency-aid.org
HELP – HILFE ZUR SELBSTHILFE E.V.
HILFE FÜR KINDER IN NOT
HUMANITARIAN CARGO CARRIERS (HCC) hcc-berlin.org
JOHANNITER- UNFALLHILFE E.V. johanniter. de
KINDERBERG INTERNATIONAL HUMANITÄRE HILFSORGANISATION E.V. kinderberg. org
LAZARUS HILFSWERK lazarus.de (under construction)
MALTESER HILFSDIENST malteser-ald.de (under construction)
MEDICO INTERNATIONAL medico.de
WORLD VISION DEUTSCHLAND worldvision.de

Greece

EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVE
GREEK COMMITTEE FOR INTERNATIONAL DEMOCRATIC SOLIDARITY
HELLENIC INSTITUTE OF SOLIDARITY AND COOPERATION (HELINAS)
HELLENIC RED CROSS redcross.gr
INSTITUTE OF INTERNATIONAL SOCIAL AFFAIRS iisa.co.yu (Belgrade field office)
INTERNATIONAL ORTHODOX CHRISTIAN CHARITIES / GREECE
KESSA DIMITRA – GR kessa.dimitra.gr
MEDECINS DU MONDE mdmgreece.gr

Ireland

CONCERN WORLDWIDE concern.ie
GOAL goal.ie
IRISH RED CROSS SOCIETY
REFUGEE TRUST
TROCAIRE trocaire.org
WORLD VISION IRELAND wvi.org

Italy

ALISEI (ex NUOVA FRONTIERA) alisei.org
AMICI DEI BAMBINI (Ai. Bi.) aibi.it
ARCI Cultura e Sviluppo (ARCS) arci.it
ASSOCIAZIONE ITALIANA AMICI DI RAOUL FOLLEREAU (AIFO) aifo.it
ASSOCIAZIONE ITALIANA PER LA SOLIDARIETA TRA I POPOLI (AISPO)
ASSOCIAZIONE PER LA PARTECIPAZIONE ALLO SVILUPPO (APS)
ASSOCIAZIONE PER LA SOLIDARIETA INTERNAZIONALE IN ASIA (ASIA)
ASSOCIAZIONE VOLONTARI PER IL SERVIZIO INTERNAZIONALE (AVSI) avsi.org
CARITAS ITALIA caritasitaliana.it
CENTRO REGIONALE D'INTERVENTO PER LA COOPERAZIONE (CRIC)

CESVI COOPERAZIONE E SVILUPPO cesvi.org
COMITATO COLLABORAZIONE MEDICA (CCM)
COMITATO DI COORDINAMENTO DELLE ORGANIZZAZIONI PER IL SERVIZIO
VOLONTARIO (COSV)
COMITATO EUROPEO PER LA FORMAZIONE E L'AGRICOLTURA (CEFA)
COMITATO INTERNAZIONALE PER LO SVILUPPO DEI POPOLI (CISP) cisp-ngo.org
COOPERAZIONE INTERNAZIONALE (COOPI)
COOPERAZIONE ITALIANA NORD SUD (CINS)
COOPERAZIONE PER LO SVILUPPO DEI PAESI EMERGENTI (COSPE)
CROCE ROSSA ITALIANA
CUAMM cuamm.org
EMERGENCY emergency.it
GRUPPO DI VOLONTARIATO CIVILE (GVC)
ISTITUTO PER LA COOPERAZIONE UNIVERSITARIA (ICU) icu.it
ISTITUTO SINDACALE PER LA COOPERAZIONE ALLO SVILUPPO (ISCOS)
INTERSOS (ASSOCIAZIONE UMANITARIA PER L'EMERGENZA) intersos.org
LVIA – ASSOCIAZIONE INTERNAZIONALE VOLONTARI LAICI
MOVIMENTO SVILUPPO E PACE
MOVIMONDO
TERRA NUOVA
UN PONTE PER... unponteper.it
TERRE DES HOMMES ITALIA tdhitaly.org
VISPE – VOLONTARI ITALIANI SOLIDARIETA PAESI EMERGENTI

Luxemburg

CARITAS caritas.lu
CROIX ROUGE LUXEMBOURG croix-rouge.lu
MEDECINS SANS FRONTIERES msf.lu

