5. Recommendations

All recommendations are intended for IWG member agencies, with some relevance to wider bodies of which IWG agencies are members, such as NetHope or InterAction. Recommendations should be viewed as collective, rather than targeted at individual agencies.

Information and Communications Technology

- Include ICT assessment (focusing in particular on emergency telecommunications) as a standard part of emergency needs assessments. Staff with the necessary expertise should be in the first wave of staff responding to an emergency. This is essential if agencies are to implement a "comms first" approach to emergency response and establish good lines of communication with their field staff at the earliest opportunity.

- Ensure better coverage of the programme area and more effective use of resources through joint ICT assessments. (The basic elements of such an assessment include physical locations, coverage (existing and planned), user requirements, budget constraints, legal frameworks (including import and licensing) and local market conditions.) The starting point for this will be a common format for ICT assessment in emergencies. In the short term, carry out joint ICT assessments; for the long term, investigate the possibility of forming a joint ICT team.

- Develop a common tool for gathering user ICT requirements (hardware and software), using an agreed methodology.

- Develop protocols for establishing ICT co-ordination meetings in all future emergency responses. These protocols should be developed with NetHope, but should be applicable even where NetHope is not involved.

- Ensure NGO representation at UN cluster meetings for security and data communications, using the group mentioned above as the basis for co-ordination with the UN. At a minimum, one staff member should be in regular attendance.

- Promote awareness amongst member agencies of the Tampere Convention as an advocacy tool for ensuring rapid deployment of telecommunications equipment. Agencies should ensure wide circulation of the Convention within relevant units, and use it as part of their lobbying during emergency response.

- Develop and implement Minimum Operating Standards for Telecommunications (with a clear focus on security), drawing on work already done by InterAction, CARE and others. NetHope may be the venue for this, although there is more chance of agreement if a smaller number of organisations begin the process.

- Develop clear criteria for the operational environments in which different technology options should be deployed (i.e. what are the factors that an ICT assessment should identify to trigger deployment of a particular tool?), and clear criteria for ICT support requirements for emergency response (i.e. how many ICT support staff are required per number of total staff).

- Measure and evaluate the use of ICT staff time to ensure it is effectively allocated to mission-critical tasks, and ensure that ICT issues are included in all lessons learned, after action reviews, real time evaluations, etc.

Information Management

- Invest in building a W3 approach that can be used as a basis for co-ordination with the UN, national governments and/or other NGO co-ordination bodies.

- More clearly delineate user requirements for specific information, particularly taking into account differences between national and international staff in terms of access to information, information requirements, and understanding of that information.

- Establish protocols for co-ordinating needs assessments to ensure more complete coverage and to avoid the persistent duplication that is currently the norm.

- Agree a common baseline data set that can be used as the basis for all IWG member agency needs assessments. Baseline data includes fields such as settlement locations, population numbers, damage to infrastructure, presence of basic services, etc, but would not preclude members from including their own agency-specific questions.

- Define data requirements for both operational and programme activities. These definitions should draw on existing M&E tools used by member agencies, and seek to establish a baseline data profile that all agencies can use to develop country- and programme-specific M&E.

- If the four activities above can be agreed, a joint approach to the UN should be made at Inter-Agency Standing Committee level to develop a common assessment(s) format and process that meets the needs of all actors in the response.

- Develop protocols for capturing security information and networks, particularly in the handover process.

- Develop and implement model Information Flow Charts for use by agencies in emergency response, clearly assigning focal points for units, allocating responsibilities for information sharing, identifying clear channels and listing timelines for the process of sharing specific information. Field staff should be consulted in this process to ensure that it does not become a headquarters-driven exercise, and the chart should be viewed as a dynamic management tool. Flow Charts would be useful primarily within agencies, but a similar exercise could be carried out between IWG members to enable more rapid information sharing.

- Develop and implement protocols for sharing information between IWG member agencies at the field and headquarters level. This should focus in particular on developing, presenting and planning from agreed numbers for beneficiaries, requirements, etc.

- Invest in geographic information as a core part of data collection. This investment should begin with all emergency staff having GPS capability when they deploy, either through Thuraya or through a dedicated GPS unit. In addition to investing in the necessary hardware, this will require training for staff in how to use GPS properly.

- Develop geographic information systems, either within the IWG membership or working with outside agencies, to ensure that the NGO community has access to the map products it requires for its work and to support government and UN efforts.

- Develop a common format for situation reporting, enabling agencies to more easily share information with each other, and develop joint reports for co-ordination, advocacy, fundraising and financial tracking. This format should balance geographic and sectoral requirements, and also quantitative (figures) and qualitative (narrative) components.

- Develop alternatives to 'traditional' models and formats of situation reporting. In particular, agencies must ensure that information gathered and presented is specifically linked to decision-making, and explore the use of web-based communication (such as blogs and wikis)[10] to add more value to reports.

Support Requirements

- Build a shared knowledge base on the use of emergency telecommunications, based on the ICT assessments mentioned above and the experience of existing country programmes. This knowledge base – covering issues such as the capacities and requirements of different technologies, the legislative and technical environments of different countries, the characteristics of various vendors, and so on – should be web-based and open for agency staff to contribute and update as needed on an ongoing basis.

- As part of this knowledge base, identify and register individuals with specific ICT expertise (as we already do with sectoral skills such as shelter). Discuss the possible mechanisms (including funding) for developing this register into a shared helpdesk function that can provide support to all IWG agency staff in an emergency.

- Discuss the possibility of recruiting or seconding a facilitator (through an IWG or NetHope member) to deal with issues such as customs, training, installation on a full time basis.

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[10] Blogs (or weblogs) are online journals presented in a chronological format; wikis are collaborative websites that can be edited by anybody given access.

- Develop a curriculum for capacity development around specific IWG member interests. Training could be provided through trainers already working within the IWG (or wider NetHope) membership and supported by the private sector actors already involved in humanitarian response.

- Discuss the possibility of establishing joint support for common maintenance and troubleshooting needs. Obviously this would be more difficult to apply to corporate systems, but general communications, hardware problems, networking and helpdesk functions could be supported by a joint agency effort.

- Promote cross-fertilisation of staff skills through exchange and loan programmes, particularly returning staff to their home countries in a professional capacity where possible.