1. Executive Summary

1.1 Background

The evaluation was initiated by the United Nation's Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA): i) to assess whether the ReliefWeb web site project meets the needs of its target audiences in an efficient and effective manner, in line with its mandate; ii) to provide accountability to donors, OCHA management and users; and iii) to provide clear recommendations and lessons learned for the future direction of the project and its products and services.

ReliefWeb is a ten-year old web site project that consolidates information from many sources about humanitarian emergencies and disasters. ReliefWeb was created in 1996 by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), growing out of a broad consensus in the early 1990s about the need for a clearinghouse for humanitarian information to enable decision makers in the field and at headquarters to make informed decisions. ReliefWeb was endorsed by the UN General Assembly in 1997 Resolution 51/194[1], and affirmed again in 2003 Resolution 57/153[2]. The mandate of ReliefWeb is:

> "…to strengthen the response capacity of the humanitarian relief community through the timely dissemination of reliable information on response, preparedness, and disaster prevention. This is accomplished by providing guaranteed access to time critical reports, maps and financial contributions to both decision makers at headquarters and to relief teams in the field." [3]

The site has grown steadily in usage and functionality since its inception, and now provides a major repository of situation reports, policy documents, maps, information on relief contributions, training resources, job vacancy announcements, and other resources. The content on ReliefWeb can be accessed on the web site and via email alerts according to specific issues, countries and regions. In the past five years the use of ReliefWeb has grown from about 50,000 "page views" per average weekday to about 200,000. The number of subscribers to ReliefWeb's email alert services has grown from about 45,000 in 2003 to about 130,000 today. ReliefWeb is highly visible on the web, and is one of the most prominent sites on the internet today on issues of humanitarian relief.

ReliefWeb is run by a team of 23 individuals located in offices in three different time zones - New York, Geneva, and Kobe. This three-office approach enables ReliefWeb to track and post new information on a 24-hour cycle. ReliefWeb staff reviews hundreds of web sites and email alerts on a daily basis to collect information which is then vetted for quality and posted on ReliefWeb. In 2005 ReliefWeb staff posted an average of about 160 documents each weekday for a total of 39,000 documents for that year. Of these documents posted, some 80% were collected by ReliefWeb staff scanning the web, and the other 20% submitted to ReliefWeb by "content partners".

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[1] "The General Assembly…requests the Secretary-General to further develop ReliefWeb as the global humanitarian information system for the dissemination of reliable and timely information on emergencies and natural disasters, and encourages all Governments, the United Nations agencies, funds and programmes and other relevant organizations, including non-governmental organizations, to support ReliefWeb and actively participate in the ReliefWeb information exchange, through the Department of Humanitarian Affairs."

[2] http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/hlp.nsf/db900ByKey/GA57153?OpenDocument

[3] ReliefWeb Project Description – Draft Version 1,0 – Dec 18, 2005

ReliefWeb has regularly enhanced its services over the past ten years, most recently with the completion of a major redesign and improvements to site features in 2005. Previously, in 2001 ReliefWeb added email alerts to provide automated notification of new documents and job vacancies; in 2005 ReliefWeb also added RSS feeds (Really Simple Syndication) which allows web users and other web sites to track new information posted to ReliefWeb; and in 2006 ReliefWeb is undertaking enhancements to the technical infrastructure for the site.

The core operating budget for ReliefWeb is about USD 2,000,000 (2005), all of which is contributed by donors. In 2005 six donors contributed more than USD 200,000 each, including the USA, Japan, Norway, Sweden, ECHO, and UK. Over the life of the project a total of 13 countries have made contributions to ReliefWeb, with the USA the major founding donor and the largest overall contributor.

1.2 Evaluation Approach

The evaluation team used a combination of broad audience surveys, detailed in-person interviews, and its own expert review and judgment to assess the usage, value and success of ReliefWeb. It surveyed more than 1,300 ReliefWeb users working in more than 139 countries and about 80 "content partners" residing in 31 countries. It conducted about 50 face-to-face discussions with a total of more than 150 individuals across Nairobi, Geneva, London, Washington, Brussels and New York. These discussions also included phone-based interviews with groups of humanitarian workers at Regional Office locations in Dakar, Panama, Bangkok and Kobe. The evaluation team also used its expert judgment on the performance and operation of ReliefWeb, drawing on the team's experience in building and managing web sites on international policy issues.