Netherlands

CORDAID cordaid.nl
CARE NEDERLAND (former Dutch Relief & rehabilitation agency) carenederland.org
HEALTH NET INTERNATIONAL hni.nl (underconstruction)
HET NEDERLANDSE RODE KRUIS rodekruis.nl
INTERCHURCH ORGANIZATION FOR DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION (ICCO) icco.nl
MEDECINS SANS FRONTIERES/ARTSEN ZONDER GRENZEN artsenzondergrenzen.nl
NOVIB (NETHERLANDS ORGANIZATION FOR INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT
COOPERATION) novib.nl
SAVE THE CHILDREN – NL savethechildren.nl
ZOA REFUGEE CARE ZOAweb.org

Norway

NORWEGIAN CHURCH AID nca.no
NORWEGIAN PEOPLE'S AID npaid.org
NORWEGIAN RED CROSS redcross.no
NORWEGIAN REFUGEE COUNCIL nrc.no

Portugal

ASSISTENCIA MEDICA INTERNATIONAL (AMI)
ASSOCIACAO DE BENEFICENCIA LUSO- ALEMA (ABLA)
ASSOCIACAO PARA A COOPERACAO INTERCAMBIO E CULTURA (CIC)
CRUZ VERMELHA PORTUGUESA
MEDICOS DO MUNDO
OIKOS oikos.pt

Spain :

A. C. S. U. R. ASOCIACION PARA LA COOPERACION CON EL SUR acsur.org
ACCION CONTRA EL HAMBRE (ACH) achesp.org
ASAMBLEA DE COOPERACION POR LA PAZ (ACP) acpp.com
ASOCIACION NAVARRA NUEVO FUTURO (ANNF) nuevo-futuro.org

AYUDA EN ACCION ayudaenaccion.org
CARITAS ESPAÑOLA caritas.es
CENTRO DE COMUNICACION, INVESTIGACION Y DOCUMENTACION EUROPA- AMERICA LATINA (CIDEAL) cideal.org
CODESPA codespa.org
COMITE INTERNACIONAL DE RESCATE (CIR) ongrescate.org
CRUZ ROJA ESPAÑOLA cruzroja.es
ENTRECULTURAS - FE Y ALEGRÍA entreculturas.org
FARMACEUTICOS SIN FRONTERAS (FSF) www.servicom.es/fsfe
GEOLOGOS DEL MUNDO
INTERMON intermonoxfam.org
MEDICOS DEL MUNDO medicosdelmundo.org
MEDICOS SIN FRONTERAS msf.es
MEDICUS MUNDI ESPAÑA medicusmundi.es
MOVIMIENTO POR LA PAZ, EL DESARME Y LA LIBERTAD (MPDL)
NOUS CAMINS
PAZ Y TERCER MUNDO (PTM)
SOLIDARIDAD INTERNACIONAL (SI)

Sweden :

CARITAS SWEDEN caritas.se
CHURCH OF SWEDEN AID svenskakyrkan.se
DIAKONIA- SWEDEN diakonia.se
ERIKSHALPEN erikshalpen.se
INTERNATIONAL AID SWEDEN ias.nu
PMU- IINTERLIFE pmu.se
THE QANDIL PROJECT
MEDECINS DU MONDE
SVENSKA RODA KORSET redcross.se
SWEDISH COMMITTEE FOR AFGHANISTAN sak.a.se

Switzerland :

CARITAS SUISSE caritas.ch
CROIX ROUGE SUISSE redcross.ch
MEDECINS SANS FRONTIERES-CH msf.ch
HEKS [SWISS INTERCHURCH AID] heks.ch
INTERNATIONAL CATHOLIC MIGRATION COMMISSION ICMC icmc.net
TERRE DES HOMMES tdh.ch

United Kingdom:

ACTIONAID actionaid.org.uk
AGA KHAN FOUNDATION akdn.org / akf.org.uk
AGENCY FOR CO- OPERATION AND RESEARCH IN DEVELOPMENT; ASSOCIATION DE COOPERATION ET DE RECHERCHES POUR LE DEVELOPPEMENT (A. C. O. R. D) acord.org.uk
THE AMAR INTERNATIONAL CHARITABLE FOUNDATION amarappeal.com
BRITISH RED CROSS redcross.org.uk
CARE INTERNATIONAL UK careinternational.org.uk (under construction)
CATHOLIC AGENCY FOR OVERSEAS DEVELOPMENT (CAFOD) cafod.org.uk
CHRISTIAN AID christianaid.org.uk
CONCERN UNIVERSAL concern-universal.org
THE EUROPEAN CHILDREN'S TRUST / EVERYCHILD eur-child-trust.org.uk
FOOD FOR THE HUNGRY / UK uk.fhi.net
THE HALO TRUST halotrust.org
HELPAGE INTERNATIONAL helpage.org
ISLAMIC RELIEF islamic-relief.com
MARIE STOPES INTERNATIONAL mariestopes.org.uk
MEDAIR UK medair.org
MEDICAL AID FOR PALESTINIANS map-uk.org
MEDICAL EMERGENCY RELIEF INTERNATIONAL (MERLIN) merlin.org.uk
MERCY CORPS SCOTLAND mercycorps.org.uk

