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International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies



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at the World Summit on the Information Society Tunis phase, and beyond**

ICT For Humanity – The Perspective of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies

In 1970 a major cyclone hit Bangladesh causing severe flooding and killing almost 500,000 people. The cyclone was accurately tracked by weather forecasters around the world who were well aware of the potentially devastating effect of the storm, and who watched in dismay as their predictions were realised in a catastrophic loss of life.

Following this cyclone, the Bangladesh government implemented a community based cyclone preparedness programme. This programme involves disseminating the information processed by highly sophisticated weather forecasting tools to the population in the path of the storm. Once again in 1997 the country was ravaged by yet another high intensity storm. This time more than 1 million people were evacuated and the death toll was less than 200 lives.

The tools for dissemination of storm warning information are transistor radios, megaphones, flags and volunteers from the Bangladesh Red Crescent Society. The key to the success of this programme is in the focus on how to get the warnings into the community. As for Information and Communications Technologies, the Information is known, the Technologies are basic and the Communication works because of the committed Bangladesh Red Crescent volunteers.

The debate on Information and Communication Technologies under way at WSIS should take note of the experiences such as those mentioned above. ICT can only realise its potential to change the lives of vulnerable communities if the “last mile” issues are addressed in a manner appropriate to the local culture and environment.

The International Federation advocates for the development of ICT to adequately address the needs of vulnerable communities in all countries of the world. We term the effort “e-preparedness”.

e-preparedness includes the “last mile” services required for disaster preparedness that can best be delivered over ICTs. It also includes services to support the Red Cross and Red Crescent National Societies in their community based health programs and advocating for the vulnerable.

An example worthy of mention is a small pilot project undertaken by the Egyptian Red Crescent Society in conjunction with the United Nations Development Programme. A branch in the Governorate of Minia set up a telecentre to provide guided access to the internet for the local community.

This facility made use of the existing resources of the local branch, including computers and internet connection. This was opened to the community for a number of hours per day. The Egyptian Red Crescent provided interpretation so that the local people could interact effectively with the internet and find the information that they needed – an “internet pilot”.



This project underlines the potential value of structures such as the Red Cross and Red Crescent branch networks working within their communities. It is the volunteers in these networks that allow the full capability of ICT to be realized. Without the “internet pilots”, the vast repository of information that is the internet is unattainable to so many individuals, particularly in vulnerable communities.

Against this backdrop it is disappointing to see that the Draft Tunis Agenda for Action has only passing reference to the value of volunteers in ICT. The effective use of ICT by all communities will require a sustained effort to continually introduce evolving technologies to those who are less comfortable with ICT – the old, the illiterate, the displaced or those who speak a different language. In this effort volunteers will play a key role, as we hope will all Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies.

We see significant interest from the youth sections of Red Cross and Red Crescent societies in understanding and developing ICT applications for the vulnerable. It is an opportunity that must be encouraged; providing motivation for our volunteers as well as the development of the next generation of leaders.

The challenges that need to be faced in the provision of ICT to the vulnerable are mainly in finding and developing the human resources. There is the need for training and continuous lifelong learning. The skills that exist in the world in industry and government need to be harnessed and brought to bear in this vital task.

The International Federation understands that partnerships with industry, with government instrumentalities and with other humanitarian players are vital in this area of endeavour. Our collaboration with major international corporations such as Microsoft, Ericsson and Cisco provides an opportunity to ensure that our ICT systems are close to world’s best practice.

Additionally the partnerships with UN and other organisations are important. One example is the close working relationship with the World Health Organization. While this relates in the first case to co-operation in the field of health campaigns, it has also allowed the International Federation to access a world class e-recruitment application that WHO developed with a number of other UN agencies.

To conclude, the humanitarian world must commit to the costs and opportunities of ICT. We must not invent new programs in ICT for their own sake; but we must ensure that our existing programmes take full advantage of ICT, even if it means fundamental changes to the way we do our work.

We must accept that implementation down to community level takes time and challenges many of the conventional technologies. It is only through a committed volunteer network backed by government determination and supported by the private sector that we can hope to secure our ICT for Humanity objective and make a difference to the lives and livelihoods of the world’s people.