

**Seminar on Crisis Management and Information Technology**  
- Helsinki -

Ladies and gentlemen,

Thank you for having invited me and my colleague from the OSCE.

The OSCE is an Organization that allocates about eighty five percent of its resources to field operations. It works in the Balkan, Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and increasingly also in Central Asia. Its field operations cover a wide range of activities such as support to local elections, creation of ombudsmen offices, confidence-building measures, the training of multi-ethnic policing and border monitoring. These are complex operations that have to be built up within weeks, if not in days, after the political decision has been taken by our participating States. Many field operations are time-limited interventions that have to be wound down as quickly as they have been started. Flexibility, speed and transparency are hence key for the work of the OSCE.

Because of all this we are very interested in learning more about the Information Technology and Crisis Management programme. In its operations the OSCE works with many partners such as the United Nations, the European Union, NATO, the Council of Europe, and the International Financial Institutions as well as with international and local civil societies. The success of our work, as with that of many organizations represented here, very much depends on the quality of information and communication with our partners. An ITCM would therefore be very necessary.

And there is another reason that we are interested in the ITCM programme. We too try to make better use of modern information and communication technology to develop an improved internal management capacity. And although our efforts are directed to allow the OSCE to define better its objectives and to set up and manage faster its operations, I see a number of similar issues and a link to the more policy-oriented ITCM programme. We gave our system a more prosaic name **IRMA** and have distributed a two-page brief called The OSCE, IRMA and the Yellow LapTop.

The first time we have heard about your initiative was through this invitation and we still know very little about it. I am hence very much aware that the following comments run the danger of having misunderstood the ITCM programme.

I would like to draw your attention to three major risk factors for any programme aimed at improving international crisis management through unifying IT systems. My concerns are neither about the technical feasibility of such programme nor about practical problems in implementing it. My concerns have more to do with the general environment within which the international community manages crises. Even though ITCM may be successfully developed, these three risk factors may limit considerably the impact of an ITCM programme.

Let me be more specific and I hope that you will not mind if I use some metaphors:

## **1. Car races must be won at pit stops**

My first concern is about functioning administrative and management systems. It is the administrative and management system that allows international organizations to mobilize crisis operations. It is their ability to identify and recruit qualified staff in time, to procure efficiently the equipment needed, to set up functioning offices, to ensure logistic support, to transfer resources from one operation to the next and to account for funds and in-kind contributions that make or break a crisis operation. I fear that we at international organizations are notoriously bad in this – in spite of, and I tend to believe also because of – so many large-scale investments into IT-based management systems.

There is an old saying among race car drivers that races are won at the pit stops. It is there that the car is made ready for the race; it is there that the car is serviced to continue the race. Workflows are carefully planned and optimized. Car mechanics undergo detailed training before being allowed on the job as the reliability and speed of their work will be a decisive factor in winning any race. I have often the impression that we at international organizations like to think too big, want to develop too many strategies, discuss politics but have little regard for our car mechanics and for the functioning of our engines, gear-boxes and safety belts.

An ITCM programme may provide the race car driver with a modern GPS guidance system. However, at the same time he/she may in fact have little control over the speed of the car, over amount of petrol left, over the air pressure in the tires or over the breaking system.

## **2. Puzzles must fit to a picture**

The second risk for any new unified IT-system for crisis management is the notorious fragmentation within the humanitarian and reconstruction aid communities. UN agencies, bilateral aid agencies, the development banks and the NGO community simply have simply too many overlapping mandates and have too many conflicting interests to allow rational decision-taking – irrespective of the availability of a common information system. They compete for the same funds, for the same donors and the same media attention. This is not the fault of ambitious individuals. This is built into the system, as the survival of many of the players will depend on the market share they are able to secure. Crisis is also business for many! Lots of funding attracts also lots of players, all with their own management culture, their own systems and their own priorities. All this makes coordination impossible. A win-win scenario under these circumstances is difficult to imagine and if it would happen, it would be the exception rather than the rule.

In my previous incarnations as coordinator for various UN operations and programmes, I had often the feeling that I was asked to put together a puzzle with many pieces that belong to different puzzle games. Whatever one does, the pieces will simply not fit and create together a clear picture.

The integration of IT and communication systems for crisis management may not necessarily help change these multitude of disconnected puzzle pieces and better information management may not necessarily make these puzzle pieces fit into a clearer picture.

### **3. *Trees must take roots***

We will probably all agree that we will only be successful in crisis management if we are able to build up local capacities. Before the ouster of the Taliban in Afghanistan an estimated 40,000 Afghans were employed by the international assistance organizations, is it the UN, the bilateral donors or the NGO community. Today, with the explosion of international representative offices, embassies, NGOs this figure must have increased substantially. As we all try to recruit qualified and English-speaking local staff, and pay considerable salaries, this will soon dry out the limited pool of Afghan talents. The impoverished Afghan authority will be unable to retain, not to speak of attract, qualified Afghans for building up some kind of local administration.

The same applies to funding. While ISAF swallows millions of dollars, the Afghan authorities will find it difficult to pay their emerging security forces even the most rudimentary salaries. While more and more international staff arrives in Kabul at the cost of well over US\$ 15,000 per months, we find it difficult to fund the salaries of local administrators at the rate of US\$ 100 per month or even less.

With a new system such as the ITCM in place, would we not risk further widening the gap between the international efforts in crisis management and what is left of local administrative capacities? Under these circumstances, how on earth can we expect that we will lead a country out of a crisis? How will normality ever take roots?

#### ***Complementing ITCM with a local administrative capacity***

It is the last point, our failure to rely more on local administrations, that I consider the most important. And here I would like to make a suggestion:

Could we not try to build a basic administrative system for failed states such as Afghanistan and put this on to an IT system? This does not need to be anything very complex and difficult, but should allow procuring and recruiting while maintaining basic budgetary controls. Such a system could be flexible enough to be adaptable to local conditions and translated into local languages. One could save millions on international consultants, each trying in their respective field to reinvent administration. One would also prevent that each local ministry, each local authority will end up with a different set of administrative rules, depending on what consultant from which agency happened to have a programme with them. Further, being pre-arranged, such system could provide at least a rudimentary first administrative local capacity within a relatively short time.

And here I believe that IT and communication systems could really do wonders. Major cities could be easily connected and for local communities one would have to provide stand-alone solutions. I am thinking along the lines of the Yellow Laptop approach that we are presently developing at the OSCE for our own field operations. Could such approach not be further simplified and adopted to the local conditions of failed states? And wouldn't it well complement an ITCM programme?

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