MINES ADVISORY GROUP (MAG) mag.org.uk
OCKENDEN INTERNATIONAL (OI) ockenden.org.uk
OXFAM UK oxfam.org.uk
PLAN INTERNATIONAL plan-uk.org
PROJECT HOPE projecthope.uk.org
SAVE THE CHILDREN FUND scfuk.org.uk
TEARFUND tearfund.org
VETAID UK vetaid.org
WORLD VISION UK worldvision.org.uk

United States:

CATHOLIC RELIEF SERVICES (CRS) catholicrelief.org
INTERNATIONAL RESCUE COMMITTEE intrescom.org
INTERNATIONAL ORTHODOX CHRISTIAN CHARITIES iocc.org

International

FEDERATION INTERNATIONALE DES SOCIETES DE LA CROIX ROUGE ET DU CROISSANT ROUGE (FICR) ifrc.org
COMITE INTERNATIONAL DE LA CROIX ROUGE (CICR) icrc.org
INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATION FOR MIGRATION (IOM) iom.int
ORDRE SOUVERAIN ET MILITAIRE DE ST. JEAN DE JERUSALEM, DE RHODES ET DE MALTE orderofmalta.org

Final Statement
United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
Symposium on Best Practices in Humanitarian Information Exchange
Palais des Nations Geneva, Switzerland
5 – 8 February 2002

Best Practices in Humanitarian Information Management and Exchange

Preamble

Interested practitioners in the field of information management, including government representatives and institutions, UN agencies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), academia and the private sector, met to take stock of achievements in the humanitarian information management field, to identify future challenges and to agree on next steps.

Based on their collective experience, the participants endorsed this statement as a vision for the future and a prescription for action.

By endorsing this statement participants agreed to 1) share its contents with their respective organizations; 2) raise these issues with international institutions and actors for broader discussion and implementation; and 3) work with OCHA to follow up on its recommendations.

Overview

Timely and accurate information is recognized as integral to humanitarian action in both natural disasters and complex emergencies. The international humanitarian community's ability to collect, analyze, disseminate and act on key information is fundamental to effective response. Better information leading to improved response directly benefits affected populations. Over time, improved assessment of impacts and responses through better data collection and management contributes to a more complete global database on disaster impacts, leading to better risk assessment and targeting of prevention and preparedness activities.

The Symposium recognized that considerable progress has been made to date in developing information systems, tools and Web sites and in establishing standards for their use. In particular, participants acknowledged the ReliefWeb, Integrated Regional Information Network (IRIN) and the Humanitarian Information Center (HIC) models as successful examples of international and field-level activities and services that form a solid basis for future work. But much remains to be done to build upon these approaches and continue to meet the demands of decision-makers and other stakeholders.

Principles of Humanitarian Information Management and Exchange

The Symposium affirmed the fundamental principle that the purpose of humanitarian assistance is to assist affected and at-risk people. Information management and exchange should reflect this humanitarian imperative and promote more effective humanitarian action.

Symposium participants also identified the following operational principles to guide information management and exchange activities:

Accessibility. Humanitarian information and data should be made accessible to all humanitarian actors by applying easy-to-use formats and by translating information into common or local languages when

necessary. Information and data for humanitarian purposes should be made widely available through a variety of online and offline distribution channels including the media.

Inclusiveness. Information management and exchange should be based on a system of collaboration, partnership and sharing with a high degree of participation and ownership by multiple stakeholders, especially representatives of the affected population.

Inter-operability. All sharable data and information should be made available in formats that can be easily retrieved, shared and used by humanitarian organizations.

Accountability. Users must be able to evaluate the reliability and credibility of data and information by knowing its source. Information providers should be responsible to their partners and stakeholders for the content they publish and disseminate.

Verifiability. Information should be accurate, consistent and based on sound methodologies, validated by external sources, and analyzed within the proper contextual framework.

