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Creating a Common Communications Culture: Interoperability in Crisis Management

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Introduction

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No technologies have been more powerful in reshaping the post-Cold War international system than those of the information revolution. Over the past two decades, nation-states and subnational groups, international businesses, and multinational organizations have struggled to incorporate the dramatic possibilities for their work of satellite communications, the Internet, inexpensive telephone and cell phone services, fax machines, and global computer networks. The innovations have occurred largely without central direction or a clear game plan, and the effects of the ongoing revolution in the way we communicate on international affairs will continue. We are only beginning to see purposeful efforts to channel all the power in these technologies in support of good governance or effective and expedient management of international conflicts and crises.

A World Pushed and Pulled by Information Technology

One of the most dramatic and paradoxical effects of advanced communications technologies has been to reconfigure the international order. Most notably, they have quietly co-opted the nation-states' manifestation of sovereignty and power by integrating them into an interdependent global economic and political system while at the same time empowering local communities and subnational groups within their borders with voice and outreach beyond those borders. The Internet has created worldwide virtual communities of shared interest that in many instances and ways override citizenry as well as governance in this post-Westphalian era.

These technologies offer an expanded role for conventional foreign affairs agencies in the international arena through their power to reach vast publics, maintain 24/7 contact with their counterparts in every country, and elicit immediate responses from their own national governments. Yet these agencies have tended to resist such changes. Many reasons are offered for not dismantling organizational "stovepipes" that inhibit reaching out to publics and counterparts across the globe. The reasons, however, boil down to two: a defensive view that their power will be diminished by sharing information with competitors; and fear of change coupled with a lack of accountability for ineffective practices and procedures. All of which leads to disjointed, erratic, piecemeal policy-making and operational coordination. As the old structures

struggle to adapt, new collaborations are forming with remarkable speed. New opportunities and threats, new priorities and national interests bring people, societies, and states together in real or virtual combinations.

There is, to be sure, something unsettling about the dramatic rise onto the international scene of nonstate and stateless actors who now press their demands for change onto the once-sacrosanct diplomatic negotiating table. One need only mention Jody Williams of the anti-land mine campaign or al Qaeda to dramatize the disquieting reality that nation-states are now under challenge from individuals and small groups who—thanks to the information revolution—have gained a global electronic voice. Those who have the will to act increasingly have the capacity to do so.

Without question, the information revolution has contributed many invaluable tools to the international community's humanitarian and human rights efforts: the use of remote sensing imagery to locate mass graves, or databases to manage refugee repatriation, to name just two. Yet there is a dark side to this new electronic force that must be recognized as well. Terrorist groups and drug merchants can communicate globally, and secretly, as they plot their destructive schemes or market their poisonous wares. And we see how vulnerable we have become to computer viruses. Hackers can cripple financial systems that support the work of millions and impose enormous costs on the global economic order with a few strokes on a keyboard.

These are heady and challenging issues. This presentation explores some thinking derived from the work of the United States Institute of Peace about the significance of the global information revolution for humanitarian assistance operations.

The U.S. Congress created the Institute of Peace, an independent federal organization, in 1984. Its congressional mandate is to focus on the great, unresolved challenges involved in controlling international violence in an interdependent world. Accordingly, the Institute uses its resources and standing as a national entity to confront issues traditionally outside the scope of interstate relations, such as ethnic and religious conflict, humanitarian crises, and human rights violations. Building on this mandate, the Institute—and especially its Virtual Diplomacy Initiative¹—has for some years explored the relevance of the information revolution for new approaches to international conflict management and has collaborated with other organizations in its field of endeavor.

This conference focuses on ways of developing interoperable communications systems that can facilitate information sharing during crises. Underlying this very practical problem is a fundamental need. That need is for better security, in the broadest sense, for people in peril and for those managing the rescue or care of such people. The new challenges of security in our time were made evident, of course, on September 11, 2001; but the special problem of security for the peacemakers was brought home to us by the horrific bombing of the UN headquarters in Baghdad on August 19, 2003. Many of us lost colleagues in that bombing—as did we in the case of the UN Secretary General's representative in Baghdad, Sergio Viera del Mello, with whom we had worked on the Cambodia settlement a decade ago. The vulnerability of such humanitarian workers has been repeatedly and tragically demonstrated over the past decade in Somalia, Rwanda, Bosnia, Kosovo, East Timor, Afghanistan, and now Iraq and Liberia.

Civilian aid workers, as well as the vulnerable population they seek to protect, are at risk in these circumstances largely because of the ill intent of bad actors. Yet those of us who organize the work of first responders bear some responsibility because we do not have our act together, so we can collaborate more effectively among ourselves and with those uniformed military and police who must provide security in conflict-ridden societies.

