

ITCM
Information Technology
and Crises Management

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"Telecommunications and Emergencies"

Mr. Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen, Dear Friends:

It is a great pleasure to be back once again in Finland, the country which has offered its generous hospitality to some of the most important events in telecommunications in the service of humanitarian assistance. The name of Finland, and that of one of its towns, has become so closely connected to the subject, that when I attended a conference on communications in Tampa, FL, Florida some years ago, the author of the periodic list of travel of officials from my office listed "Tampere, Finland" as my destination. Let me therefore, first of all, thank you all, and in particular your former President, Mr. Martti Ahtisaari, for this opportunity to report on what the United Nations organisations make from all the opportunities we were given.

In ICT, the "C" stands in the center; this may only be a syntactic coincidence, but the "C" deserves this position. Without communications, even the most sophisticated information technology can not fulfil the role it has in operations of humanitarian assistance.

Communications are the logistics of information management. In a variation of the principle guiding logistics, one can thus say that "communications have the task to supply the right information to the right place at the right time".

However: Different from most elements of logistics of information technology, communications are governed by the often complex, national and international regulations. Verbal, in written form and even more so in today's electronic age, communications depend on co-operation, on compatibility through common standards. Without agreement on common language and terminology, even inter-personal, verbal inter-action can not work, not to mention the intricacies resulting from the need to share resources such as frequency spectrum or public networks.

Traditionally, communications are also a particularly sensitive matter: Communications are not only support activities; to control communications means to have power. No wonder, therefore, that regulatory frameworks were established latest when exchanges between spheres of interest of different forces or powers became technically feasible: It has thus its good reasons, that the International Telecommunication Union, the ITU, founded in 1865, is now the oldest member of the UN family of international organisations.

What does all this mean for the use of communications in the service of humanitarian assistance during crises ?

From experts of what is called "operational agencies" we hear about the practical side of the role of the "C" in the ICT in the information management required for increasingly complex

humanitarian operations, such as most recently in Afghanistan and Central Asia. The success of such operations depends on the team-work of many institutions, and such team-work depends on a corresponding approach by each partner, as well as a joint position vis-à-vis the environment in which communications in the service of humanitarian assistance take place.

The United Nations Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs has the mandate to facilitate the co-operation between the many partners working on the alleviation of human suffering. Given the diversity in the institutional character, the mandates, and thus the specific goals and agendas of the partners, this task can by itself not be an easy one. Communications are only one tool in its accomplishment, but they are an essential one.

The facilitation in achieving common principles, mechanisms and platforms, is thus on the agenda of OCHA. Such facilitation can, however, not have the character of "command and control", there is no straight forward "C3I" concept in the humanitarian environment. Nevertheless, only a common approach allows the users of communications in the service of humanitarian assistance to benefit from un-hindered use of the tools technology provides them with.

It is in this sense, that within its inter-agency mechanism OCHA convenes the Working Group on Emergency Telecommunications and maintains its secretariat. Over the past 8 years, since its inception in 1994, the WGET has served as the forum in which users, experts and regulators worked on a facilitation through common standards and the "Telecommunications Coordination Officer" concept. Experts from the WGET authored the "Handbook on Emergency Telecommunications", published by the ITU in English, French and Spanish in 2001 and already out of print, and the WGET secretariat now works on a second edition, to be published by the ITU and the United Nations. The WGET members joined forces in the continuous work towards recognition of the special needs of providers of international humanitarian assistance. The safety and security of personnel in the field is being increased by the development of Minimum Standards for Telecommunications.

Many obstacles had and others still have to be overcome. Standardization depends not only on good intentions of the creators of new and advanced technologies, but on the appropriateness and, most of all, the affordability of the latter. Any co-ordination requires the consent of the partners to the underlying principles. Recognition of needs has been expressed in several international instruments, from resolutions by major international conferences all the way to the central international legal instrument of the Tampere Convention, adopted by an intergovernmental conference here in Finland in 1998.

The inter-operability by application of common standards depends not only on agreement among telecommunications experts and managers - it often requires administrative, financial management decisions. The creation of more awareness for the role of IT in crisis management, and thus also for the need to allocate sufficient resources to the respective units in each institution is a priority of the common work in the WGET and related inter-agency mechanisms. The safety and security of our colleagues in the field, who often risk their lives in their efforts to save lives, depends on progress in the full implementation of the agreed and approved minimum standards. The recognition of the needs of the "humanitarian community" in respect to the un-hindered use of appropriate communication tools will greatly benefit from the entry into force of the Tampere Convention, but this entry into force requires 16 more ratifications from among the 54 signatories or other States before 21 June 2003.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

This seminar brings together experts from many professional backgrounds, from engineers and users to representatives of institutionally very diverse background such as international organizations, the military, the industry as well as civil society through non-governmental institutions. This makes it an ideal forum for further discussion of the issues on the agenda of those who need communications as the logistics for the accomplishment of their task, **to prevent, and where this is not possible, to at least alleviate the human suffering caused by disasters and crises.**

Thank you for your attention.

Bibliography:

Mentioned and related documents and further information on the above subject are available at URL <http://www.reliefweb.int/telecoms>.

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Mr. Zimmermann's earlier assignments included long term posts in Lebanon, Ethiopia, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran and Liberia, and assessment and evaluation missions in Somalia, Namibia, Pakistan, Nepal, the Balkan Region and in other countries affected by natural disasters or complex emergencies. Mr. Zimmermann is a trustee of the International Institute of Communications (IIC), and member of the Pacific Telecommunication Council (PTC) and other international and regional institutions. He is a Swiss national, and his academic background is in political science. Mr. Zimmermann can be reached by e-mail zimmermann@un.org and Hans.Zimmermann@ties.itu.int.