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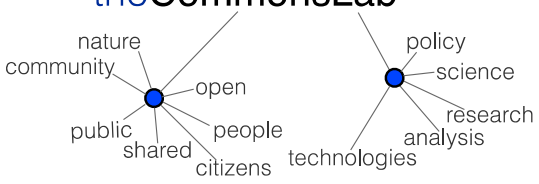

Policy research for the digital commons

Interview with Gisli Olafsson:

Humanitarian Response in a Time of Mass Collaboration

Gisli Olafsson *is the co-author of the recent report titled "Information & Communication Technology (ICT) Usage in the Pakistan Floods 2010" and a contributor to the United Nations' report "Disaster Relief 2.0: The Future of Information Sharing in Humanitarian Emergencies." Mr. Olafsson gave a presentation and led a round table discussion at the Wilson Center on October 4, 2011.*

With the onset of the Information Age, there has been a transformation of how we organize, conduct, and think about many fields of human endeavor. Humanitarian crisis response is no exception. Bringing aid to areas facing disaster often requires intensive coordination between many culturally and operationally disparate groups, in environments where the stakes are high and very real, and the local communities and mechanisms for communication are in a state of chaos or nonexistent.

It is for these reasons that the revolution in information and communication technology has begun to deliver on promises to greatly enhance the management of crisis response. Advances in technology have improved the affordability, mobility, and reliability of communication while offering connectivity to a global network of expertise and resources. The technology is not, however, a cure-all. There is a danger that enthusiasm for new methods and tools to push technology "to the edge" for technology's sake will feed into skepticism among many of those who have practiced humanitarian response in the same way for decades.

It is this clash of old versus new that Gisli Olafsson, Emergency Response Director of NetHope, uses in his presentation to point out the promise of technology, but also how it only increases the need for non-technical innovations in the way humanitarian response is organized and conducted. Mr. Olafsson's broad experience has led him to conclude that a complete rethinking of how the humanitarian response field operates is necessary. Neither the technical social media/crowdsourcing advocates nor the traditional camp built on familiarity and accumulated wisdom hold the one road to the future of the field. A middle path must be found and outlined, and Mr. Olafsson, while admitting his views are not the only ones out there on the subject, does his utmost to point in this new direction.

Mr. Olafsson sees that the need for a rethinking of humanitarian response is made clear by the experiences in recent history, which show both the deficiencies of the current model and the possibilities living in the Information Age presents.

In the South-East Asian Tsunami of 2004, with a global geographic effect, and the Haiti Earthquake of 2010, where the number of individual organizations involved numbered in the thousands, there was a clear inability of the current structure of humanitarian aid to scale to the size of the crisis. The traditional method of responding to such large scale events has been to organize the various groups into clusters based on their role. This approach has its limitations, as Olafsson points out: in Haiti there were over 600 organizations under the cluster heading of "Health" alone. Olafsson is certain the next big crisis will be as large in scale as these examples, or potentially larger, and it is up to the humanitarian aid community to be prepared to handle it.

This is not a situation without hope for improvement. Technology, especially in new information and communication fields, has advanced rapidly and has the potential to radically alter how aid work is accomplished. The use of new technology has been demonstrated in the field: 3G networks in the aftermath of the earthquake and tsunami of 2011 in Japan and teams ready for deployment at a moment's notice to provide rapid Very Small Aperture Terminal (VSAT) connectivity.

To take the traditional methods of humanitarian aid and put them in the context of the Information Age and its technical infrastructure, Mr. Olafsson identifies several key principles of the Information Age, as opposed to the Industrial one it supplanted, and develops a few of these principles further to illustrate where he sees the potential for a middle path between relying on technology or traditional methods.

The first principle is innovation. Innovation is needed to create the technology that will help humanitarian organizations deliver aid in an increasingly complex and chaotic environment. Innovation goes beyond simply using social media or field blogging. Hurricane Irene was a tipping point to Mr. Olafsson that brought social media into the mainstream of disaster preparation and response, but there is a need for openness beyond things like social media. Both private companies and local communities have much to contribute, and new technologies enhance their ability to do so. Yet this ability is often underutilized by the traditional organizations.

Mr. Olafsson provides a clear example: In the Dadaab refugee camp in Kenya there are nearly a half million people, 63% of whom have mobile phones which Olafsson believes is an underappreciated resource. For distributing food, vouchers are printed that, in order to be durable and difficult to counterfeit, cost $1.60 each. If this were conducted via mobile phone transactions, with a system like Empeza, the transaction cost would be closer to $0.03, a clear and sizable savings, especially considering each voucher must be printed hundreds of thousands of times on a weekly basis. This doesn't even include the ability to track and analyze data on refugee needs and patterns that this method would offer.

These types of applications are common enough that as part of relief efforts, it might well be best to offer a cheap cell phone as well. The assistance this would offer in speeding communication regarding what

the needs of the population are, and where they are most needed could very well offset the cost. There's also the potential of working more closely with local mobile operators to get locality data and help identify populations. Still, to really be part of the way forward, these efforts need to be done in a comprehensive way, at the largest scales.