The major findings of the evaluation are presented here:

1.3 Users and Usage

ReliefWeb is generally reaching its target audience of humanitarian workers, and in particular decision makers, at UN agencies, NGOs and other international organizations, and governments. Users surveyed reported residing in 139 countries, with 33% of them working with International NGOs, 16% with UN agencies, 11% with governments, and 9% with National/Local NGOs. ReliefWeb is reaching and serving decision makers, with 29% of users reporting that they are working as a "program manager" or "senior manager/policy maker". About 9% of users surveyed report being "Relief worker/field level" (and the proportion is likely higher). In terms of geographic focus, 37% of users surveyed report that the focus of their work is on issues in Africa.

The usage of ReliefWeb has grown strongly over the past ten years and shows good user loyalty. Overall site usage has increased in the past five years from about 50,000 page views per weekday to about 200,000. User loyalty is strong, with about 70% of the users surveyed reporting that they visit the site at least once a week – and this is consistent across NGO, government, and UN audiences. They also report using ReliefWeb more than they use web sites like BBC News, IRIN News, and AlertNet. Users report several valuable functions that ReliefWeb provides for them, namely:

- **A "one-stop shop" for humanitarian information**, to enable people to stay on top of the developments of the various organizations working in a region or a country.

- **The humanitarian perspective on situations**, going further than the typical media sources - to explore and explain the humanitarian implications of events.

- **A complete repository and archive of background information**, to support, for example, research in preparation for mission planning, or triangulating in writing a situation report.
- **Visibility to relief organizations**, sharing with peer organizations and with donors the work of relief organizations, and importantly, their smaller partners.

There are, of course, people not now using ReliefWeb across all types of organizations in the humanitarian sector. The evaluation team cannot quantify the size of this group, but describes here some typical characteristics of "non-users":

- **National-level staff of governments and NGOs**. The non-users in these organizations may not be aware of ReliefWeb, may lack reliable and affordable internet access, and/or find it difficult to use an English-based web site like ReliefWeb.

- **International NGO staff at HQ or Regional Levels**. The non-users here in fact read ReliefWeb's job vacancy emails, but rarely use the site for anything else, saying that it does not provide them anything special beyond what they can get elsewhere. They value getting information directly "from the source" and also from a wide range of views – beyond the UN and other major players.

- **Managers and Decision Makers**. These non-users are managers who suffer from information overload, and struggle to stay on top of all the information that flows their way. Earlier in their careers they used ReliefWeb regularly, but do not now have the patience to wade through all the information it provides, and so rely on their staff to send to them what is relevant.

1.4 Products and Services

"Job Vacancies" is the most popular service on ReliefWeb, receiving 35% of all ReliefWeb site traffic and a large share of all email subscribers. Because humanitarian jobs are often short-duration and urgent, the Job Vacancies listing and emails are widely seen as very valuable operational support for the humanitarian sector.

Other services on ReliefWeb that are highly valued include those which provide timely information – Latest Updates, Email Alerts, Headlines, and also Country Pages. The maps on ReliefWeb are also widely used and recognized as valuable.

Users report that additional services they would like from ReliefWeb include: analysis of situations to highlight what is most relevant and important; information on "who is doing what, where"; materials from National/Local NGOs; and content in languages other than English.

ReliefWeb users are generally satisfied that they can find what they are looking for on the site (60%), but there are some problems that hinder them. Users commented that the homepage layout does not provide enough timely information, that site performance is slow and unpredictable, and that some resources (especially maps) are slow to download. They also commented that the popular email alerts for Job Vacancies and other information are not organized in a useful manner.

In terms of the completeness of its coverage of specific issues, ReliefWeb does cover regional issues reasonably well, but its primarily English language-focus reduces its usage by regional audiences, according to users. The evaluation team also found that ReliefWeb provides little formal coverage of early warning issues.

