

INFORMATION, INFORMATION AND MORE INFORMATION

By John Owen-Davies

Charles Montesquieu, French 18th century lawyer and philosopher

LONDON - As the world enters a new millennium, one of the more pressing problems it faces is how to contain complex humanitarian disasters.

In the past two decades, natural and man-made disasters have become tragic staples of daily life, be they hurricanes in Central America, refugees fleeing fighting in Central Africa and the Balkans, cyclones battering Bangladesh or earthquakes ripping through parts of Asia.

After hearing of the latest disaster from television, newspapers or the radio, most people turn to other matters, assuming that a well-oiled relief machine will go into action.

Reality is often very different. To many insiders, the multi-faceted disaster prevention and relief industry is beset by problems including poor coordination and communications, deep-rooted suspicion and the stretching of a dwindling pot of cash given by a general public beset by "donor fatigue".

Some humanitarian non-governmental organisations (NGOs), with funds from government agencies, complain that they are expected to act as "eyes and ears" in disaster zones in places such as earthquake zones in northeastern Afghanistan, thus jeopardising their humanitarian ideals.

These same organisations are also grappling with problems of security for

their workers in hostile environments, such as Chechnya, and demands for increased accountability, particularly for the money they hand out in disaster zones.

The picture looks bleak. But there is a common thread - it is the need for accurate and speedy information.

Some leading relief operators have long recognised the need for such information. But information is only part of a solution to dealing with complex emergencies if temporary "band aid" results are going to be avoided.

There are no simple solutions.

"It must be said that relief agencies no longer have privileged knowledge of what is happening in the field," Urs Boegli, head of media services for the Geneva-based International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), told a conference in London.

"When I started working for the ICRC, reporters were queuing up in front of our field offices because we went further and we knew more... Some (reporters) know more than relief workers or at least as much. This reality should serve to foster dialogue," he added.

We are living in what has been called the Information Age, which has seen the advent of a cultural revolution. And, like all such revolutions, there are political implications.

Communities struggling with this new age - which can also be described

as the "Age of Confusion" or the "Age of Information Overload" -- include humanitarian NGOs in problem areas and governments.

In this new era, information technology is the underlying theme, but the major issue remains how the technology is used.

"In a world of the increasingly interconnected 'infosphere' of ubiquitous communications and information, governments and their various agencies have lost their monopoly and control over information. Power, force and information no longer define the nation state," a Western communications official said.

The so-called cultural revolution had a clear impact for NGOs in the Great Lakes crisis of 1996-97, which saw the rise of information-smart commanders with highly sophisticated strategies of information control. This shattered assumptions by the humanitarian community of information superiority.

The exact shape of the cultural revolution is still unclear. The challenge is adapting to the speed, size and scale of its spread. This is the current issue for the so-called wired elite.

A next major global challenge will be how to bridge the gulf between the information-rich and the information-poor on a national and global basis.

The 1990s have been a disaster watershed. And, if projections for the first two decades of the new millennium are anything to go by, there is worse to come.

The scale of the challenge is evident from estimates that by 2012 of the

7.4 billion world population, an estimated 1.7 billion people - nearly double today's numbers -- will be trapped in impermeable poverty, mainly in large conurbations in the Third World.

This, together with a possible severe adjustment to the nation state system, increased alienation and insecurity and easier access to weapons of mass destruction, gives great cause for concern.

Major players in the disaster prevention and relief industry, including governments and NGOs, now realise that keys to success and saving lives include access to fast and accurate information, and the sharing of information.

This information "transition" has not won general acceptance and is unlikely to do so given the secretive nature of various organisations in the field.

"The well functioning of modern societies is based on the good and fast circulation of information. This is even more relevant in the case of a society vulnerable to natural hazards," The U.N.'s IDNDR (International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction) secretariat said.

"... Accurate information and its regular delivery is of importance in all sectors of decision-making as people's lives are at stake," it added.

A senior official with an international relief organisation said: "A key to the coordination of international (disaster) response is through open sharing of information.

"Shortcomings and even disorganisation or some degree of chaos are

inherent in any disaster situation, even in the most developed country. Any attempt to hide shortcomings will only stimulate the curiosity of the international mass media and undermine the international community's confidence in the assessment of needs provided officially," the official added.

Last year, 1998, was a worse than average year for natural disasters -- some 50,000 people were killed and economic losses exceeded \$90 billion. This compared with 13,000 killed and economic losses of about \$30 billion in 1997.

These statistics, from a major insurer, do not include man-made disasters. Each year, on average, disasters of all kinds kill more than 133,000 people and leave more than 140 million homeless.

There are some fundamental questions to be asked here. Why these massive tolls when more information on disasters, both potential and actual, are being produced than ever before?