The second principle is collaboration. Currently when a large number of groups are working together in humanitarian response, there is a focus on coordination. Mr. Olafsson suggestion goes further. Organizations themselves can get in the way, as they end up fighting turf wars or highly politicized battles, like the one that delayed the deployment of UN peacekeepers to Haiti due to questions about their mandate, delays that can have grave consequences on the ground. Mr. Olafsson points to individual people, in particular personal relationships, as the way around this. Personal relationships are how things actually get done. Meetings of cluster representatives are common, but little work gets done in the actual meeting time. Most of the contact and coordination really happens before or after the meeting. The inefficiency of the traditional cluster model is also shown in needs assessment. Data is gathered by taking paper questionnaires into the field, which in itself is a highly non-standard, labor intensive and time consuming task. Even deciding which questions to ask can take days. The tendency is to include rather than exclude, to gather as much data as possible in one survey, and as a result questionnaires can run 110 questions or longer. Mr. Olafsson reports that in a large percentage of cases the needs in the report have already been handled by other means by the time the survey results are compiled into reports and reach the field.

In the early days of a crisis, speed of information is critical, more so than exacting accuracy and detail. Mr. Olafsson recognizes the role of technology in increasing the speed of communications, but at the same time cautions against thinking of it as the ultimate solution. Sometimes the enthusiasm of the new, technology oriented humanitarian community can pursue data gathering or other activities to push technology "to the edge." Here however it becomes clear that there are more structural issues in the way aid groups organize themselves that cannot be addressed by technology alone.

Mr. Olafsson believes that rough estimates based on preliminary data can be enough to start with. Rather than starting by collecting as much data as possible on which to make plans, Mr. Olafsson suggests starting by figuring out what the general needs are, and what decisions need to be made, and then find out what data is needed to make those decisions and fill those needs. He provides an example from his work with urban rescue. Here, teams with a standard set of capabilities are formed, and assigned a specific sector of the affected area. Each team then finds out what the needs are in their sector. This model scales better than the cluster model, as larger areas can be handled by multiplying the number of standardized teams.

The collaboration, in Mr. Olafsson's view, is not something that only occurs while a crisis is unfolding. Just as important is collaboration between organizations, both inside the humanitarian community and outside it, including the private sector. It is here that he sees the most potential for getting the different sides to be thoughtful, open, and find ways to understand how the other operates, as during a crisis the pressure and time constraints are too great. When asked how a small business might get involved with assisting aid

organizations, Mr. Olafsson recommends trying to reach out to one in a non-crisis time, and try to reach a mutual understanding, and only then try to propose technical solutions.

The next principle is openness, which involves sharing the data that will enhance the ability to collaborate. Mr. Olafsson points out that transparency is highly desirable to maintain legitimacy, but at some point there are diminishing returns as the time and effort to track everything interferes with the ability of the work to get done. Here, too, there is a need to find a middle ground. This can start by identifying the data that would have the most benefits. Operational data that doesn't contain private information, if made public at the right level of detail could help immensely, he insists. As examples he cites a government that has started making their employees' expense reports within 24 hours publically available to fight corruption.

This could be applied in a similar way to a humanitarian organization if they make their project planning and spending against goal public. The technology certainly exists to make these possible, however Mr. Olafsson recognizes that there is a strong tendency to protect operational data, or if made available, in formats that are difficult to analyze. The benefits of sharing this data would be widespread and organizations could even benefit from academic research done based on their data. Privacy is always a concern when sharing data, but experience in Haiti, where aid organizations were able to cooperate with local mobile operators, both for gathering and transmitting information, shows that this type of collaboration can be effective. The problem is definitely a policy rather than technical one. Along with openness comes integrity, another principle that Mr. Olafsson lists. In the current environment, someone is always watching, whether citizen reporters or donors, so retaining trust and integrity has become ever more important.

Finally, Mr. Olafsson points to self-organization as a principle for humanitarian organizations in the Information Age. This is important because in the initial phases of a crisis there is a large degree of chaos. Humanitarian response groups have been trying to impose a firm hierarchical model on top of this, a practice that needs to be amended. Mr. Olafsson gives the example of the U.S. Military, which has tried to adapt their traditional command and control organization for the Information Age, and increasingly is trying to put data into the hands of units on the ground, as close as possible to those that have to make the tactical decisions rather than relying on communication with the central command. This can apply to humanitarian response work as well. Mr. Olafsson advocates empowering field workers by giving them the data they need to make their own decisions, and to then share data with the affected communities so they can self-organize and more intelligently express and identify their needs. This also includes using social networks and information so workers who don't have the expertise to make a decision can locate and communicate with someone who does.

Mr. Olafsson acknowledges that of his suggestions, many would be considered quite radical in the field, but he maintains that it will take some time for the old ways of doing crisis response to give way to the new, and it will rely on the ability of the old and new generations to work together, as both have something to contribute.

To view a short podcast with Gisli Olafsson, click here:

http://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/social-media-and-international-disaster-response

For the PowerPoint slides and archived video of the event *Humanitarian Response in a Time of Mass Collaboration and Networked Intelligence* (October 4, 2011), visit:

http://www.wilsoncenter.org/event/humanitarian-response-time-mass-collaboration-and-networked-intelligence

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