



IPI ROUNDTABLE

“Crowdsourcing and Conflict Prevention”

Meeting Summary

On Wednesday 9 November 2011, the International Peace Institute and the Bureau for Crisis Prevention and Recovery of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) held a roundtable discussion to consider the topic of Crowdsourcing for Collaborative Conflict Prevention.

The meeting featured several interactive presentations on applications of crowdsourcing technologies in the area of conflict prevention and crisis mapping and their possible integration with existing international and local conflict prevention frameworks. A live demonstration of how mobile phones can be used for crowdsourced data collection and crisis mapping was also conducted.

The group of representatives from UN Member States, the United Nations, technology companies, academia, and NGOs at the roundtable combined expertise in the areas of crowdsourcing, crisis mapping, and conflict prevention. They discussed the emerging trends concerning current as well as possible future uses of crowdsourcing tools for conflict prevention.

The goals of the meeting were to tease out how the use of new technologies can strengthen local conflict mitigation and prevention structures. To achieve this, the meeting was aimed at shedding light on the possible uses of the new technologies for crowdsourcing, at sharing lessons learned in projects so far, and at exploring further how the use of communication technology can strengthen local and national infrastructures for peace.

Crowdsourcing is a methodology involving the use of new technologies and social media for gathering and sharing real-time information generated voluntarily and sometimes anonymously. It is a way to harness the information of people on the ground using technologies they already have to transmit this data. Many applications are being developed, tested, and gradually implemented in a variety of fields.

In conflict prevention, another area where crowdsourcing may be a beneficial tool, large amounts of real-time information that can be gathered via crowdsourcing technologies have the potential to drastically improve knowledge of dynamically evolving situations and to accelerate possible interventions. As of today, a multitude of international, local, modern, as well as traditional conflict prevention mechanisms are in place. New technologies, such as crowdsourcing, can provide a simple and low cost way to mobilize localized and participatory preventive multi-stakeholder action

in potential conflict situations. As such, crowdsourcing can be a complementary tool for existing conflict prevention frameworks.

Meeting participants emphasized in particular the potential of crowdsourcing technologies to broaden participation in political transformation processes and conflict prevention. Broad participation means that both warning and responses can take place at the local level, giving more ownership and responsibility to the people that are directly impacted by potential or actual outbreaks of violence.

While crowdsourcing technologies are still a relatively new phenomenon in the area of conflict prevention, some experiences have been gathered in the recent past.

A wide variety of tools have been developed which allow for quick and inexpensive deployment of these systems in diverse environments. Examples include mapping platforms such as Ushahidi, which displays crisis information submitted by users via SMS and social media on a map; FrontlineSMS, which is a free large scale text messaging service that can be implemented without the use of the internet; or FreedomFone, which is a system that enables data collection over the phone using voice only which is useful in areas where low levels of literacy are a challenge.

A lot of the recent applications of these technologies for conflict prevention have been short-term interventions, centered on elections. UNDP has pioneered crowdsourcing for conflict prevention during the constitutional referendum in Kenya in 2010. To prevent outbreaks of violence – with the memories of the 2007/2008 post-election crisis still fresh – the *Uwiano* platform was deployed. This platform consisted of a toll-free SMS service allowing people from around Kenya to report threats. A total of 20,000 SMS messages were received, analyzed, and verified by volunteers and responses initiated involving civil society groups and the police. The referendum passed without incidents of violence. Similarly, during elections in Kyrgyzstan, Nigeria, and Liberia UNDP has deployed various crowdsourcing systems to monitor elections and election-related violence. Especially in countries like Nigeria with vast territories and populations, technology may be the only way to track events and initiate responses.

Maps are another area where crowdsourcing technologies are often used. Options range from pre-existing, free platforms to more elaborate custom solutions. During crises and in the aftermath of specific events, users often refer to map platforms such as google maps. For example, within minutes after the earthquake struck Japan in spring of 2011, people marked where water and shelter were available on a publicly shared map and volunteers helped develop the maps of newly emerging state South Sudan after the maps were opened up for public contributions. In Uganda and Central Africa, the LRA Crisis Tracker is a custom-built mapping application which relies on crowdsourced information to display incidents of LRA-related violence, abductions, etc.

Crowdsourcing technology can be deployed quickly and often at relatively low cost, but how it is used poses a number of challenges. The main challenge is to get enough users to participate. This involves a dual challenge of user acquisition and outreach as crowdsourcing platforms require both a large number of users and of consumers and often these groups even overlap. In order to participate in crowdsourcing, users also need to have basic trust in the system. This also means that it has to be ensured that the safety of contributors is not in jeopardy – this would undermine participation and be the opposite effect of what crowdsourcing technologies are intended to achieve. This is a particular challenge in countries where the state and state authority are perceived to be part of the problem. Are authorities capturing crowdsourcing platforms as a means of intelligence gathering and state control, or are they responsibly using the information to dispatch police units to protect populations?

Broad and real-time participation are the defining elements of crowdsourcing, yet, they also pose problems. When large amounts of information are collected from a large number of often anonymous contributors in real-time, the information becomes increasingly hard to manage and questions over its accuracy arise. Vetting such information takes time – there is a direct tradeoff between accuracy and speed. One participant noted in this context that “good enough information now is probably better than perfect information in two weeks.” In the field of conflict prevention, this dilemma is particularly acute – it is a matter of life and death. If a real threat is not addressed, because information has not been vetted or if wrong or intentionally malicious information gets disseminated that could fan conflict in a certain area, the results can be catastrophic.

Finally, conference participants agreed that directing responses, that is, actually preventing violence from breaking out is the greatest challenge of all. When people provide information, for example via SMS, and report an imminent threat of violence, they expect a response. When responses are not forthcoming, people lose the incentive to participate in a crowdsourcing system, and the system cannot function. Yet, responding in a fast and effective manner across vast territories, is very difficult. And in all of these efforts, the real goal must be to prevent genuinely, that is to not merely react to incidents, but to proactively gather information and put structures into place which can prevent conflict from breaking out.

Achieving this is very difficult. In the meantime, crowdsourcing technologies applied in the area of conflict prevention are in and of themselves a kind of response in as much as they allow people to share information quickly and with a large number of people, thereby potentially deterring hate speech and acts of violence from occurring.