1.5 User Perceptions of ReliefWeb Quality

ReliefWeb is viewed very highly by users in terms of the credibility and reliability of its information. 80% of users surveyed gave it a positive score for credibility and reliability. They appreciate the quality of the information posted and the fact that sources are very clearly cited. (See) ReliefWeb is also viewed highly for its neutrality and independence. Most respondents stated that ReliefWeb was timely in providing the humanitarian dimension of issues; some commenters were less positive, stating that ReliefWeb was not timely in comparison to news services like the BBC and AlertNet.
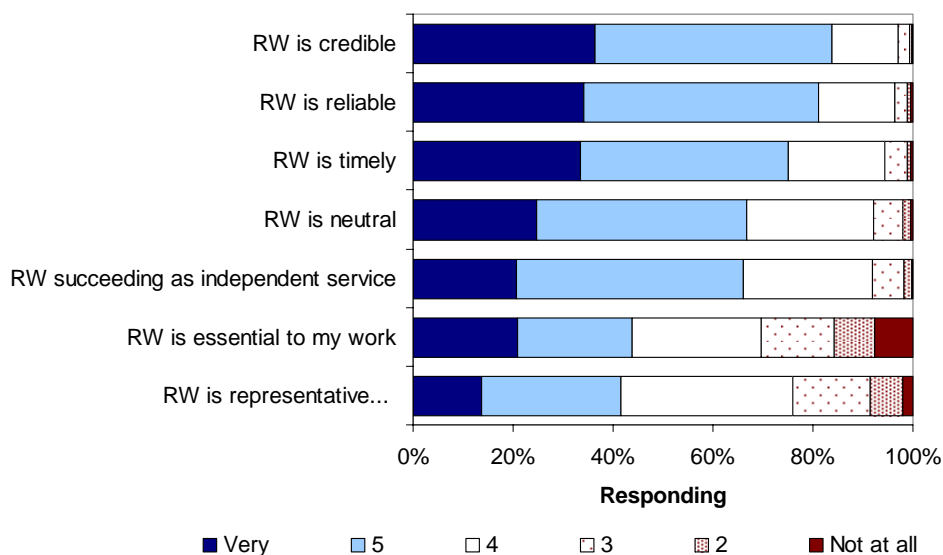
Figure 15: User Perceptions about ReliefWeb Content

ReliefWeb is not viewed as favorably for the representativeness of the information it provides. Only 42% of survey respondents rated ReliefWeb as positive for being representative of the "whole humanitarian community," lower than the ratings of other quality characteristics. Many users noted that ReliefWeb represented well the traditional players in the humanitarian community - the UN agencies, large NGOs, and governments. However, they did not think ReliefWeb adequately included content from smaller NGOs, especially those at the national and local level and those working in languages other than English.

1.6 Partnerships

ReliefWeb depends almost exclusively on other humanitarian organizations for the content that it posts. In 2005 ReliefWeb posted 39,000 "response documents" to the site from 787 "content partner" sources, not counting other resources and job vacancies. This content comes from a range of news and humanitarian organizations, but disproportionately from a few large news services. In 2005, one third of all content came from four news media sources, and 50% came from the top 16 sources. The "content partner" relationship with ReliefWeb is largely passive, as ReliefWeb itself identifies and posts about 80% of the content on the site with little involvement of the partner. The majority of partners are not aware of the process and standards for publishing content to ReliefWeb, and ReliefWeb outreach to partners has been limited in recent years.

ReliefWeb content partners report strong value from having their materials on ReliefWeb, especially with regard to visibility in the humanitarian community and with donors. Partners report that they would be

more proactive in sharing content with ReliefWeb if they could see data on the level of user traffic to ReliefWeb and to their own content on ReliefWeb.

1.7 OCHA, ReliefWeb and Other Online Services

OCHA receives a lot of value from the service that ReliefWeb provides to OCHA staff – timely information on humanitarian emergencies and natural disasters. OCHA staff and UN staff are among the heaviest users of ReliefWeb across sub-audiences. OCHA is also a major source of content for ReliefWeb, ranking as the 7th largest. That content is, however, collected and posted by ReliefWeb staff, and OCHA staff does not generally see submitting content to ReliefWeb as a part of their job nor as something that will help them carry out their work.