Interoperability

How can we make our humanitarian assistance operations more effective? The magic concept is "interoperability." Sometimes techies refer to the mechanics of interoperability as an electronic "handshake" that enables separate communication systems to "talk" to each other. Such metaphors try to explain in common parlance the conditions that enable nonhuman technologies to do "human" things, such as share information. During this conference we are applying a technical term, "interoperability," to a basically human endeavor of creating conditions that enable separate organizations to share information toward a common end.

Interoperability means not only technical and political compatibility, but also the will and the means to communicate, to cooperate, and to collaborate: in short, sharing a common culture of communication. As we well know, when systems are not politically, organizationally, or technically interoperable, information becomes "stovepiped" within a single organization, and systems cannot easily collaborate. The U.S. government was forced to recognize the costs of stovepiping in the post-9/11 analysis of its intelligence failures, and, indeed, of the inability of first responder organizations—the police, firefighters, and the New York Port Authority—to readily communicate. The problems created by a lack of information sharing in crisis conditions cannot be overstated.

Consider the post-Iraq war challenges: In assessments of the American operations six months after the end of major combat, we see a picture of how reconstruction-phase planning was undermined by a lack of information sharing among various government agencies. And, what is more disturbing, the valuable information in the "lessons learned" from the past decade's many humanitarian and political crises was either ignored or dismissed.²

As far back as Somalia and as recently as Afghanistan, the Institute of Peace's Virtual Diplomacy Initiative has convened workshops of military and civilian practitioners to identify the salient lessons to be learned from these interventions. Out of these assessments, we have extracted four key lessons, all related to the need to create a common culture of communication between civilian and military organizations and between civilian nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) during humanitarian or peace operations:

- Communications must flow in all directions, all the time.
- An organization's mission matters.
- Information structures need to be flexible (but not ad hoc).
- "Lessons learned" need to be learned and trained toward.

Communications Must Flow in All Directions, All the Time

The Institute's 1996 conference "Managing Communications: Lessons from Interventions in Africa" examined the effectiveness of communications and information-sharing practices between and within humanitarian and peacekeeping organizations operating in complex emergencies in Somalia, Rwanda, and Liberia. From that conference and every subsequent study, the Institute has undertaken on this and related subjects, we have learned that at least seven dimensions of communication must be in place and working during a crisis³:

1. Communication **within organizations**
2. Communication **between organizations** (bilaterally)
3. Communications **among organizations** (multilaterally, as in a networked community)
4. Communication **with local leaders**
5. Communication **with and between decision makers**
6. Communications **with the media**

7. Communication among the parties in the conflict

Perhaps most central to these assessments, we came to realize that communications interoperability is less a technical problem than a matter of organizational politics. Commitment at the very highest policy levels to implement and enforce omni-directional information sharing is required before there can be meaningful information exchange from headquarters all the way down into the field.

Organizational Mission Matters

All of us involved in crisis management and humanitarian assistance work want to achieve the same goal: conditions that will permit the emergence of a safe, just, and self-sustaining society out of the chaos of a crisis. Each organization's mission prescribes its own unique role in contributing to the attainment of that goal. Operating according to one's mission and special capabilities is the sine qua non of organizational effectiveness. Understanding and respecting one another's missions and the special means by which those missions are fulfilled are necessary conditions for effective collaboration in the complex environment of a crisis or battlefield and in the post-conflict reconstruction phase.

Last year, at the behest of our Department of Defense and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), the Institute of Peace and the RAND Corporation conducted a study of civilian-military interactions in Afghanistan. The results of this assessment—the "lessons learned"—were to be conveyed to those involved in planning the Iraq operation. The study observed that U.S. military personnel saw humanitarian assistance as one facet of their overall mission.⁴ They regarded the work of the NGOs as a means to a political end, and they weighed the priorities of assistance efforts against other priorities in the military's broader range of activities. For the NGOs and international operations (IOs), in contrast, assistance was—and is—the sole mission.

"Hearts and minds" campaigns waged by the military are not the same as humanitarian responses to victims in crisis. The first have an overtly political end. The second assume no particular political end and seek to conduct their activities as neutral actors in the field—operating under the security umbrella accorded the International Red Cross by the Geneva Convention, which we have come to term "humanitarian space." Political neutrality is critical to justifying humanitarian responders' access to victims behind combatant lines—just as force protection is critical to the operations of all military organizations. In order to effectively promote their respective missions, both the military and the humanitarian assistance organizations must have their own spheres of operation, or "spaces," and information integrity, even as they need to collaborate in working toward the common goal of protecting the local population. To cooperate when their needs and objectives overlap, they must share suitable, protected mechanisms for exchanging information. Instead of going around and around on this issue, which the two cultures have done for a decade, policymakers from both sides should evaluate the necessities and realities that face them in the field and manage their respective needs for information integrity and the means to cooperate. This is doable technically; whether sufficient political will exists to meet the challenge is the critical question.

