

Technology: bringing solutions or disruptions?

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Most of our discussions still focus on how responding organisations can use technology more effectively, rather than how disaster-affected communities might use those same technologies. The availability of information through new technologies is challenging existing power relations and current ways of working, and we may not be prepared for the consequences.

Ten years ago few aid workers were thinking about how information and communications technology would change how relief operations were carried out; technology was the preserve of experts discussing technical issues within a relatively small community of practice. The global spread of mobile technology and web access has brought those discussions into the spotlight, as technologies previously used only by experts is now in the hands of the general public. The effects of this have already been felt in the private sector, and they will increasingly change the way in which the humanitarian sector does business.

The 2010 Haiti earthquake focused attention on how social media – web-enabled services exemplified by Facebook and Twitter – could support the response. Some projects caught the public imagination, particularly those involving crowdsourcing – outsourcing tasks traditionally performed by an employee or contractor, to an undefined, large group of people or community (a ‘crowd’) – and such innovations will change the way in which the humanitarian sector does business.¹ However, most of our discussions still focus on how our organisations can use technology to respond to disasters, rather than how affected

communities might use those same technologies. This is understandable but represents a missed opportunity.

We can identify cases where social media have been used to good effect by disaster-affected communities to mobilise their own resources rather than draw on external assistance. In the Philippines and Indonesia, Twitter was used by communities to manage their responses to Typhoon Megi and the Mount Merapi volcano eruption. This innovation does not come out of nowhere; at the start of 2010, Indonesia and the Philippines were the third and eighth largest countries respectively in terms of Facebook users, and sixth and twelfth largest in terms of Twitter users.

Enough people were already familiar with social media before those disasters that they were able to adapt existing tools to a particular need.

By contrast, social media played a much smaller role in the 2010 floods in Pakistan, where the number of social media users lags behind those two other countries. By December 2010, the 'PakReport platform'² had received only 1,144 messages from an affected population of an estimated 20 million. People are likely to use tools that they, their families and friends are familiar with, rather than start to use a new technology in the immediate aftermath of an emergency.

These experiences also show that, as communities gain access to more information, they come to rely less on outside organisations, which has implications for the humanitarian community. We need to think more seriously about how people are using these technologies, how that will affect our relationships with disaster-affected communities, and what the appropriate responses to these developments are.

Information and power

Historically, information has been extracted from affected communities by organisations claiming to work on their behalf. The assumption is that, in exchange for that information, communities will receive physical or financial assistance from organisations – but rarely do communities receive information back again in a useful form. Access to information changes the power relationships between affected communities and aid providers, and consequently challenges the existing model of humanitarian assistance.

In Haiti, the Communicating with Disaster Affected Communities (CDAC) group brought together aid, media and technology projects to enable access to information.³ This was undoubtedly useful but the model was still of broadcasting information from or through aid providers to affected communities. If information is power, broadcast models maintain power in the hands of aid organisations. Once empowered by information, however, affected communities will be increasingly unlikely to accept the role of passive recipients of external largesse, and instead demand greater levels of partnership in how aid is allocated, distributed and monitored.

An example of this has been Kanere,⁴ an independent newspaper produced by residents of Kakuma Refugee Camp in Kenya, whose mission states that "in exercising a refugee free press, we speak in respect of human rights and the rule of law in order to create a more open society in refugee camps and to develop a platform for fair public debate on refugee affairs." This type of project should be a welcome development but has the potential to alter the balance of power between refugees and the organisations that provide them with services.

The 2005 *World Disasters Report* concluded that "disaster-affected people need information as much as water, food, medicine or shelter".⁵ Information is one of the most valuable resources an

affected community can receive, enabling them to make more informed decisions for themselves. Information is also essential for enabling communities to hold aid organisations accountable, to judge our effectiveness compared to the commitments we make and to the work of other organisations.

If access to information is as fundamental to people as access to clean water, it follows that providing communications infrastructure and information resources to refugees, IDPs and other disaster-affected populations should be seen as a core part of our response. This paradigm shift will not be easy, since many people still view information as a non-essential requirement; yet a shift is clearly underway in the humanitarian world, not caused solely by technology but in which technology plays a pivotal role. At present we are unprepared for the transformations that information empowerment will bring.

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1. See *Disaster Relief 2.0: The Future of Information Sharing in Humanitarian Emergencies*, 2011, published by OCHA, Harvard Humanitarian Initiative and the UN Foundation & Vodafone Foundation Technology Partnership www.unfoundation.org/global-issues/technology/disaster-report.html
2. <http://pakreport.org/ushahidi/>
3. <http://cdac-haiti.org>
4. <http://kakuma.wordpress.com/about-kanere/>
5. www.ifrc.org/publicat/wdr2005/

Sifting hype from reality

The absence of useful metrics for success is a persistent challenge in information and communication technology projects in the humanitarian sector but how should we judge whether a new technology is worth adopting? Unlike commercial technology projects, success has nothing to do with how many users you have or the value that they might derive from the technology. The key measure is whether that technology improves the lives of individuals and communities affected by conflict, either directly or indirectly. At first glance measuring this kind of impact looks impossible but the difficulty of measuring impact is not an excuse for attempting it. At present the tendency is to rely on anecdotal evidence provided by operational agencies or assumptions imported from the technology sector. However, both of these parties have a vested interest in promoting their own work, and so we remain largely in the dark about the real impact technology has.

The opportunity costs of technology – not just developing but implementing and maintaining it – are relatively high, making the sector conservative rather than innovative. In practice this means that innovation usually comes from outside established actors, increasingly in the form of partnerships with individuals or groups coming from the private sector. This leads to more challenges as each sector struggles to understand the others and it is particularly important to remember that the definition of 'success' may be different for each side.

Lastly, you don't hear much about projects that promise a lot and then fail to deliver, or about projects built on technology that is out of date by the time they go public. We don't discuss the reasons why projects start strongly but then grind to a halt or deliver little operational value – yet these are exactly the projects which we need to hear about, and these are the discussions that we need to have, if the sector is to learn from experience.

Adapted from a chapter by Paul Currion in *Peacebuilding in the Information Age: sifting hype from reality*, ICT4Peace Foundation (www.ict4peace.org), January 2011 <http://ict4peace.org/updates/peacebuilding-in-the-information-age-sifting-hype-from-reality>