There is some sharing of content between ReliefWeb and other OCHA projects, but the evaluation team sees scope for more. ReliefWeb staff manually collects and republishes a large amount of content every week from the IRIN News web site, an OCHA project. Also, ReliefWeb's RSS feed is used by OCHA online to provide dynamic content on some country pages. Other than that, there is only limited cross linking between the different OCHA sites including the HICs. ReliefWeb and other information providers could benefit from more aggressive integration of content to complement each others' strengths.

Outside of OCHA, ReliefWeb collects a large share of content from other humanitarian and news organizations. ReliefWeb's RSS feeds are also picked-up and republished up by a number of other web sites. ReliefWeb does not actively cooperate with its largest content sources to more actively (and automatically) share information or services online.

1.8 Management

Over the past six years of ReliefWeb's operations (2000-2005) the output of the site has expanded and its operations have become more efficient:

- Output has more than doubled, from 16,000 to 39,000 documents posted per year, while usage has grown more than four fold, to more than 200,000 page views per average weekday.

- Budgets have risen about 1/3, from USD 1,500,000 to 2,000,000, and staffing has increased from 6 to 10 permanent positions, and a current total team of 23 individuals.

The financial sustainability of ReliefWeb appears strong, with a growing core group of donors - six donors in 2005 who each gave at least USD 200,000. A majority of donors are positive about the service ReliefWeb provides and are likely to continue support for it. ReliefWeb has its budget requests fully funded in 2004 and 2005, but it did require considerable effort by ReliefWeb. Some donors are interested in seeing ReliefWeb focus its future efforts on serving regional and local level audiences, especially practitioners and field-level decision makers; they view ReliefWeb now as better serving headquarters-based staff. Some donors also recommend closer coordination of ReliefWeb and other OCHA online efforts.

The ongoing performance and growth of ReliefWeb is hindered by three related management factors – staffing, the content collection process, and the site technology. In terms of staffing, ReliefWeb currently has a staff of about 23 individuals; this now includes roughly eight to ten "non short-term" positions, about eight short-term positions, and from one to five interns. Because of the reliance on short-term and intern positions, ReliefWeb managers reported having to spend a substantial amount of time in recruiting and training staff – detracting from key needs such as building content partner relations and improving the technical infrastructure of the site. In terms of the content collection, the current process is labor intensive

with some 80% of the content being collected by ReliefWeb staff with little active content partner participation. "Content partner" relationships are generally passive and a critical area for improving the efficiency of the project and the representativeness of its content. In terms of the site technology, users are seeing performance problems that indicate shortcomings with the underlying technology of the site; the technology also hinders the ability of ReliefWeb to improve and enhance site features.

1.9 Mandate and Mission

ReliefWeb is generally fulfilling its mandate and mission, doing well at disseminating timely information on humanitarian issues, serving decision-makers at headquarters, and strengthening the humanitarian community response capacity. ReliefWeb is doing less well at disseminating information on preparedness and disaster prevention, disseminating quick-to-download maps, providing access to reliable financial information, and reaching and serving field-based humanitarian workers. Overall, ReliefWeb is meeting well its mission statement of "Serving the information needs of the humanitarian community," though it could better serve the needs by addressing the shortcomings listed above. Finally, it is clear that ReliefWeb's mandate and mission are still relevant and important today to the humanitarian community.

1.10 Recommendations

The evaluation team outlines here five major recommendations to improve the value of ReliefWeb to the humanitarian community; an overall vision for the value of its services, partnership growth, audience growth, improving its products and services, and strengthening the management capacity for the project.

1.10.1 Increase Value to Information Shared on ReliefWeb

An important theme over all the recommendations is that to increase the value of ReliefWeb it must become a more essential tool for decision-making at both headquarters and field levels. To do this ReliefWeb must build on top of its core content foundation to provide a layer of insights and analyses. Users greatly value this aggregation role that ReliefWeb plays and want it to continue. But decision-makers, in particular, express a need for insights to help them understand what is most relevant, what is most important, and what is most critical on an issue. This "framing of the issues" should be done by highlighting information from across the body of content on ReliefWeb to provide key insights for these decision-makers. (See Table 11 below.)

