



With breaking stories and  
newswire products from

# UN NEWS CENTRE



## Information technology opens new routes for emergency disaster relief – UN report



28 March 2011 – The vital role of new information technology in responding rapidly to sudden onset emergencies is highlighted in a new United Nations study [released](#) today, identifying best practice and lessons learned from last year’s devastating Haitian earthquake.

“The challenge is to improve coordination between the structured humanitarian system and the relatively loosely organized volunteer and technical communities,” UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator Valerie Amos said at the report’s launch in Dubai, United Arab Emirates (UAE).

“This report illustrates a potential way forward. Without direct collaboration with humanitarian organizations, volunteer and technical communities run the risk of mapping needs without being able to make sure that these needs can be met.”

The study, *Disaster Relief 2.0: The Future of Information Sharing in Humanitarian Emergencies*, launched at the Dubai International Humanitarian Aid & Development Conference 2011, analyzes how the humanitarian and emerging volunteer and technical communities collaborated in the aftermath of the Haitian quake that killed more than 200,000 people and made 1.3 million more homeless, and recommends ways to improve coordination in future emergencies.

Commissioned by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs ([OCHA](#)), the UN Foundation and Vodafone Foundation, it was written by researchers led by John Crowley at the Harvard Humanitarian Initiative, based on interviews with some 40 technology and humanitarian experts, many of whom responded to the Haitian quake.

UN Foundation Chairman Ted Turner noted that the quake showed that interconnected people were increasingly central to emergency response and recovery. “Haitians trapped under rubble used text messaging to send pleas for help,” he wrote in a foreword. “Concerned citizens worldwide engaged in a variety of ways, from sending in donations via SMS to using shared networks to translate and map requests for assistance.

“Powered by cloud-, crowd-, and SMS-based technologies, individuals can now engage in disaster responses at an unprecedented level.”

The report spells out how hundreds of geo-spatial information systems experts used fresh satellite imagery to rebuild missing maps of Haiti and plot a picture of the changed reality on the ground, an essential element that provided much of the street-level mapping data used for logistics and camp management.

“Humanitarian crises from Libya to Japan remind us that fast and accurate information is imperative in effective emergency response efforts,” UN Foundation chief executive officer Kathy Calvin said. “Today’s increased access to collaborative technologies and networks presents an important innovation milestone and an opportunity to rethink how data about urgent humanitarian needs are gathered, processed and shared.”

Ms. Amos underscored the role of technology in her opening address to the Dubai conference. “In a world awash with information, one of the biggest challenges is to pinpoint the right information to enable us to make good decisions,” she said. “More than ever, our collective energy, resources and efforts are needed to strengthen our humanitarian response capacity. The emphasis this conference is placing on new technologies is very appropriate.”

Ms. Amos also met with Princess Haya Bint Al Hussein of Jordan, wife of Sheikh Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum, UAE Vice-President and Prime Minister and Ruler of Dubai, to thank her for her strong support and deep engagement in humanitarian affairs.

News Tracker: past stories on this issue

[New UN satellite standards to boost communications in emergencies](#)