Relevance. Information should be practical, flexible, responsive, and driven by operational needs in support of decision-making throughout all phases of a crisis.

Objectivity. Information managers should consult a variety of sources when collecting and analyzing information so as to provide varied and balanced perspectives for addressing problems and recommending solutions.

Humanity. Information should never be used to distort, to mislead or to cause harm to affected or at-risk populations and should respect the dignity of victims.

Timeliness. Humanitarian information should be collected, analyzed and disseminated efficiently, and must be kept current.

Sustainability. Humanitarian information and data should be preserved, cataloged and archived, so that it can be retrieved for future use, such as for preparedness, analysis, lessons learned and evaluation.

Key Issues

In support of these principles, Symposium participants highlighted a number of key themes to be considered when developing and implementing humanitarian information management and exchange systems.

1) User Requirements

The Symposium emphasized that information management systems should meet the clearly defined needs of users and decision-makers, and aim to reduce the effects of information overload.

2) Quality of Data and Information

To be useful, data and information must be relevant, accurate and timely. Ensuring quality requires the development of, and adherence to, standards for information collection, exchange, security, attribution and use. In addition, it is vital to maintain a strong sense of professional ethics at every stage of information system design and implementation, including such elements as independence and impartiality, in pursuit of humanitarian action.

3) Technology

Technology is a powerful enabler. Technology should not, however, undermine, distort or overshadow content. Achieving humanitarian objectives by using technology is not primarily a question of hardware and software, but rather of cost-effectiveness and appropriateness for achieving desired humanitarian outcomes. Information system designers should consider explicit and proactive efforts for making systems relevant and easy to use, particularly in remote areas. This includes bridging the technological divide by building capacity, promoting the exchange of knowledge and skills between local and international actors and making information available through a variety of means in a variety of formats. Human judgment, rather than technology, is the basis for operational decisions.

4) Partnerships

Successful information management systems encourage openness, inclusiveness and sharing. This strengthens relations, trust and coordination among multiple stakeholders. Multiple information systems, including Web sites and databases, operating at global, regional and local levels, create the potential for an unprecedented degree of cooperation between organizations and people at the field level, between the field and headquarters and between the international and local communities. Partnering with the media can be an effective way of communicating information to the affected population.

5) Preparedness

One of the most important aspects of humanitarian information management and exchange is preparation. Information-related efforts that are incrementally resourced and initiated only as emergency situations unfold tend to remain behind the curve and reactive. This leads to a failure to provide timely information that is accurate and contextual. Preparedness measures such as base data preparation for high-risk areas, national-level capacity building and the formation of institutional relationships prior to deployment enable information management and exchange systems to effectively support assistance efforts once an emergency begins. Preparation also includes planning for sustainability and/or exit strategies.

Best Practices

The following is a set of best practices derived from the principles and themes summarized above and identified as integral to the future success of humanitarian information management and exchange. In complex emergencies and natural disasters, the humanitarian community should:

Define user needs and emphasize data sets and formats that directly support decision-making at the field level. Identify user groups, conduct user requirement analysis, inventory information resources inventory and define core information products based on user input. Develop and implement information products on operationally relevant themes, such as the location and condition of the affected population, “who is doing what, where?” and factors affecting access to affected populations. Use templates such as the Rapid Village Assessment (RVA) tool to speed data collection. Create maps to effectively communicate information to decision-makers.

Collect and analyze base data and information before and throughout an emergency. Gather, organize and archive data and information on operationally relevant themes for high-risk areas in preparation for emergencies. Maintain and enhance data sets during emergency responses. Document and archive data so that it is easily accessible for future use.

Maintain and promote data and information standards. Follow generally accepted standards for information exchange, such as the Structured Humanitarian Assistance Reporting (SHARE) standard to promote data sourcing, dating and geo-referencing. The SHARE standard facilitates integration of data from multiple sources and enhances verifiability, assessment, analysis and accountability. Geo-referencing data during collection allows cartographic presentation and geographic information system

(GIS) analysis. Create metadata catalogs as part of a standard documentation process with handover procedures.

Maximize resources by expanding partnerships. Recognize that data and information are collected and managed by a variety of actors including national governments, UN agencies, NGOs, the private sector and research institutions and that the contributions of these providers are crucial. Pre-establish inter-agency agreements and relationships at the national and local levels. Establish an ongoing process of personal interaction to create partnerships for information management and exchange. Use distributed networks and neutral portal repositories to assist with information sharing and promote linkages to avoid duplication of effort.