Increasing Value to User ↓	Aggregate Information	Mechanical	Screening
	Frame the Issue	Insightful	Highlighting
	Shape Response	Influential	Analyzing

Table 1 "Information Value" Strategies

ReliefWeb should, in the immediate term, increase its value to decision-makers by moving to provide services more consistently at this second level, either through editorial highlighting of "issues we're watching this month", or showing data on "most read documents this week," or "where are the job postings this month?" ReliefWeb should expand its relationships with partners who can provide more analysis, and take advantage of OCHA's analytic capacity to develop and post analysis.

1.10.2 Partnership Growth

ReliefWeb needs to expand the scope and the quality of its content partnerships. Expanded partnerships will help improve the value of ReliefWeb and user perceptions of its quality by enhancing the representativeness of its content. More active efforts by partners will also improve the efficiency of the ReliefWeb project.

- ReliefWeb should conduct more aggressive outreach and training to partners at the headquarters and regional level. This should include having a dedicated ReliefWeb focal point in regional offices to conduct outreach and promotion and ongoing partner relationship management.

- ReliefWeb should enlist content partners to be more proactive by providing them easy technical tools to manage their own content on ReliefWeb and data on the readership of their content.

- ReliefWeb should publish clearly defined policies and guidelines to inform users of editorial procedures and decision-making, and to share standards with content partners.

- ReliefWeb should play a leading role in the sector to expand content sharing by developing and using content standards for common humanitarian information. ReliefWeb should explore using "micro formats" for standard types of humanitarian content (situation reports, maps, jobs, etc). These have the potential to enhance the efficiency of ReliefWeb's own content collection process, and also to enable wider sharing of ReliefWeb content across other humanitarian web sites. ReliefWeb can do this unilaterally and allow other organizations to build off of it.

1.10.3 Audience Growth

ReliefWeb needs better to reach non-users within its target audiences as well as those using only a very limited portion of the site. This will help ReliefWeb support underserved field audiences and become more essential in the humanitarian community.

- ReliefWeb should improve access to its content for people with slow internet access, by making the site perform more quickly and in text-only mode, by reducing the size of maps, and by making all resources accessible by email query.

- ReliefWeb should conduct stronger promotion of the services it provides, for example through home page features, or highlighting in the weekly Job Vacancy emails what is the latest content available on ReliefWeb.

1.10.4 Products and Services Improvement

ReliefWeb should extend the value of its products and services to benefit current users and also to help expand its user base. The recommended improvements to products and services are:

- ReliefWeb should provide users with the ability to customize how they get information from the site, such as the home page, region and sector pages, and email services.

- ReliefWeb should partner with specialized information services to incorporate automated news feeds or other information to ReliefWeb. This will reduce time spent on collecting information from some of the larger ReliefWeb content partners.

- ReliefWeb should improve the layout of email messages sent to subscribers to make them easier to browse, and to better direct users to more detailed information on ReliefWeb and partner sites.

- ReliefWeb should provide data to make it easier for users to understand the value of information on ReliefWeb. For example, this could include showing: "most read documents" on a topic, or showing a count of most recent content by region or topic.

- ReliefWeb should expand the multi-lingual content it provides on the site by inviting such materials from partners, and by enabling users to find content by "language" on the site.

- OCHA AIMB should more aggressively integrate its information management and online efforts, to promote, as a rule, interoperability between information systems (e.g. HICs, OCHA Online and OCHA country office websites, and others).

1.10.5 Management Strengthening

The ReliefWeb management systems and capacity need to be expanded in some critical ways. The benefit of doing this will be greater value to the humanitarian community through better site performance and expansion of new services:

- ReliefWeb should recruit a larger core of permanent staff and reduce its reliance on short-term (GTA) staffing for core functions. This is critical to allow ReliefWeb to make important long-term investments in expanding the value of its services.

- ReliefWeb should reduce the amount of staff time spent on routine content posting, through better content posting tools and expanded partner relations.

- ReliefWeb needs additional technical staff working full time on the project to make ongoing improvements to and innovations on the site.

- ReliefWeb should establish 365/24/7 technical support for its web server infrastructure.

- ReliefWeb and ITS should complete the planned 2006 technical improvements, and afterwards continue to evaluate how well the current platform will meet planned growth needs.