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TAHIR ANDRABI AND ASIM IJAZ KHWAJA

The Boston Globe

Responding to disasters - can we act in time?

By [Tahir Andrabi](#) and [Asim Ijaz Khwaja](#)

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THE WORLD is witnessing an oft-repeated, tragic scene in Haiti: chaos in the aftermath of disaster. While technology increasingly helps predict natural disasters, it remains glaringly absent in the aftermath of calamity. But technology can be part of the solution to getting supplies and aid to victims following a disaster. It is now possible that as soon as a disaster hits - not the next day or in the next few hours, but literally minutes later - a Web-portal of the affected regions could go live. The portal would display geo-referenced village maps overlaid with demographic information, physical and infrastructure facilities, the latest satellite imagery, and message boards that allow for coordination and real-time information exchange between relief agents at all levels, and for affected individuals to provide real-time accountability. Within minutes of a disaster the world could know where it hit, how many people are affected, where they are, and how to get to them. Within hours, governments and relief agencies could know what is needed, who is helping, who is being helped and who is not.

Such a solution is not science fiction but a feasible and immediate reality. An open-access Web-based portal for the entire globe can be established - all that is needed is the will and vision to do so. Such portals were thought of after the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, but their use in real time has been limited. However, recent examples like [healthmap.org](#) (displaying global disease alert maps), [risepak.com](#) (a portal that provided village-level information to coordinate relief after the 2005 Pakistan earthquake) and [Ushahidi.com](#) (which provided real-time information on post-election violence in Kenya) are small but significant testaments to the viability and value of this concept. In developing countries, where three-fourths of all disaster-related deaths occur, the problem of swift, effective disaster response is most acute. And yet, as hurricane Katrina taught us, even the most advanced of countries is unable to act quickly when disaster strikes. Successes of the Internet era have shown that we need not rely on a centralized coordinator and a limited set of experts to provide real-time information. A network of actors - individuals and organizations - can even more effectively, rapidly and reliably exchange information and coordinate efforts to aid afflicted countries.

The reality is that no single agency, federal or private, can respond with the speed required to minimize post-disaster casualties. These organizations collectively offer invaluable local knowledge and play a crucial role in providing immediate relief. Yet without coordination or timely information their power to help is limited. For a fraction of the cost of the predicting machinery, today's information technology can be used to provide effective and timely aid.

Given population growth and settlement patterns, large scale disasters will increasingly affect larger, poorer and more vulnerable populations across the world. As we are seeing tragically in Haiti, coordinating disaster relief is a daunting task. A Web-based data portal that combines the global knowledge network with local and community information and which is activated the

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minute a disaster hits can be of immense value. The payoff directly translates into lives saved for a bargain price.

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