Engage local and national actors in information projects. Develop networks of local communities and national NGOs, civil society groups and the private sector and address the issue of local participation as part of overall emergency planning, monitoring and evaluation. Build and strengthen the national/local capacity in information management and exchange and promote the transfer and use of local knowledge.

Maintain preparedness "toolboxes" for online and offline distribution. These toolboxes provide guidelines and reference tools for the rapid-deployment of HICs or the establishment of Web sites and databases under a variety of field conditions. Toolboxes should include data standards, operating procedures, training materials, database templates and manuals.

Define an exit strategy. Develop a clear phase-out strategy, including transitioning to development activities and creating archiving systems to maintain access by current and future stakeholders after the project is closed.

Preserve institutional operational memory. Define and adhere to sound data and information management policies and techniques for handling large volumes of information. Document datasets with metadata. Maintain quality control and organizational learning to avoid the need to start from scratch with each emergency and to maintain quality of information services during emergencies.

Establish field-based HICs according to identified operational and decision-making demand. Design them as open-access physical locations, incorporate existing capacities, systems and information management activities. Serve as a neutral broker of humanitarian information, providing value-added products and beneficial services to the field-based humanitarian community. Encourage broad participation from local, national and international actors to facilitate and support humanitarian response activities. Form partnerships with specialized agencies and sector experts to conduct sectoral surveys and analyses.

Use appropriate technology. Ensure that field information systems reach the broadest possible audience. Be aware of the limitations of technology (both inherent and as related to availability). For example, keep in mind that the Internet, while powerful, is not a panacea and can be ineffective as a distribution channel to and from remote areas. Consider making data products, particularly databases, available via e-mail, CD-ROM and for local download. Recognize that local staff's ability to work with the technology is an important determinant of success. Technology should be easy to use and be accompanied by training for local staff.

Use open data formats and inter-operable technologies. Use commercial, off-the-shelf technology and create all information products using open data formats and inter-operable technologies.

Promote awareness and training. Conduct technology training sessions for non-technical humanitarian staff, particularly national staff. Educate senior decision-makers in humanitarian organizations about the purpose, strengths and weaknesses of information management and exchange. Broaden participation in information projects among affected and at-risk populations.

Involve the private sector. Consider the efficiencies of contracting information management and exchange functions to the private sector, especially local private interests, when cost-effective and appropriate. Encourage a constructive role for the private sector by incorporating private-sector expertise into preparedness and planning activities.

Mobilize adequate resources. Include funding for field-level information management and exchange systems and projects in the overall resourcing of assistance programs.

Recommendations and Follow-Up Actions

Participants endorsed the above principles, themes and best practices and committed to working on resolving outstanding issues. To this end, Symposium participants agreed to work proactively within their respective organizations to promote recognition of, and investment in, information management practices to improve humanitarian action.

The Symposium participants recognized that necessary resources would need to be identified and raised to implement these recommendations and follow-up actions. Participants also emphasized the importance of mobilizing resources to provide adequate funding for information management and exchange activities incorporating the results of the recommended actions.

The Symposium acknowledged OCHA's role as a focal point in the area of humanitarian information and recommended that a multi-stakeholder steering committee be established by OCHA to:

- 1) draft specific guidelines for humanitarian information management and exchange;
- 2) catalog best practices through the ongoing development of lessons-learned case studies, project evaluations and the identification of appropriate technologies;
- 3) establish working groups as needed, including representatives from recipient countries, to implement recommendations;
- 4) establish and announce an appropriate process for implementing these recommendations through consultation with stakeholders.

Specific areas to be addressed through this follow-up process include:

- **User requirements.** Explore the linkages between data, information and decision-making in critical areas, such as assessments, "who is doing what, where?" and other operational information, particularly in the field. Improve the exchange of data and information collected during natural disasters and complex emergencies for operational purposes as well as to strengthen the database on global disaster impacts over the long-term.
- **Quality of Information.** Develop and disseminate standards, ethical guidelines and codes of conduct to address issues of data quality and information integrity.
- **Technology.** Evaluate and report on successful applications of new and existing technologies. Identify technology partners and promote the dissemination of appropriate technology practices for varying end uses. Discuss the application of these technologies in a future forum.
- **Partnerships.** Strengthen the linkages among existing information systems. Improve relationships between these systems and their stakeholders including decision-makers at the field and headquarters level, as well as with the affected population. Establish public-private partnerships especially in the area of systems and tools development. Define the roles of sector specialists and the media.