Information Structures Need to Be Flexible (But Not Ad Hoc)

During a conference that Virtual Diplomacy cosponsored with the U.S. Army's 353 Civil Affairs Command in 2000, humanitarian workers and military participants alike stressed the need for a standardized structure of humanitarian coordination and information sharing to meet their respective and common needs.⁵

This call coincided with recommendations in the 2000 United Nations' "Report of the Secretary-General on the Implementation of the Report of the Panel on United Nations Peace Operations" (better known as the Brahimi Report) for specific actions to improve information sharing between civilian and military groups

during complex emergencies. In particular, the report recommended the design of new information management and planning capabilities involving military, humanitarian, human rights, and other entities engaged in complex emergencies.

Sad to say, however, our "lessons learned" assessments have taught us that humanitarian assistance organizations do not routinely or readily share information among themselves. They have yet to develop reliable standards, structures, and practices for information sharing and communication in field operations. Because they compete for funds and visibility, they often risk forfeiting success in their broader mission through collaborative efforts in the interest of enhancing their individual public visibility or financial gain.

There have been a number of efforts to deal with these problems, such as the humanitarian community information center (HIC) in Kosovo, Afghanistan, and now in Iraq and Liberia. HICs and humanitarian operational centers (HOCs) and NGO councils have played important and variously successful roles in field information sharing. Yet, each instance of cooperation has been worked out more or less on an ad hoc basis. To date, there has been no agreement about funding for mechanisms, procedures, responsibilities, or systems for information sharing, much less data standards. Moreover, scanty documentation has prevented others from learning from these useful and important experiences.

In response to the lack of institutionalized humanitarian information management practices, the Institute's Virtual Diplomacy Initiative has produced the Good Practices Database, which chronicles in computer-searchable form an oral history of the past decade's humanitarian communications and coordination structures and practices. Our objective has been to document what has worked in what conditions, and to describe the components of these various models to prospective practitioners for possible use in future interventions.

Despite the utility of this effort, a single, fixed modality of acquiring and circulating information would, in the long run, needlessly inhibit the innovative use of extant or emerging technologies that would enable humanitarians to acquire better ground truth in their areas of operation. The following collaborations demonstrate paradigms of public-private leading-edge partnerships:

- SPOT Image satellite imagery, among others, is now available through UNOSAT to all UN humanitarian agencies.
- ESRI's geographic information system (GIS) has been applied to rapid assessment forms, refugee flows, and the return of internally displaced people (IDPs) in Kosovo.
- Ericsson set up and maintained telecommunications systems for the UN system during the humanitarian response in Afghanistan in 2001-2002.
- And, most recently, IBM Finland is an active partner with Information Technology and Crisis Management (ITCM) in building an incident management system for civilian and military organizations in a crisis zone.

These innovative projects highlight the opportunity to create the public-private partnerships that this conference and its sponsors seek to foster and implement as a regular feature of information management during crises.

"Lessons Learned" Need to Be Learned!

Even with these visionary applications of information technologies to crisis management, we are far from fulfilling their potential. We tie our hands with outdated institutions and practices. And to paraphrase that oft-used phrase of George Santayana, those who are ignorant or dismissive of history's mistakes are bound to repeat them. A recently commissioned U.S. Department of Defense review of the post-conflict effort in Iraq by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)—Iraq's Post Conflict Reconstruction: A Field Review and Recommendations—concluded that the "lessons learned" from Afghanistan were not

merely not learned and applied in Iraq, but rather a wholly new and untested model was tried.⁶

Besides lacking the relevant experience, the U.S. military, in its efforts to prepare to win the peace, failed to focus on the critical need to develop a robust culture of communication with its NGO collaborators and the systems needed to support it. As the CSIS report concluded, this lack of internal communication among the governing elements of the Coalition Provisional Authority has contributed to the mission's current physical insecurity. And the lack of external communication with the Iraqi people has led to misunderstanding, alienation, and violence⁷. The consequences of a lack of communications in all directions at all times in Iraq is tragically evident—such as the downsizing of staff or outright departure from Iraq of several key IOs and NGOs: Oxfam; the Norwegian Refugees Council; Save the Children; the UN, and even the resilient ICRC.

Conclusion

Where does this leave us? How do we build a culture of communication as the centerpiece of the post-Cold War world's efforts at effective crisis management? How do we implement the recommendations from this conference's work and "lessons learned" from a decade of humanitarian interventions?

