

Crowd Programmed Initiatives: facilitating the development of beneficiary-led aid programmes

Dr Adrian Flint (University of Bristol) and Chris Meyer zu Natrup (MzN International)

The debate of using “the wisdom of crowds” is often inspired by rapidly falling costs of technologies able to collect and interpret (to a certain extent) masses of information very quickly. Such approaches to “crowd gathered information” also bear the promise of ‘bottom-up’ consultations, as opposed to being largely expert-led, and is generally seen as more favourable.

The effective assessment of needs and efficient delivery of aid is largely determined by intelligence of the situation on the ground, anticipating needs and problems. The provision of aid has, almost unavoidably up until this point, been largely an expert-led enterprise. As a result and despite a focus on beneficiaries’ participation, aid agencies, staffed by people well schooled and trained in various aspects of aid-delivery, have traditionally largely determined the nature of needs assessment undertaken and the direction and allocation of aid that is to be implemented. However, developments in the last decade mean that changes in the way that needs and aid – including emergency aid – is determined and provided might be ripe for reconsideration.

The debate surrounding the use of crowd-sourced information in emergency needs assessments focuses often too much on the technology. Whilst considering how to go about developing techniques that go beyond the “Land Rover powered Expert Assessment”-approach, we must also ask how useful evidence generated by crowds can be, what evidence can be collected reliably, how a bigger picture of the emergency situation can sensibly be put together in a balanced approach (and often with conflicting information) and how such information can be used by all actors in the humanitarian response sphere efficiently. We may (soon) have a compelling technology, however, as per now we seem still some steps away from using it effectively.

Our presentation will pose these questions and attempt some initial answers to them, thereby providing a skeleton for the debate to follow. However, over the next 12 months, our study will further explore these questions by actively engaging the humanitarian community and by considering what we can learn from projects utilising “the wisdom of the crowds” in other sectors.

Crowd wisdom in other sectors...

Approximately ten years ago analysts in the business community like James Surowiecki and Jeffe Howe became very excited about the prospect of harnessing 'group knowledge'. The argument presented in popular books like *The Wisdom of Crowds* was that the combined knowledge of the group often far exceeded the knowledge of individual experts. By harnessing this knowledge ('crowdsourcing') whole new approaches to a host of different fields became evident. The most compelling argument for the effectiveness of 'the crowd' in producing sophisticated outcomes with very little organisation or input from above is the evolution of the Linux operating system. Unlike Microsoft software which is produced by employees beholden to the company, Linux is produced by hundreds of volunteers working only when they feel inspired to. Linux volunteers are not directed or managed, and the source-code is often generated by people that are not professional code-writers. Yet the result is, according many experts, superior to that produced by Microsoft. Wikipedia is another example. Originally envisaged as a free on-line encyclopaedia designed to compete with *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, it has far outstripped its original target by way of its sheer scale and ubiquity. On the internet, no ones knows whether you have a PhD from Oxford or you are a high school drop out – the value lies simply in the quality of the outcome. Even when expertise is required, the crowd often remains more effective than a dedicated 'brains trust'. For example, websites like InnoCentive have become ways for companies like Proctor & Gamble – traditionally reliant on in-house R&D – to outsource problem issues to the website's 270,000 registered 'solvers'. Solutions devised by solvers are submitted anonymously, there is no record of the solver's qualification (if any) for attempting the task; only the result matters. These examples are simply the tip of an ever growing iceberg.

What has facilitated the development of crowdsourcing is the fact that the costs associated with the relevant technology have declined dramatically. The media and music industries are just two examples in which ever more widely accessible tools have led to a boom in 'amateur input' and a steady decline in the traditional way in which these products are produced and consumed. The advent of cheap video cameras and platforms like You Tube have allowed millions to make and show (although the quality varies) short films. Likewise, recording software has enabled musicians without a recording contract to record music in their bedrooms, while the blogosphere and Twitter have re-invented the way news is discussed and disseminated. The availability of such technology is not only restricted to developed countries, one only needs to look at the ubiquity of mobile phones across any number of African countries in order to see that this is a global (albeit unevenly distributed) phenomenon.

...and applying it to humanitarian purposes

Crowdsourcing is about finding new ways of gathering information and solving problems. It has begun to influence any number of fields traditionally governed by expert practitioners: it has been employed by NASA to help map Mars, by the SETI project in monitoring electromagnetic radiation, and ornithologists mapping the range of different species. It has likewise been employed in a number of areas pertinent to the potential delivery of aid. The most dramatic example of this was in the wake of the devastating Haiti earthquake in 2010 which caused the deaths of over 200,000 people. Ushahidi, an open-source crisis-mapping tool originally developed to help monitor political violence in Kenya in 2008, and based mainly on collating information from mobile phone

communications and different forms of social media, allowed for a real time mapping of the crisis. This 'open source intelligence gathering' was quickly shown to be far more effective than traditional approaches to information gathering in such circumstances. However, the Haiti example also showed that major aid-agencies like the UN were often 'structurally' unable to innovate and make the most of such intelligence, relying instead on tried and tested (expert-led) procedures when approaching the delivery of emergency relief. The result was that crucial emergency inputs like food drops were often delayed as UN staff attempted to evaluate, for example, security risks in different areas.

Accordingly, this study, while theorising on the value (and desirability?) of recipient-led aid, will seek to develop a sense of the practicalities and problems inherent in any such potential shift and what this might offer to those engaged in distributing aid.