- **Preparedness.** Promote the preparation of base data for high-risk areas. Calculate and disseminate risk assessments, and build national capacity and develop toolboxes for rapid mobilization of HICs. Raise donor- and, where appropriate, media-awareness of the importance of information preparedness to humanitarian action.
- **Field-level coordination.** Improve field-level information coordination among multiple actors including the UN resident coordinator and UN country team, NGOs, academia, the affected population and other stakeholders. Facilitate OCHA's role as an information field focal point or partner. Evaluate and implement field-level information policies such as access and exit strategies.

Progress on these recommendations will be posted on ReliefWeb, submitted to the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) and will become the subject of the next symposium.

Section 4

Questionnaire on IT tools in humanitarian aid

Questionnaire on IT tools in humanitarian aid

Part I: IT within your organisation

1. Do all members of your organisation have access to the same computer-network? Or are there large gaps, for example between the network at HQ and the computers used in the field? For which aspects of your organisation's work is IT crucial (communications, finance, etc.)?
2. Does your organisation have a web site? What is the address? What are the main features of the web site? Is it mainly informative? Does it allow to make queries through e-mail and to make online donations? Does it provide links to other organisations? Does it provide services for other organisations, such as web-guides, discussion boards etc.?
3. How does the information get to your organisation's web site? Is the site directly linked to other computer-applications within your organisation, such as databases? Or is it managed separately as a stand-alone tool?
4. Can you give an indication of how many staff members are dedicated to IT within your organisation as related to the overall size of the organisation? And can you give an indication of your organisation's yearly expenditure on IT as related to the overall budget?
5. Can you describe the aims and objectives of your organisation's IT efforts for the near future?
6. Are there any other remarks you would like to make regarding the current and future role of information technology in the work of your organisation?

Part II: IT tools developed by other organisations

7. Can you describe to what extent your organisation relies on the Internet to obtain information on the humanitarian situation around the world? Which information sites and sources are most widely used within your organisation? Does your organisation systematically keep track of the way in which the Internet is used as an information source?
8. What Internet-based communication services does your organisation use? (e.g. e-mail, e-mail discussion groups, telephone conferencing, video conferencing, etc.) Who provides these services to your organisation?
9. Does your organisation use the Internet for the procurement of goods? How?
10. Does your organisation use the Internet to recruit personnel? How?
11. Are there any other remarks you would like to make on the use your organisation makes of the Internet to obtain information and services?

Part III: Partnership and IT

Is your organisation actively involved in joint IT initiatives with other organisations?

12. Are there serious obstacles that prohibit your organisation from taking part in such initiatives?
13. Do you think that the integration of dispersed information through new IT tools might improve the co-ordination, and thereby the efficiency and effectiveness, of aid efforts?
14. What role and opportunities do you see for the European humanitarian network in the development of such new IT tools?
15. Would your organisation be willing to systematically provide information on its programmes and projects, for example along the lines of the attached form?
16. Are there any other remarks you would like to make on the issue of IT in humanitarian aid, particularly in the context of your organisation's partnership with ECHO?

Humanitarian aid project information sheet

1. Organisation					
2. Value		cash/in-kind	currency:	amount:	
3. Recipient country(ies) and breakdown <i>(please use a continuation sheet if necessary)</i>					amount:
					amount:
4. Crisis/Disaster					
5. Date of decision		DDMMYY			
5a. Project code					
6. Donor(s)		name:			amount:
		name:			amount:
7. Local implementing agency(ies)					
8. Area(s) of destination					
9. Project description	Objective:				
	Beneficiary group:				
	Aid sector(s)	Logistics & operational support/Health & Medical/ Sanitation/Food/Social/Water/Shelter/Transport/Education/Institutions/Demining/Energy/Post-conflict reconstruction/Agriculture/Human Rights/Household items/Other (describe)			
	Type of aid	Core humanitarian/Food aid/Disaster Preparedness & Prevention/Other (describe)			
	Continuum	Urgent relief	Care and maintenance	Rehabilitation	Development
	Duration	Start (DDMMYY)			End (DDMMYY)
10. Name and tel. no. of contact person					
11. Embargo date					

THE FOLLOWING FIELDS MUST BE COMPLETED WHENEVER AN IN-KIND CONTRIBUTION IS MADE:

12. Description of relief items and services provided; quantity			
13. Transport	land/sea/air	value:	
14. Estimated date/place of arrival			