First, at a minimum, we must press our governments for immediate ratification of the Tampere Convention, which would allow emergency communication workers and systems to rapidly deploy across national borders in response to a crisis.⁸

Second, building on this international convention—a first step in recognizing the centrality and importance of information systems in crisis management—we must establish other conventions that require governmental and private organizations involved in crisis response to commit to recognized information-sharing standards and practices in the field.

Third, we must require, through force of treaty and training, respect for the distinct humanitarian and military spheres of operation in the field. We have to engender attitudes and practices of cooperation with and support for each other's missions.

Fourth, we must encourage our national and international agencies to routinely engage the private sector on international crisis management issues. We have the Crisis Management Initiative to thank for this mutually beneficial step. We must develop organizational policies and practices to facilitate more flexible interactions and system development processes between government agencies and private enterprises.

Fifth, we must improve forward planning, to ensure sufficient resource allocation for longer-term partnerships as opposed to fleeting and ad hoc arrangements. We must commit our governments and international organizations to review, learn, implement, and then train "lessons learned" to agencies and to rising diplomats, military personnel, and civilian humanitarian and development responders. This means that we must institutionalize internationally agreed-upon "lessons learned" into national doctrines, policies, and operating procedures.

And finally, we must establish at the highest level a policy framework that will embrace the efforts of government officials, the military, and all civilian responders on the ground. Former Finnish President Ahtisaari has personally advanced this conference's agenda with the secretary-generals of the United Nations, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, and the chairman of the European Union (EU) Military Committee and a high-level civilian official from the EU, all of whom endorsed it. We must all commit to follow his lead by calling for the political leadership within our own governments and organizations to mandate, fund, and implement a culture of communication through organizational information sharing and interoperability. Crisis management interoperability must become a routine agenda item for our individual and group advocacy.

Creating more effective communications practices in the service of protecting people during a crisis need not be an impossible dream. We have come very far in the past ten years. A common culture of communication—and the policies and procedures that would give it reality—is within our immediate grasp, a "handshake" away.

Advances along the road toward organizational interoperability must be aggressively initiated from the top with the goal of transforming organizations into portals rather than terminals in the global network. Our challenge is to ensure that new generations of international humanitarian responders have the institutions with which to conduct twenty-first century crisis management.

Endnotes

1. For a description of the initiative's history and activities, see <http://www.usip.org/virtualdiplomacy/index.html>.
2. John Hamre, Frederick Barton, Bathsheba Crocker, Johanna Mendelson-Forman, and Robert Orr, *Iraq's Post-Conflict Reconstruction: A Field Review and Recommendations*, July 17, 2003, pp. 5-7.
3. "Managing Communications: Lessons from Interventions in Africa," Virtual Diplomacy Series No. 2, January 2000, <http://www.usip.org/pubs/specialreports/early/managingcomm.html>.
4. OSD-USAID Civil Military Operations in Afghanistan Project, United States Institute of Peace/RAND, forthcoming.
5. "Taking It to the Next Level: Civilian-Military cooperation in Complex Emergencies," Virtual Diplomacy Series No. 10, August 2000. <http://www.usip.org/virtualdiplomacy/publications/reports/nextlevel.html>.
6. *Iraq's Post-Conflict Reconstruction: A Field Review*, p. 9.
7. *Ibid.*, pp. 5-7.
8. www.reliefweb.int/telecoms/tampere/index.html.

Related Resources

- ["Towards Interoperability in Crisis Managment" conference](#)
- [The Information Technology and Crisis Management](#), Crisis Management Initiative, Crisis Response Executive Advisory TEam (CREATE) groups
- [Report of the Secretary-General](#) on the implementation of the Report of the Panel on United Nations Peace Operations (aka "Brahimi Report")
- [Tampere Convention](#)
- ["Iraq's Post-Conflict Reconstruction: A Field Review and Recommendations"](#) CSIS

About the Report

This publication was presented as a speech at a conference, "Towards Interoperability in Crisis Management," cosponsored by the United States Institute of Peace's Virtual Diplomacy Initiative (USIP/VDI) and the Crisis Management Initiative's Information Technology and Crisis Management project (CMI/ITCM) in Helsinki, Finland, September 11-14, 2003. Former Finnish president Martti Ahtisaari, president of CMI, provided the opening framework for the conference; Richard Solomon, president of the United States Institute of Peace, delivered this keynote speech at the conference's culminating banquet.

The conference, the second in a series launched by CMI, was organized to explore practical steps toward improving information sharing, coordination, and cooperation from headquarters to the field and between and among the various organizations responding to humanitarian crises, a subject that VDI has pursued since 1995.

Conference participants included senior management from the European Union (EU), the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the United Nations (UN), the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), government agencies, practitioners from international, regional and local nongovernmental organizations, the military, information and communications technology companies and standards-making organizations.

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