Keynote Presentation:

A Tale of Two Cities: Banda Aceh, New Orleans, and Humanitarian Operations

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ABSTRACT

The international community provides humanitarian assistance through a complex web of agreements and institutions that simultaneously support and obstruct each other in their work. While most support during a disaster is provided by local actors, international organizations often provide the framework for funding and co-ordination of responses in those countries where national or local institutions are unable to cope – whether because of the scale of a disaster (such as the Pakistan earthquake) or because of issues around government capacity (such as in the Democratic Republic of Congo).

In recent years, the humanitarian community has undergone a massive transformation – one that is still going on today. Partly those changes relate to the political environment in which we operate now, particularly the ‘war on terror’; partly, they are shaped by the increasing frequency and severity of natural disasters, although many conflict-related emergencies that dominated the 1990s and early 2000s continue. Partly, however, they relate to the way that technology has changed both the response and the context in which that response is made.

While domestic emergency management practice relies on certain assumptions – the establishment of clear lines of communication and command, centralized and coordinated decision-making, specialized agencies providing critical public services, continuity of presence (particularly of government) – humanitarian actors proceed on directly opposite assumptions. As a result there are critical differences in the design and implementation of information systems for relief and peace operations, compared with the requirements of emergency management.

Comparing the responses to the Indian Ocean tsunami and Hurricane Katrina exposes many of these differences, and raises questions about how compatible the two approaches might be. While there may be lessons for the humanitarian community to learn from the emergency management discipline, what is more important is to build a common language to enable these two sets of actors to co-operate more effectively – something that will become increasingly critical as they interact more in future.

Paul Currian runs a consultancy specializing in information management for humanitarian operations. He is currently carrying out an assessment for the Interagency Working Group (CARE, Catholic Relief Services, International Rescue Committee, Mercy Corps, Oxfam, Save the Children and World Vision) on NGO use of ICT to respond to emergencies. He is working on a range of other projects including research into the use of ICT for peace, developing open source software for disaster response, a GIS data model for humanitarian work, and humanitarian data standards. Previously, Paul was Regional Information Manager for the tsunami response with the World Food Program, and developed the Humanitarian Information Centre (HICs) concept for the United Nations, working on HICs in Kosovo, Afghanistan, Iraq and Liberia.