While in the midst of a global information revolution, with some disasters being reported almost in real time, there are countless meetings and conferences on early warning, disaster prevention, disaster relief and so on.

Considerable emphasis has been placed in recent years on early warning systems and indices for potential disasters from earthquakes and volcanic eruptions to civil strife.

There is considerable doubt among much of the humanitarian community

about the effectiveness or usefulness of early warning systems and, instead, they put an emphasis on "early response".

Randolph Kent, a British-based expert on disaster issues, wrote: "In part, early warning systems are regarded as a means to wrap the aura of science around the self-evident and, in part, as a method of predicting the obvious and accepting that the unobvious is too difficult to predict.

"Nevertheless various agencies have made forays into the future as evidenced by a variety of agency-supported seminars and published papers. The output of these activities, however, does not seem to be directed towards mainstream activities or systematic follow-ups.

"They appear to be left on the periphery since speculation seems to be intellectually challenging but generally is perceived to have little direct consequence upon the roles and responsibilities of most humanitarian organisations," Kent added in a paper entitled "Humanitarian Futures in the Year 2012: Practical Perspectives".

The truth is that many NGOs and other organisations in the disaster-related field get their early warning reports from major newspapers and magazines, as well as from their own profiles of specific regions or countries.

Problems in the disaster relief industry are made more difficult by divisions between some of the disciplines in disaster management - including academics and NGOs and, sometimes, between donors, U.N. bodies and NGOs.

The overall answer for these woes comes down to communication and

information. But this is easier said than done in a business that often has sets of rigid, pre-set ideas among different players on how things should be conducted.

The Geneva-based International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) is among major players which see information as one of the ways ahead. "We are in the information business," a senior IFRC official said.

It was in this atmosphere that AlertNet (www.alertnet.org), an online news and communications service for the international disaster relief community, was launched in 1997 by The Reuters Foundation, the humanitarian and educational arm of Reuters global news and information Group.

When people talk of information and communication they are referring generally to the Internet and the media. Both are powerful but are far from universally accepted. There are suspicions, often deep-rooted, on both sides.

The Internet has grown tremendously since 1981, when there were 235 interlinked computers. This grew to 300,000 in 1991 and then again to 100 million in 1998 following the introduction of the world wide web and web browsers six years earlier.

But even if the number reaches one billion by 2005, as some experts predict, a large portion of the world will not participate. Three-quarters of the people in the world do not own a telephone, let alone a modem.

A fundamental issue for NGOs in the field is time. It is not possible to

wait for comprehensive information, which is only available in retrospect

NGOs are still reassessing their failures in the Great Lakes crisis of 1996-97. Information and data were mismanaged and assumptions of information superiority were shattered by a systematic campaign of disinformation and information control on the ground.

NGO communications were intercepted, their staff intimidated and their movements restricted. The use of surveillance techniques was justified by Rwandan Vice President Kagame.

"NGO information is not just humanitarian information, it is also military information," Kagame was quoted in a report - "New Challenges and Problems for Information Management in Complex Emergencies" -- by Nik Gowing, a senior presenter with the British Broadcasting Corporation. The report was published in May 1998.

In response to the pressures on them, some leading humanitarian NGOs believe information technology is a "false God" -- technology is their security risk.

Many NGOs believe use of the Internet in disaster zones is of little value. They see e-mail as more cost- and time-effective as a means of communication.

On the horizon are a host of new technologies that will give NGOs and the media opportunities available previously only to governments.

New satellites systems such as Iridium are now live. It will eventually

consist of 66 low earth satellites. In the future, Iridium plus other systems such as Teledisic/Celestia, with hundreds more satellites planned, may provide an ubiquitous information environment with instant data and voice communications on a global basis.

But while the latest gismos are awaited with relish by many people, it is often forgotten that such technologies may have little impact in remote or poor areas of the world. Wind-up radios and short-wave radio have important roles to play and are likely to be around well into the new millennium.

To return to the present. Journalists and humanitarian organisations generally have a love-hate relationship, sometimes due to wrong perceptions. On the journalists' side there is a feeling that the NGOs are sometimes amateurish in their approach and that one of their main aims is to attract more donations.

Some aid workers say they are unimpressed with journalists who flit in and out of disaster zones, akin to "war zone tourists".

But this does not address the fact that some journalists covering wars and disasters are full time foreign correspondents who have lived in a specific region for several years and will continue to do so long after the last emergency relief worker has left.

Relief organisations can learn from the media, especially foreign correspondents to whom accountability and security are important.

That aside, the overall message is clear - information, information and more

information.

(1,974 words)

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John Owen-Davies has spent much of the past 34 years as a news agency and newspaper journalist in the Third World. He was Reuters bureau chief in India, Indonesia, Nigeria and Turkey, and has also worked in the Middle East, Japan, South Korea, Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, Southern Africa, the United States, Germany and Northern Ireland.

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